

# Gender Norms: The Missing Part of Gender Equity Philanthropy

By Riki Wilchins

Our shared philanthropic vision of a more fair and just society can't happen without gender equity. Yet, funders, especially in the U.S., often fail to recognize that gender norms, or the implicit stereotypes associated with gender, create obstacles to the success of their well-intentioned programming for gender justice.

In particular, recent "gender lens" investing has tended to be used in ways that omit deeper analysis and ignore the critical impacts of gender norms, especially as they play out at the community level. To realize broader goals of gender equity, it is crucial that domestic grantmakers follow the lead of the many international funders that have begun to challenge, rather than ignore, the power of gender norms.

"Gender" is an overloaded term that is used in a variety of contexts (gender equity, gender mainstreaming, gender identity, etc.). Adding to the confusion, some years ago the gender equity field shifted its linguistic frame from referring to "women and girls" programming to "gender lens" programming, to better focus on the system of oppression that perpetuates inequity between women and men, rather than women as a group. Having a gender lens generally refers to understanding how different groups (boys and girls, families, LGBTQ individuals, etc.) are treated differently by the gender system.

However, the systemic focus this new linguistic frame heralded hasn't happened. Over time, "having a gender lens" has morphed back into shorthand

for "funding for women and girls." Funders have overlooked the critical fact that having a gender lens means more than just focusing on one sex. Consider a few examples:

- A foundation announces prominently that it funds from a "strong gender lens," yet its projects benefit only women and girls.
- A leading health policy organization publishes a groundbreaking report asking "Will the California Office of Health Equity Use a Gender Lens?" that mentions "women" 91 times but not "men's health" once.<sup>1</sup>
- The landmark guide "Funding for Inclusion" mentions race and racism upfront along with lesbians, gay men, transgender and intersex people; yet, it never addresses any of these again in 32 pages.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, increased funding for women and girls is important; after all, they still receive only 7.5 percent of U.S. grants.<sup>3</sup> But funding women and girls does not constitute "having a strong gender lens" any more than funding youth of color implies having a strong racial justice analysis.

As Loren Harris, now director of Family Economic Security at the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, has noted, "Gender impacts every issue funders work on. But grantees and program officers aren't challenged to do innovative work around gender [like they are race and class]."

In the Ford Foundation's paper *Why We Can't Wait: A Case for Philanthrop-*



World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim (left) visits a school in Peru. CC image courtesy of Dominic Chavez/World Bank.

*ic Action: Opportunities for Improving Life Outcomes for African American Males*, Harris points out the little-explored, but important, influence that gender roles have “on the way men understand and engage in educational opportunity, the labor force and relationships with women and other men.” He continues, “Men also suffer the adverse consequences of rigid gender roles that limit conceptions of opportunity and success and expose some men to stigmatization, abuse and violence.”<sup>4</sup>

Funders in the international sphere are doing work that can serve as a model for domestic funders. Major donor institutions such as CARE, the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank and the World Health Organization all have developed “gender transformative” initiatives that highlight, challenge and ultimately try to change rigid gender norms.

For instance, USAID will not even consider funding new programs that lack a strong analysis of gender norms and inequities. And the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief Initiative lists challenging harmful gender norms among its top three priorities.

Even the conservative World Bank, after investing hundreds of millions of dollars in loans, grants and other direct aid to improve the lot of women and girls, has launched an organization-wide initiative to integrate gender norms into every facet of its work to get better results. The group’s president, Jim Yong Kim, recently called gender norms one of the “foundations of inequality, as important as education or opportunity.”

As one of its senior managers put it, “We’re not doing this because it’s trendy or politically correct – we’re data-driven economists, after all – we’re doing it because the numbers show it works better.”

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A deeper implicit bias is also in play. U.S. funders tend to work from what might be called an “empowerment model,” treating each person as an individual actor able to take action on his or her own behalf. This model is rooted in capitalist economic models in which everyone is a rational consumer, weighing product information, comparing prices and taking individual action.

Following the empowerment model, grantmakers provide funding, opportunity programs and training to improve a girl’s circumstances.

Yet, the model doesn’t really work when addressing the economic behavior of teenage girls, who are as likely to make decisions based on a combination of peer group behavior, pressure from boyfriends, the power imbalances inherent in boy-girl relationships and how they might be seen as they are on a measured appraisal of the facts.

Particularly in low-income communities where resources are scarce, young women and girls are likely to

be enmeshed in complex social networks necessary for survival; they likely have extensive family obligations and responsibilities (such as taking care of younger siblings and infirm elders, doing chores and bringing in extra income), and lack anything like the full agency the empowerment model assumes.

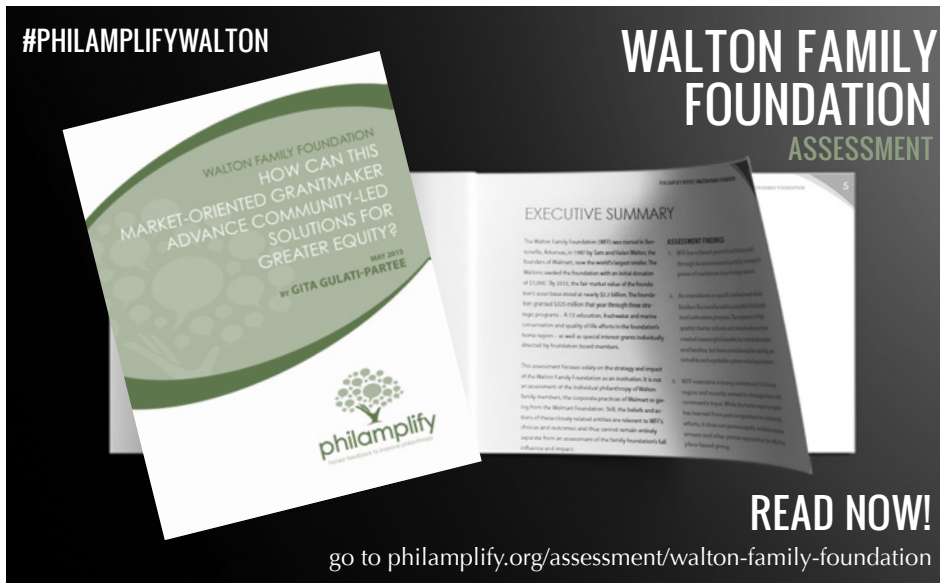
Even if they do have full agency, group norms can act as invisible “guard rails,” locking inequalities into place while shaping and narrowing young women’s opportunities. Such norms don’t show up as overt discrimination, but rather more quietly through doors that just don’t open, choices that just aren’t made, actions that just somehow seem off-limits.

For instance, consider this story from the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota’s 2014 report, *On the Road to Equality*:

“Our daughter was one of the top welders in her junior-high school program and would have been very successful in that field, but she wasn’t encouraged by us as parents or people in construction. Why not? Because she would have had to struggle for acceptance by men in that field, and they would not be welcoming. So, she’s not in that career. Even though they may have the skills, women have to always fight that battle.”<sup>5</sup>

Funding, opportunity, training and programs are all available for young people looking to follow this career path; yet, cultural norms were still able to defeat the best of philanthropic intentions and keep this young woman from the high-paying welding job her skills merited.

Imagine how U.S. grantmaking might improve if we broadened our perspective. For example, we might finally fix



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## Notes

1. Kate Karpilow, Ph.D., *Will California's Office of Health Equity Use a Gender Lens?* California Center for Research on Women & Families, January 2013, <http://ccrwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/OHE-and-Gender-Lens-WPS2013-FINAL.pdf>.
2. *Funding for Inclusion: Women and Girls in the Equation*, GrantCraft, 2012, <http://mamacash.org/content/uploads/2013/06/Grantcraft-Guide-Funding-for-Inclusion.pdf>.
3. *Accelerating Change for Women and Girls: The Role of Women's Funds*, Foundation Center, June 2009, [http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/womensfunds2009\\_highlights.pdf](http://foundationcenter.org/gainknowledge/research/pdf/womensfunds2009_highlights.pdf).
4. Marcus J. Littles, Ryan Bowers and Micah Gilmer, *Why We Can't Wait: A Case for Philanthropic Action: Opportunities for Improving Life Outcomes for African American Males*, Ford Foundation, January 2008, [http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/why\\_we\\_cant\\_wait.pdf](http://www.fordfoundation.org/pdfs/library/why_we_cant_wait.pdf).
5. *On the Road to Equality: Statewide Findings & Policy Recommendations*, Women's Foundation of Minnesota, October 2014, <http://www.wfmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2014RETourPolicyReport.pdf>.
6. Sylvia Ann Hewlett, "What's Holding Women Back in Science and Technology Industries," *Harvard Business Review*, March 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/03/whats-holding-women-back-in-science-and-technology-industries/>.

the "leaky pipeline" that halts girls from pursuing science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields when they reach middle school, when even girls who were good at STEM and reported liking STEM courses start dropping out.

For decades, the field has addressed barriers ranging from parental attitudes, the lack of role models and "chilly" classroom climates, all while ignoring feminine norms.

As part of a project for the Motorola Solutions Foundation, my organization convened young Black and Hispanic women and asked them whether they could be both smart at science and math and feminine and popular with boys. They laughingly replied, "Yes ... but not in junior high." They went on to explain that in middle school, they had to "dumb it down" and focus more on being attractive for their boyfriends.

The problem goes beyond middle school. Corporate foundations at a host of tech companies are investing millions to combat the lack of women in Silicon Valley. It's no secret that part of the problem is the aggressive jock-nerd culture of many tech environments, which favor young white and Asian males while repelling women as well as LGBTQ workers and those who are Black or Hispan-

ic. A recent *Harvard Business Review* report noted that extreme pressure and the hostile work culture are among the most frequently cited reasons for why women leave high-tech jobs.<sup>6</sup>

Major Silicon Valley foundations and corporations are investing millions to recruit and retain more women. But they're unlikely to be effective until they challenge the masculine norms at the center of the problem.

The tide may be shifting. The Women's Foundation of Minnesota and the Women's Fund of Central Ohio are among the first U.S. donors to integrate gender norms into their funding priorities and strategic plans. The Women's Funding Network and Women Moving Millions have both issued white paper reports recommending that the field adopt a gender transformative approach.

This is pioneering work. Other funders, such as The California Endowment, Ford Foundation, Heinz Endowments, Jewish Women's Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago and Overbrook Foundation, also have moved forward important grants with a strong gender norms focus.

Isn't it time other U.S. funders started doing likewise? ■