

Embracing Feminism Can Change Philanthropy and Create a More Equitable World

By [Rena Greifinger](#)

JUNE 9, 2021

JOHN LAMPARSKI, GETTY IMAGES

Melinda French Gates's Pivotal Ventures invests in funds that prioritize companies led by women and people of color.

The overlapping crises of the past year have laid bare the complicated realities facing women today. In one reality, wealthy, powerful women across the globe are leading and succeeding as never before. In another, poor and middle-income women are falling behind in education and careers at a troubling rate.

In the last year, the United States elected its first female vice president. Women-led countries like New Zealand showed the world how to lead responsibly and effectively during a pandemic. And new laws demonstrated the power of feminist movements to create change, including [Argentina legalizing abortion](#) and Scotland becoming the first country to make all [menstrual products free](#).

Women also made waves in philanthropy, [outpacing their male counterparts in online giving](#) and showing what it will take to change philanthropy's game. [MacKenzie Scott](#) was evangelized as the new face of wealth distribution, giving billions to movements and organizations typically overlooked by big philanthropy, including those serving women and girls.

At the same time, the pandemic has threatened to undo the enormous strides toward gender equality in recent years, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. [Millions of girls have dropped out of school](#), [gender-based violence has intensified](#), and more than 2 million women in the United States have [left the work force](#). The [poverty rate](#) for women worldwide increased 9.1 percent during the pandemic.

These disparities in women's experiences come down to the difference between individuals and systems. Kamala Harris, [Jacinda Ardern](#), and MacKenzie Scott have blazed trails, but the systems of politics, power, and philanthropy are still male-dominated and rooted in inequity.

To achieve gender equality, we must focus less on the strides made by individual women and more on upending the patriarchal structures around them — including philanthropy.

ADVERTISEMENT

Create Opportunities for Women

Traditional philanthropic models are not equipped to address the increasing gender inequities exacerbated by the pandemic. The most recent data shows that [only 1.6 percent](#) of all charitable giving goes to nonprofit organizations dedicated to women and girls.

To address this extreme funding imbalance, we need to create opportunities for women to act and lead in their own ways. We all need to embrace a feminist approach to philanthropy.

Such an [approach](#) is grounded in an understanding that women's oppression is multiplied due to their race, religious, and sexual identities. It recognizes power as the most important capital to share and directly funds and supports movement building, activism, and the rights of women, inclusive of those who identify as nonbinary. It focuses less on what is being funded and more on how funding is done.

In practice, according to the [National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy](#), feminist philanthropy is about “being accessible, listening to grantees, providing flexible and long-term funding, funding movements and networks, co-designing metrics with grantees, and learning with and from one another.”

These principles can be applied to any subject and implemented by any donor, regardless of gender or net worth. They should become the foundation of a new system of philanthropy that has the potential to transform the world.

Embracing the tenets of feminist philanthropy will require thinking differently about what it means to be a grant maker. It will require incorporating the following principles into all aspects of giving:

ADVERTISEMENT

Focus on we, rather than I. Community is at the center of feminist philanthropy — both the funding of community-based approaches and building community among donors. Research shows that women [prefer](#) to practice philanthropy together. Recognizing this, women donors have increasingly come together to form their own philanthropic communities, offering an example for what philanthropy should do on a larger scale.

[Women Moving Millions](#) and the [Maverick Collective by Population Services International](#), which I lead, bring together communities of wealthy women who give \$1 million or more to support organizations working on women's health, reproductive rights, and other issues that promote gender equality. Grant-making collaboratives such as the [Global Fund for Women](#), [Mama Cash](#), [Groundswell Fund](#), and [Frida](#), were set up explicitly to support feminist movements and organizers and are grounded in participatory approaches to grant making that put power in the hands of women and their communities to determine how funding is spent.

On a broader scale, the recently formed collective giving movement [Philanthropy Together](#) makes it easy for any woman, regardless of how much money she has, to join a giving circle based on shared interests, values, or geography. Practicing philanthropy together in this way unlocks a wealth of resources and should be a standard part of any giving strategy.

Emphasize connections, not transactions. The philanthropic world is rightly calling for longer-term, less restricted, and more trust-based giving. But we shouldn't get so caught up in hands-off giving that we eliminate the opportunity for connection with grantees. Women philanthropists don't write checks to see their name on a building or college scholarship. [They want deeper connections](#) with the people and organizations they fund.

Creating those connections was at the heart of Melinda French Gates's and the Crown Princess of Norway Mette-Marit's vision when they co-founded the [Maverick Collective](#).

Our members often tell us how lonely philanthropy felt before they found us. Now they can engage directly with those they fund by, for instance, joining our researchers in interviews with community members at the start of a project and taking part in program design workshops. This allows them to gain a more nuanced understanding of the problems they want to help solve and builds trust with the teams doing the work. As a result, they become much more flexible with their resources — not only with us but in all their philanthropic endeavors.

Change one system and then change them all. Feminist philanthropists understand that changing societal structures that hold women back doesn't stop at philanthropy's door. They fully recognize and take ownership of the [historic role](#) philanthropic wealth played in oppressing those it was supposed to help. All their endeavors reflect this understanding. That includes paying close attention to the practices of the companies they invest in and work with — and parting ways with those that don't fully embrace equity.

Several women-led collective movements have formed recently to advance this thinking. For example, [SheEO](#) brings 500 women together every year who contribute \$1,100 each. Their money goes into a pooled fund that provides interest-free loans to women-led businesses addressing a range of social problems. The impact venture-capital fund Rhia Ventures' [RH Capital Fund](#), which several of our members invest in, supports women's reproductive and maternal health innovations that aim to improve access, quality, and affordability of care for all women in the United States. And Melinda French Gates's [Pivotal Ventures](#) invests in funds that prioritize companies led by women and people of color.

As they work different levers of the system, women philanthropists are becoming known more for their mastery of the issues they care about and less for how much money they have or who they are (or no longer are) married to.

Philanthropy has many inherent flaws, but its potential for creativity, flexibility, and risk-tolerance can pave a path for government and business to follow. As more women rise to positions of prominence — and millions more see their futures dim — philanthropy needs to take bold steps toward a feminist future. Let's get to work. Women and girls around the world are counting on us.

A version of this article appeared in the [July 1, 2021, issue](#). We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.