

Lighting the Way



A Research Brief for
Philanthropy on the
Power and Promise of
Feminist Movements



Introduction

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This research brief is an abridged version of our [full report](#).

Feminist movements offer philanthropists a profound and largely untapped opportunity to contribute to transformative change. This report by Shake the Table and The Bridgespan Group shares practical guidance on how to find and fund these distinctive movements and calls on philanthropy to invest an additional \$6 billion in them by 2026.

To the extent people enjoy freedoms and human rights, we do so thanks to social justice movements.¹ Led by those with lived experience of injustice, movements have long gathered people together to make changes to their societies. From overthrowing British colonialism in India to ending apartheid in South Africa, and from expanding voting rights in the United States to changing laws prohibiting abortion in Argentina, time and again movements have shown the impact individuals can have when they collectively organize for their own liberation.

Throughout history, we have counted on movements to light the path forward in a complex and troubling world. Today's world is no different. The globe is heating up. Civil liberties are under siege. A deadly virus persists. More people are forcibly displaced now than at any time in the last three decades.²

We know from the experience of COVID over these last two years that these emergencies don't affect people equally. Occurring against a backdrop of multi-layered and interconnected social inequalities, they are producing profoundly unequal outcomes by race, religion, nationality, class, caste, ability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Across all these crises, and **interwoven with other forms of inequality, gender inequality is compounding the injustices**. Gender inequality is everywhere, hardwired into our mindsets, policies, and practices, slowing our progress on every issue. While the forms of discrimination are myriad, the root cause of gender inequality—patriarchy—is the same.

Consider, for example, how rigid gender norms shape the impact of natural disasters, increasingly common given climate change. Men often transmit warning information to other men in public spaces, while women, because of public policies and social norms, tend to be in private spaces, caring for children or the elderly. In Sri Lanka, where it is also considered inappropriate for women to swim, men outnumbered women three to one among the survivors of the 2004 tsunami.³ More broadly, women are 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters.⁴

If we as a society want to realize transformative change in any area, it's critical to elevate the efforts of those individuals and organizations working to address systems of oppression. And so we must once again look to social justice movements—and feminist movements in particular—to illuminate the way

through these troubling times. **Feminist movements are uniquely poised to address the rules, norms, and stories that reinforce gender inequality.** Importantly, feminist movements don't solely focus on gender. On the contrary, they also name and challenge the compounding factors of discrimination—race, religion, caste, class, and more—taking a multifaceted approach and working without end to address our most intractable problems.

Feminist movements are organizations, leaders, and networks working together to challenge and change power structures that reinforce gender inequality. They are almost always led by people with lived experience of the gender power imbalance and often other injustices as well.

Feminism is the belief in full social, economic, and political equality for cisgender and transgender women and girls and nonbinary people. To achieve meaningful gender equality, feminism seeks to shift power to those who resist exploitation or oppression based on their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, nationality, class, caste, ability, or ethnicity.

These definitions were informed by our advisory board, interviews, and the writings of Srilatha Batliwala.



Lasting impact: Shaping the policy response to domestic violence

Looking at 70 countries over four decades, political science professors S. Laurel Weldon and Mala Htun concluded that feminist movements—more than left-leaning political parties, participation of women in government, or economic factors—had the most lasting impact on policy responses to violence against women.⁵

Understanding Feminist Movements

“ **These are *leaderful* movements.**
They are not *leaderless* movements.”

— Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President
for Global Programs, [Ford Foundation](#)

Shake the Table and The Bridgespan Group teamed up to understand how we can better connect global philanthropy with feminist movements. To pursue our research, we conducted 43 conversations, engaging with 27 high-net-worth individuals and the people who lead their giving, 10 feminist movement leaders and feminist-fund leaders, and six institutional funders.

Our conversations and research highlight a host of characteristics that are central to what feminist movements are, how they operate, and, ultimately, why they're so effective in bringing about transformative change. Granted, they're quite varied. Some feminist movements enter through climate, others through racial justice. Some are working to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS.⁶ Others are transforming education. And they use a range of strategies and structures. But they all:

- **Focus on power and rights**, working to shift power so that women, girls, and nonbinary people can make their own choices—for themselves and for their communities.
- **Use intersectional analyses**, recognizing that forms of oppression, such as racism and misogyny, compound one another.
- **Are constituency-led**, born from and guided by members of the communities in which they work.
- **Operate as a collective**, comprising any number of (often local) organizations, leaders, and networks working in collaboration.

- **Operate with care**, designing collaborative organizational structures and centering care not just in the *what*, but the *how*, such as offering childcare at their meetings.
- **Work on multiple time horizons**, addressing immediate needs as well as the underlying structural inequities that caused those needs to arise.

A word about intersectionality.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor who coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989, describes it as “a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other.”⁷ Feminist movements acknowledge how oppressions overlap and actively seek to address the multiple inequities that people face in their daily lives. They know that absent this approach, solutions are likely to fall short and may even deepen inequality. It's worth noting that feminist movements are most often led by women, girls, and nonbinary people living at the intersection of several forms of social discrimination, such as patriarchy and racism.

A Huge Opportunity to Accelerate Social Change



While many donors are thinking about how to incorporate systems change into their giving, to date, philanthropy has largely taken a short-term focus to long-term issues, addressing symptoms of deep-seated problems, such as giving girls access to school and helping place women in jobs. Their gender-focused work is often confined to a “women and girls” programmatic silo. Meanwhile, other program areas—climate, education, livelihoods, and so on—may or may not consider how gender inequality is at play. While investment in each silo is important, it will not be enough to create the transformative change donors seek.

The good news is feminist movements are already doing this hard, integrative work. They provide us with a vision of what can be attained with flexible, sustained, community-driven investments, and they remind us of the immense joy that can come from being part of realizing a collective vision of a more just world. What’s more, as threats to humanity mount—the climate crisis, the rise of authoritarianism, a global pandemic, extreme income inequality—feminist movements present the holistic solutions such problems require. **These powerhouses for social change represent a tremendous opportunity for funders, who will be hard-pressed to see marked progress on the issues they care about without them.**

To date, feminist movements have achieved their successes with minimal philanthropic support. **In 2017, less than 1 percent of total foundation giving, and in 2018 approximately 1 percent of**

gender-focused international aid, was directed to women’s rights organizations, which we use as a proxy for lack of data collected on the funding of feminist movements.^{8,9,10} The majority of women’s rights organizations have never received core or multiyear funding. Roughly half of women’s rights organizations in the Global South operate on a median annual budget of \$30,000 or less.¹¹

Under-resourced, undervalued, and grossly underestimated, feminist movements still manage to be vital forces, working to shift power to the world’s most exploited and excluded populations.

When funding finally came through, Liberian women ended the war

Leymah Gbowee, who led the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement in 2003,¹² received job offers from multiple international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that recognized her skills—none of which would support her work organizing women to participate in Liberia’s peace movement. When she finally managed to secure that funding from the Global Fund for Women and a few other funders willing to take the “risk,” she was able to lead a movement that was ultimately credited with ending the devastating decades-long civil war.¹³ Gbowee was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in 2011.

Five Things You Can Do to Support Feminist Movements

While some philanthropists will be new to funding feminist movements, we recognize others may be well into this work. **Wherever you are, we urge you to go further.** This report offers ideas for all philanthropists, including those whose core focus is not gender equality.



01. Understand power structures

02. Re-examine risk

03. Fund feminist funds

04. Shift your practices

05. Measure what matters

01. Understand power structures



Power structures, informal and formal, show up and shape relationships, homes, communities, and every system with which we interact. To understand the work of feminist movements, which dedicate themselves to shifting power, we must recognize those structures.

You can ask yourself the same questions feminist movements do: *Who has privilege and power here? Who's making decisions? Whose narrative is dominating? Whose voices are missing? What is the political context? What are the origins of existing power structures, and what are the consequences for women, girls, and nonbinary people? How do their overlapping identities factor in?*

One's own experience, limitations, and biases can limit the understanding of power. **Perhaps the single most important way to see power structures more vividly and draw closer to feminist movements is to listen to those with lived experience resisting oppression and discrimination.**

02. Re-examine risk

Some types of investments, be they financial or philanthropic, are quite linear and technical, with fairly predictable outcomes (e.g., investing in an established company or in an established direct-service program). Others, such as those in tech startups or power-shifting organizations, follow less predictable paths and take more time to pay off—but introduce the potential for transformational impact. Feminist networks fit squarely in this second category. Some philanthropists may view them as risky, particularly given that they're often far from the powerful networks of Global North philanthropy. And yet, **to address systemic injustice, the real risk is not investing in these leaders and organizations.**

Indeed, key to understanding risk is recognizing the headwinds. While feminist movements go almost

entirely unfunded, existing power systems continue to attract and deploy significant resources. Thus, as feminist movements work to defend and advance the rights of all people, they face mounting and often well-funded opposition to their important work. For example, there has been and continues to be an uptick in anti-gender funding. The Global Philanthropy Project estimates that, from 2008 to 2017, the aggregate revenue of organizations associated with the anti-gender movement was \$6.2 billion.¹⁴ This movement has been credited with significantly rolling back sexual, reproductive, and children and young people's rights.¹⁵ Feminist movements face similar headwinds in many areas, including funding that undermines the rights of migrant workers, Indigenous people, and more.

03. Fund feminist funds

Created by, for, and with women, girls, and nonbinary people, feminist funds are primary funders of feminist movements, particularly in the Global South. Feminist funds raise money to support feminist movements, play a role in bridging and convening across different justice movements, and advocate for their further resourcing. Aside from long-term, flexible, general support and rapid-response grantmaking, feminist funds also convene feminist activists, groups, and organizations, and support shared strategy and coordination.

Shake the Table and Bridgespan join the voices of others calling for investment in feminist funds. A vibrant and diverse landscape of feminist funds exists; weshakethetable.org provides an illustrative list based on input from our movement leaders. Bridgespan research indicates that collaborative funds focused on gender equity could deploy approximately 10 times their current funding.¹⁶ **Feminist funds represent a ready opportunity for funders to unlock tremendous impact.**



04. Shift your practices

Revisit your existing processes for selecting grantees to consider how your funding process can be more collaborative, responsive, and inclusive. If you deepen your focus on root causes and systemic, entrenched inequalities, you'll likely increasingly turn to feminist movements to achieve your goals.

Expand your sourcing. Often, donors' sources come from close-in networks and may be limited to Global North, white-led institutions—compounding their own biases. Redefine “expertise” and prioritize sourcing channels that are closer to the work and issues. Invite grassroots feminist leaders to serve as your advisors—and pay them for their time and expertise. Consider expanding the languages in which you'll review applications. You can also join a donor community to explore feminist funding in community with others.

Consider using an open call process for at least part of your funding portfolio. This approach can be powerful as an equity practice and an effective way to surface emergent groups and younger leaders.

Use diligence tactics that elevate feminist movements rather than screen them out. Consider each aspect of your due-diligence process. Do you evaluate organizations based on the caliber and content of their websites? (Feminist movements often have little time or money to spend communicating their work.) Do your diligence criteria reinforce existing power structures, such as defining a “strong leader” in a way that favors white-dominant leadership styles or organizations from the Global North? Do you have thresholds for size, history, impact evaluation, or even status as an organization? Such thresholds will limit who can apply and constrain your ability to identify the most innovative and visionary actors.

Fund the ecosystem. Large-scale, long-term change has always taken an ecosystem of organizations, networks, and people working together to dismantle the forces that maintain the status quo. Picking just a few organizations can meaningfully hinder progress toward the collective goal and perpetuate the starvation cycle for those doing the hardest work. Resist the urge to create winners. Understand the ecosystem, fund across it, and support collaboration among organizations.

Provide long-term general operating support. Philanthropists often fund specific initiatives, but what movements most need to pursue their complex, adaptive work is multiyear general operating support. Such support allows them to shift as needed and to focus attention on the work instead of raising funds at every turn.

“ If in fact you get to know the work and see the presence they have...see their ability to influence government...see their ability to be in a community of practice and influence other organizations...see their proximity to crises that often, in education, are as important as what's happening in schools, what's happening in the community...[local organizations are] light-years ahead of the organizations that would traditionally be 'safe bets.' They're much more impactful.”

— Erin Ganju, Managing Director, [Echidna Giving](#)

05. Measure what matters

Similar to the challenge donors face when funding systems-change work of any sort, funding feminist movements requires rethinking how we measure success. Interviews with funders currently focused in this area reveal that dialogue with grantees is an invaluable way to surface the indicators of progress that matter most.

The work of feminist movements is inherently wide-ranging. For example, a single feminist organization may secure access to services, conduct training with religious leaders to shift social norms, and advocate to local government to change laws. Using a range of measures allows you to see a grantee's contribution to a shift in any one of their multiple arenas. You may also want to specifically inquire about collaboration as a metric of impact, given how integral it is to the work. Does the group belong to associations of aligned organizations? Are the leaders in dialogue with other organizations across the region or globally?

Work together with grantees to define success—and allow them to pivot as needed. A key lesson of the COVID crisis is how critical it is to be flexible around goals, allowing grantees to pivot when crises arise. Many feminist groups, particularly ones in communities and regions that have been shut out from institutional power and resources, are continually reassessing their priorities and pivoting to the most promising opportunities and pressing needs, especially in emergencies.

As you measure, be mindful of the trade-off. While metrics may be valuable for funders and grantees alike, they are a lot of work for grantees and may take precious time away from their power-shifting work.

“ My approach to philanthropy has always been data-driven, and I think it's important for philanthropists to set ambitious goals and measure our progress against those goals. I've learned, however, that it's equally important to place trust in the people and organizations we partner with and let them define success on their own terms. Philanthropists are generally more helpful to the world when we're standing behind a movement rather than trying to lead our own.”¹⁷

— Melinda French Gates, Co-Chair and Founder, [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#)



A Call to Action

“ There’s just not enough funding for movements and organizations in the Global South. Do the funding. Give as much as you can to constituency-led organizations and as flexibly as you can.”

— Hakima Abbas, Co-Executive Director, [Association for Women’s Rights in Development](#)

With only one percent of foundation giving and gender-focused international aid going to women’s rights organizations, the opportunity is staggering.

[The Association for Women’s Rights in Development \(AWID\)](#) estimates feminist funds channel \$100 million and foundations channel \$600 million to feminist movements each year.¹⁸ With the vast majority of funding remaining in the Global North, we estimate feminist movements in the Global South receive only a small fraction of this funding.

Bridgespan and Shake the Table join the leadership of feminist movement leaders and funds, such as AWID, [The Generational Equality Forum Action Coalition on Feminist Movements](#), [Global Philanthropy Project](#), and [Prospera](#), in calling the field to be bold and start to deliver on the existing capacity of giving and receiving for feminist movements.

We urge philanthropists to invest an additional \$6 billion by 2026 (\$1.5 billion annually) in feminist movements.

Specifically, focus unrestricted, multiyear funding on feminist movements in the Global South, as well as those led by women, girls, and nonbinary people from Black, Indigenous, and communities of color worldwide.

We set \$6 billion over and above current funding levels as a starting point,¹⁹ to hold ground against the anti-gender movement and gain traction in shifting power.

For thousands of individual feminist leaders and organizations, an additional investment of \$1.5 billion each year would represent a true opportunity to solidify their achievements and set a future course for their vital work.

For individual funders, investing in feminist movements represents an equally meaningful opportunity—to put money into the hands of the women, girls, and nonbinary people who are fighting for equality for all people. We urge you to lean into the fear, the exhilaration, the joy of this imperative work and to match their tremendous courage with your giving.

In the meantime, movements aren’t waiting. They continue to pursue their work against all odds. When Pari Ibrahim, founder of the [Free Yezidi Foundation](#), a nonprofit supporting women and children caught in ISIS’ genocide of the Yezidi people, attended a meeting with religious leaders, the men in attendance literally pushed her off her chair.

So Ibrahim picked herself up and shoved her way back into the circle.

Now is the time
to fund systemic,
lasting change
for us all.

Thanks to feminist movements ...



... there has been a seismic shift in how the world thinks about and prioritizes gender equality.²⁰

What's more, feminist movements have pushed beyond direct impact on outcomes for women, girls, and nonbinary people to realize better outcomes for all people. Here are a few concrete wins feminist movements have been central to realizing in recent years:

Reproductive rights

In 2021, Mexico ruled that, in the northern state of Coahuila, women cannot be prosecuted for getting an abortion.²¹ In 2020, Argentina decriminalized and legalized access to abortion up to 14 weeks.²² In 2018, Ireland overturned a 35-year ban on abortion.²³

Sexual harassment

In 2018–2019 in the United States, following #MeToo, several states banned nondisclosure agreements in sexual misconduct cases. Some states also expanded sexual harassment laws to cover independent contractors.²⁴

Intellectual property

In 2016, the Movimiento Nacional de Tejedoras brought a case against the Guatemalan government, arguing it must prevent global fashion companies from stealing Mayan textile designs. The Guatemalan Supreme Court decided in favor of the Mayan weavers, setting an international legal precedent for Indigenous peoples' collective intellectual property.²⁵

Indigenous territories

In 2012, 18-year-old Nina Gualinga of the Sarayaku Indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon represented the Sarayaku before the Inter-American Court on Human Rights and won a groundbreaking case against the Ecuadorian government for violating Sarayaku rights and lands for oil drilling.²⁶

Farmworker rights

Since 2011, thanks to decades of organizing by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, food companies including Trader Joe's, McDonalds, Aramark, and more have signed on to the Fair Food Program, agreeing to source tomatoes and other types of produce only from farms that participate in the program. The program has raised labor standards in an industry that was notoriously exploitative. It has been particularly effective at ending sexual violence in the fields, which has improved working conditions for farmworkers of all genders.²⁷



About the Authors

Shake the Table bridges movements for racial, gender, and economic justice and philanthropy. We share knowledge, move resources, convene dialogue, expand networks, and create practical tools. We believe in the power of feminist movements to create more justice and joy and share insights and unlock resources to multiply their impact.

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The Bridgespan Group is a global nonprofit that collaborates with social change organizations, philanthropists, and impact investors to make the world more equitable and just. Bridgespan's services include strategy consulting and advising, sourcing and diligence, and leadership team support. We take what we learn from this work and build on it with original research, identifying best practices and innovative ideas to share with the social sector. We work from locations in Boston, Johannesburg, Mumbai, New York, and San Francisco.

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Endnotes

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