

Opinion

Philanthropists Bench Women of Color, the M.V.P.s of Social Change

And we all lose out.

By Vanessa Daniel

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November begins the peak season for charitable giving in the United States. Over the next several months, donors and foundations will allocate billions of dollars to progressive causes. And this year, the stakes are higher than ever: The future of the climate, of abortion rights and of our democracy are on the line.

I run a national public foundation, and I see up close that the people who are overrepresented in success at social change — women of color who lead grass-roots nonprofits — are wildly underrepresented in funding. Only 0.6 percent of foundation giving was targeted to women of color in 2016. The record for individual donors is not much better.

Our misdirected philanthropy is costing us beyond measure. A mountain of evidence shows progressive victories are surging up from groups led by women of color, particularly black women, that build power on the ground — not trickling down from large Beltway organizations headed by white men.

Consider the New Virginia Majority, which orchestrated a nearly decade-long campaign to restore voting rights to 173,000 people with felony convictions in that state under the leadership of Tram Nguyen, its co-executive director. The group proved instrumental in winning the expansion of Medicaid to nearly 400,000 people and in turning the state blue in early November.

Or look at the National Domestic Workers Alliance, run by Ai-jen Poo along with Alicia Garza and Jess Morales Rocketto, which has wielded the power of its formidable membership base to push nine states and Seattle to enact domestic worker bills of rights. (Disclosure: My foundation awards grants to many of the organizations mentioned in this essay.)

We could see many more of these victories and on a larger scale. But the standard practice within philanthropy is to favor mainstream white-led organizations while benching women of color, including transgender women of color, the bold M.V.P.s of social change. They go beyond asking for incremental gains to demand the full scope of what all communities deserve. Unless something changes, this is how we will all lose in 2020 and beyond.

Here are the main reasons women of color are shut out of funding:

The false notion that bigger is better. While most self-identified liberal philanthropists reject trickle-down economics, they buy into “trickle-down social change,” a phrase used by my colleague Carmen Rojas, the founder of the Workers Lab, which funds ideas that build power for low-wage workers. This is the false belief that the way to achieve the greatest impact is to invest in large, prominent, national nonprofits that promise to deliver “at scale” despite having little organizing heft at the local level.

This approach benefits the mostly white-led groups that have, for decades, received generous support to grow, while groups headed by women of color have been systematically locked out of funding. The latter are then trapped in a cycle in which their budgets are never large enough to qualify them for the funding they need to increase their budgets.

Instead, more donors should follow the example of the Funders for Reproductive Equity, a network of grant-makers whose increased giving to grass-roots groups run by women of color has helped win eye-popping victories. That happened in Oregon where a coalition of local groups delivered the country’s best law on reproductive freedom in 2017.

The impulse to gentrify. Philanthropists are noticing the success of strategies innovated by women of color. But instead of funding them at the source, they are writing checks so that larger, white-led nonprofits can replicate their work. I refer to this trend as the gentrification of social change movements.

This happened to the hugely successful Black Mama’s Bailout campaign, which began in 2017 and has freed hundreds of black women in dozens of cities nationwide. The brainchild of Mary Hooks, a black lesbian organizer from the South, the campaign was brought to life by community-based groups like Southerners on New Ground, of which she is co-director, as well as the Movement for Black Lives.



Mary Hooks, co-director of Southerners on New Ground, developed the bailout campaign. Lynsey Weatherspoon for The New York Times

But foundations run by white people bypassed these alliances to pour millions of dollars into their own campaigns in 2018. If this money had gone to leaders like Ms. Hooks, it could have strengthened efforts to build power in the communities most affected by the predatory cash bail system, a base of people that could be mobilized again and again on other issues.

Adding insult to injury, often a small grant will be offered to the woman of color's nonprofit that created the innovation to go teach a white-run group that has been awarded a huge grant on how to adopt it. This lets philanthropists feel that they are checking off the "people of color box" without having to change to whom they are writing their checks or confronting their discomfort with trusting people of color with money.

The proliferation of smart strategies is a good thing. But the appropriation of work without proper credit or compensation in ways that reinforce the exclusion of their creators from resources and decision-making power is not. Moreover, most of these strategies don't deliver the same impact when executed by institutions headed by white people that lack relationships and trust among people on the ground, even when these institutions hire people of color to run programs.

There are movements in this country, from excluded worker organizing to reproductive justice to environmental justice, that were created by people of color who were unable to be bold, authentic and accountable to their communities from within white-led organizations. Gentrification should no longer be acceptable in philanthropy.

Implicit Bias. Philanthropy is still overwhelmingly controlled by middle- to upper-class white people, even though the numbers of donors and foundation staff members of color are growing. Implicit bias affects which prospective grantees they deem risky, credible, trustworthy or innovative, and gives a great advantage to leaders and nonprofits that conform to their cultural norms. Facility in academic English, slick marketing materials and connections with prestigious people and institutions make it more likely that certain groups will gain funding.

I've seen repeatedly that it's far easier for a young affluent white man who has studied poverty at Harvard to land a \$1 million grant with a concept pitch than it is for a 40-something black woman with a decades-long record of wins in the impoverished community where she works to get a grant for \$20,000. This, despite the epic volumes of paperwork and proof of impact that she will invariably have to produce. She reads as risky, small, marginal. He reads as a sound investment, scalable, mainstream.

Similarly, nonprofits with glossy proposals are often seen as bankable even though some of them have terrible reputations in the communities they serve, while groups with excellent reputations on the ground and less slick proposals are often seen as risky.

Risk. With a few notable exceptions, philanthropy is the white woman grabbing her purse when a black man enters the elevator. People of color applying for funds face an immediate presumption of unreliability. I'm often asked by donors how they can manage the "risk" of funding grass-roots organizing headed by people of color. I ask them to examine how they are managing the risk of not funding it.

A growing number of foundation staff members are admitting the risk in their inherited white-only grantee portfolios that have failed, for decades, to move the needle on the issues their organizations care about. The good news is that there is a new generation of foundation officers, many of them white, who are challenging the prevailing notions of risk and transforming their lists of grantees.

Facially neutral rules. Philanthropy's eligibility criteria and metrics for impact often reinforce the inequities that are at the core of the very problems it is trying to solve. Many of them are "facially neutral": never mentioning particular groups and at first glance nondiscriminatory, but producing stark racial and gender disparities in giving.

For example, most reproductive rights grant-makers for decades limited their funding to protecting the legal right to abortion. That was sufficient for most middle- and upper-class white women, but sadly lacking for women of color, who face numerous barriers to access abortion care that the legal right alone does not remove, along with myriad attacks on their reproductive freedom. This had the effect of cutting out women of color.

Fortunately, many reproductive rights funders have since broadened their giving after realizing that their single-issue focus was creating an anemic, racially homogeneous movement that lacked the resources and people power to win legal rights or anything else.

Elitist ideas of social change. Philanthropy tackles the most difficult problems of our day but seeks to involve the people most affected by them as little as possible. People with race and class privilege often believe in fairy tales about where power comes from and how social change occurs. When they sit down to write checks, they express those beliefs.

In the sector, there is a strong belief that more research reports would surely compel elected officials to take action (missing the fact that credible reports on everything from climate change to racial disparities in maternal health outcomes have existed for years with little result). Or if only a fancy communications firm could come up with a winning message and broadcast it via an aerial campaign, that it would change behavior (even though the most trusted messengers come from our communities). There is a belief that policy written in a vacuum by well-paid lawyers in Washington is the way to win social change.

But affected communities must have a hand in shaping a policy for it to be relevant, and in building the community engagement necessary to pass it, defend it against repeal and watch over its execution. In philanthropy, there is little belief in the efficacy of collective action led by those most hurt by problems.

Once, in a meeting with a multimillionaire, I made the case for funding grass-roots organizing, headed by women of color, because they face the greatest barriers to reproductive freedom. Sure, she responded, but who is going to tell them what to do?

Instead, donors should listen to these leaders. They know what to do.

Every foundation ought to shift a majority of its giving to groups headed by people of color. We must write checks that support multi-issue organizing led by women of color on a large scale. And instead of awarding grants for individual projects, donors need to move toward multiyear, general-support funding so groups can expand. This is how we build the power of communities to win, defend victories and win

again.

We funders ought to use our access and relationships within philanthropy to open more minds and coffers to this kind of work. With year-end giving approaching — and the future of our planet, our reproductive freedom and our democracy at stake — there is a chance to do just that.

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