



Women's Funding Network

Women's Economic Mobility Hubs Initiative

A Snapshot of the Key Strategies to Advancing Women's Economic Mobility and Security by the Women's Funding Community



BARRIERS TO ADVANCING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY

Barriers and Opportunities:

Women's Funding Network (WFN) and women's foundations across the U.S have documented significant barriers to women's economic security and mobility which include: lack of employment, affordable childcare, affordable housing, education/training, transportation, and mentors. Additionally, systemic and intergenerational poverty, gendered income and wealth gaps, historical trauma, gender-based violence, lack of economic opportunity (especially in rural areas and for particular populations) and the other widely acknowledged social/cultural determinants of economic opportunity and health — racism, classism, sexism, able-body-ism and immigration status — all significantly impact women's economic mobility and security and chances for advancement.

In particular, single and working mothers face tremendous burdens in finding affordable and accessible childcare. A dearth of family-friendly policies blocks advancement for women in the workplace at all levels. Additional hurdles exist for women returning to the workforce after time away for family care and for those released from employment due to the perception of age-incompetence. Women of color, immigrant women, formerly incarcerated women and Indigenous women face particular intersectional barriers (race, gender, class) within the labor market and the economy. Specific sectors including teachers, early childhood educators, home-health care workers, and cleaners, in particular need increased wages. Increasing women's access to higher paid jobs, traditionally held by men, is also a priority.

At the same time, WFN and its members have identified many strategic opportunities to advance women's economic mobility, opportunities and security. These include:

- Focusing on education, training, and workforce development, including support for women in attaining educational credentials for high-demand, high-wage fields like STEM, healthcare, and tourism.
- Investing in community-led programs and policy solutions to address the childcare shortage and affordability so more women can enter, grow within, and remain in the workforce.
- Focusing on closing the wage gap, with attention to racial disparities.
- Identifying opportunities and better systems to provide affordable healthcare.

Across the country, burgeoning evidence demonstrates that women are fundamental drivers of economic growth. Economists have shown that a decrease in human capital (i.e., women's labor) strains government resources and decreases economic opportunities at the community level.

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| Violence Against Women and Girls |
| Gender and Racial Wage Gaps and Income Disparity |
| Lack of Access to Education and Training |
| Lack of Transportation |
| Intersectional Barriers: Race, Gender and Class |
| Housing and Homelessness |
| Lack of Affordable Childcare |
| Systemic and Intergenerational Poverty |
| Lack of Mentoring/Coaching |
| Lack of Economic Opportunities – Regional & for Specific Populations |
| Affordable Health Care and Insurance |

Regional Differences Matter:

Incorporating regional differences into the equation yields further opportunities for impact. For example, the **Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham** creates, funds, and implements programs that target low- to moderate-income women and their children to lead more economically secure lives. Latina and African American women experience the highest levels of poverty in Alabama. With just 50% of women participating in the labor market, it has the second lowest labor participation rate of any state. Women represent one of the state's largest pools of untapped workers. The women's foundation is working to raise Alabama's labor participation rate to the national average which would add an estimated 81,000 women to the workforce.

New York City provides another example, wherein families may live in one area, access services and work in another, and have children attending school in yet another. The **New York Women's Foundation** developed a place-informed approach (as opposed to place-based) to address concentrated levels of need within the city, which is essential to account for the complex nature of women's and families' lives.

Women and the Labor Market:

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the 2015 unemployment rate among women was 5.2 percent. For Black and Latina women, the unemployment rates were 8.9 percent and 7.1 percent, respectively. Unemployment was highest among women with less than a high school diploma, at 9.4 percent. At 15.9 percent, the rate was even higher among African-American women without a high school diploma.¹

Today, many women are on the margins of the labor market. In order for women to compete for jobs and earn competitive wages, they needed to have received adequate training and education prior to the start of the recession in 2007. This reality, coupled with steep cuts to state and local budgets, speaks to an urgent need to coordinate efforts among those working to support women in this challenging landscape. The women's funding community is posed to identify best practices and strategies at regional, state and national levels and to share learnings across communities, further extending its reach.

To adequately foster training and career pathways for women, a systems approach is needed to address obstacles and barriers and to take into account the many layered roles and responsibilities of women outside the workplace within their families and communities. Women still regularly encounter myths and stereotypes about women's work, sex discrimination, pay inequity, and institutional practices that disproportionately benefit and promote men. Meanwhile, women remain the primary caregivers for children and aging parents and continue to complete over 80% of household tasks and responsibilities. Overwhelmingly, a gender lens is not applied when developing, implementing, and evaluating workforce readiness curriculum, programs, and outcomes. Pathways to success for women in the workplace and the broader economy must be created by, for, and about women.

¹ U.S. Department of Labor. 2015. Household Data Annual Averages. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved April 14, 2016.



WOMEN'S FOUNDATIONS: EMPLOYING A GENDER LENS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Women's foundations have a long history of working to address women's economic security and mobility within their own communities across the country. With over 100 women's foundations and gender equity funders as members, WFN unites their financial power, expertise and influence in order to address and solve critical and complex social issues ranging from poverty to gender-based violence to global security.

From a dozen women leaders in the early 1980s, who asserted that philanthropy needed to include women's voices and solutions in order to create social change, WFN is now an international community comprised of US-based women's foundations across 36 states and in 14 other countries. Collectively, members invest \$100 million/year toward advancing the lives of women and girls. We are a movement of women investing together in women-led solutions and innovations.

WFN is the essential connective tissue, expanding its members' knowledge and strengths, and amplifying impact through its conferences, regional summits, cross-sector partnerships, access to innovative tools and research, connections with women leaders and women-led organizations around the world, and facilitated learning communities. The most recent being the **Partnership for Women's Prosperity**, a 6-year cohort of women's foundations in six states, focused on establishing pipelines to secure employment for low-income women; and the **Two Generation Advocacy Cohort**, a 2-year collaborative of women's foundations in four states advocating for better workforce policies and programs to support low-income women and their children. Skilled facilitation of each cohort supports the sharing of common challenges, innovations and best practices, and the development of shared aims and metrics.



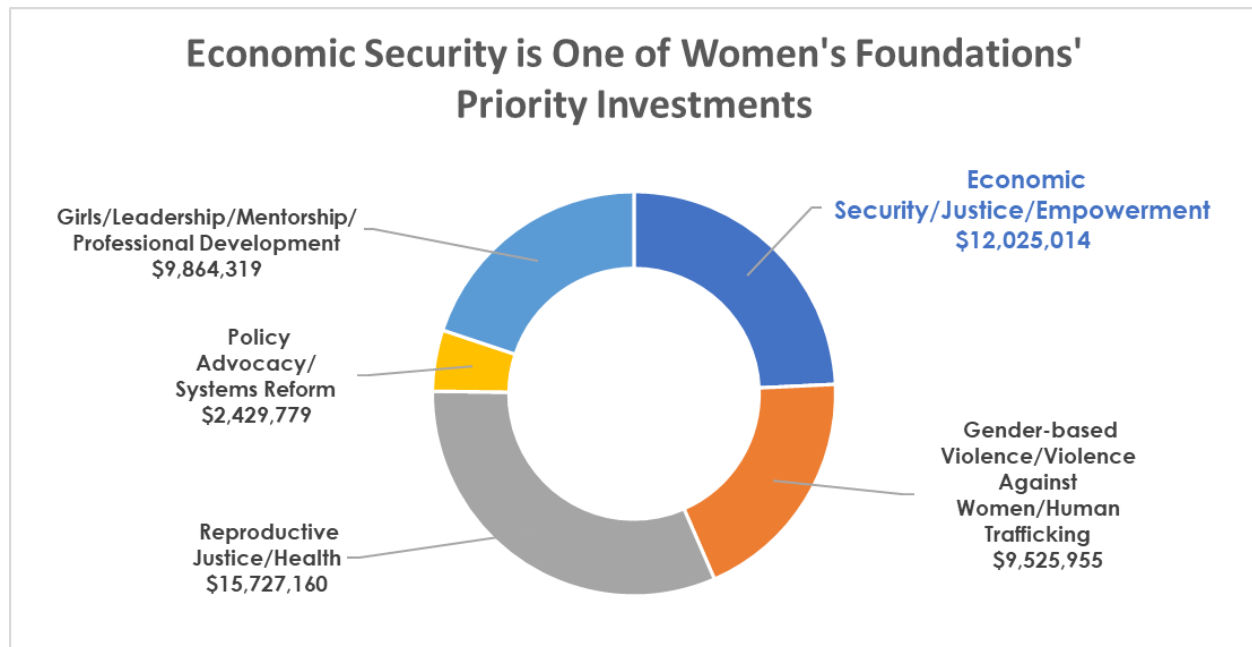
SNAPSHOT OF STRATEGIES FOR ADVANCING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC MOBILITY

The majority of WFN members prioritize advancing women's economic mobility, opportunities and security as a key focus of their work. All, regardless of whether they invest \$100,000/year or \$1,000,000/year, employ a range of strategies, including using their convening power, fostering public-private partnerships, promoting research, collaborating with academics, nonprofits and government partners, and engaging in communications strategies to move the needle. The chart on the next page shows the investments made by women's foundations on various issues impacting the lives of women and their families. Economic security topped the list, with as much as \$12M being invested in 2018.

As more women's foundations apply a holistic systems change approach — from connecting a deep understanding of the underlying economic and social context with programs and intervention development, to policy change and service provision, to scaling efforts by resourcing infrastructure needs — to the complex challenges inherent in advancing women's economic mobility and security, great strides are being made.

Women's Foundations Put Their Money Where the Need Is

Economic security is critical for women and girls everywhere. Funding it is a priority for women's foundations that invested over \$12 Million in 2018. Yet, lasting economic security also requires that violence be reduced, leadership increased, and health outcomes improved. This combination of moving parts work together, and in 2018, 46 women's foundations invested close to \$50 Million toward moving women and girls from poverty to prosperity.



Women's foundations utilize an array of proven strategies to advance women's economic security including: (1) seeking wisdom and solutions directly from the women and communities most impacted by economic challenges; (2) engaging in cutting-edge research with academic and community partners to surface key drivers of women's economic insecurity and possible solutions; (3) recognizing that gender equity and justice are inherently interconnected with racial, economic and health equity and justice; (4) supporting multi-faceted approaches such as policy change, organizing, and systems change efforts; (5) fostering cross-sector collaborations by bringing together diverse stakeholders and sectors for shared learning and strategy development; (6) investing in culture change work by elevating the issues, promising innovations, and the voices of those most impacted through savvy communications strategies and social media; and (7) leveraging impact by investing in community partners and programs over multiple years through grantmaking initiatives and trainings.

Examples are featured on the following pages offering a snapshot of the current national landscape. While these provide a rich sampling, many more examples of the broader impact of the women's funding community are featured on our website.

STRATEGY 1: SOLICIT WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE & SOLUTIONS FROM THOSE CLOSEST TO THE ISSUES

Listening tours, focus groups, community conversations, and advisory councils are common strategies that women's foundations use to lift up the voices and expertise of those with lived experience — low-income women, women of color, young women and Indigenous women — in developing funding strategies and initiatives to advance women's economic mobility.

1

Listening Sessions

In an effort to understand how the **Iowa Women's Foundation (IWF)** might positively impact the economic self-sufficiency of women and girls in Iowa, IWF held its *SHE MATTERS: We Listen and Iowa Wins* listening tour with focus groups in 19 communities with low-income women and nonprofit, public, education, law enforcement, philanthropic and business sector participants. From the focus groups, IWF learned there are six key barriers facing women with regard to their economic security: employment, affordable childcare, housing, education/training, transportation and mentorship.

2

Community Conversations

The **Women's Foundation of Colorado** launched Chat4Change, a series of community conversations to inform, illuminate, and connect the community in support of women who are on the path to economic security in Colorado. Chat4Change's first event highlighted the economic status of immigrant and refugee women in Colorado, the unique challenges they face as newcomers, and the resources they need to succeed. Given that women 65 and older are the fastest growing population and among the most likely to live in poverty, the next Chat4Change will highlight the economic challenges of Colorado's aging women's population.

3

Advisory Councils

The **Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation** established an Advisory Council, comprised of 15 women currently experiencing barriers to economic mobility. The Council informs the foundation's research and advocacy efforts and is the sole decision-maker for its programmatic grants.

4

Advisory Councils

Comprised of six single mothers living below the federal poverty level, the **Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona's** Family Advisory Council, advises on all the foundation's work and decisions, including its grantmaking, research, legislative drafts, strategic direction and priorities.

“ We are building upon invoking family voice in our work. That is a part of the 2Gen work that may not be talked about as much. We have a family expertise council. We are working to expand and broaden their influence in what we do.

STRATEGY 2: RESEARCH TO FOSTER BETTER UNDERSTANDING

Women's foundations support research to foster better understanding of the landscape, drivers of gender-specific poverty, key issues, and opportunities for interventions.

1

Women's Foundation of Mississippi commissioned the Institute for Women's Policy Research to conduct an in-depth study on female community college students, barriers to their academic progress, and resources to enable success. The report, "Securing a Better Future: A Portrait of Female Students in Mississippi's Community Colleges" critically informs the foundation's Access to Opportunity initiative, which enhances career counseling and remedial education, improves student services, and increases access to financial aid.

2

The **Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona** collaborates with University of Arizona researchers to study the economic mobility of single mothers participating in its Pathways Program, and recently published two reports: "Relationship of Economic Independence and Access to Childcare" and "Women's Work: Realities and Possibilities for Arizona."

3

A **Women's Foundation of Arkansas** study looking at the status of low-income Black women business owners in the Arkansas Delta, gathered data about lived experience through personal interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, seeking to identify barriers in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and how networks support business development

4

The **Vermont Women's Fund**, Vermont Commission on Women and Vermont Works for Women partner in the [Change The Story](#) initiative to align policy, program, and philanthropy to significantly improve women's economic status in the state. The partnership researched and published four seminal reports: "Women, Work & Wages," "Where Women Work," "Women-owned Businesses," and "Women In Leadership."

5

Including 50 direct interviews with African American women at various socio-economic levels, the **Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation** research examines income, wealth, economic mobility rates and occupational group segregation to understand African American women's paths and obstacles to economic mobility.

6

The **Chicago Foundation for Women** regularly researches the needs of low-income women across the Chicago region. One of its reports, "Stepping Out of the Debt Spiral" found that city fines and fees kept families from employment and stuck in debt. The report led to the passage of reforms to the city's fines and fees policies, which ultimately benefited low

STRATEGY 3: LIFT UP INTERSECTIONALITY

Women's foundations lift up intersectionality, and focus on and invest in key populations — teens & young women, Indigenous women, women of color, single mothers — to ensure they're supporting culturally relevant and effective strategies.

1

The **Women's Foundation of Minnesota's** Young Women's Initiative aims to increase labor force participation of young women with four priorities: (1) pathways to high-skill, high-wage careers and jobs; increased participation in STEM fields; and increased opportunities in female-dominated employment sectors; (2) increased access to accessible, affordable, high-quality, culturally appropriate childcare and early education; (3) pipelines to support post-secondary educational attainment for young women with the greatest disparities; and (4) public awareness campaigns on the impacts of gender-based violence, de-stigmatizing survivors, and providing more services.

2

The **Chicago Foundation for Women** found historic segregation and lack of investment in communities of color - particularly African American and Latinx - a significant barrier to women's economic mobility. Understanding that gender equity is inherently interconnected with racial, economic and health equity, the foundation structured its grantmaking and programs with an intersectional lens.

3

Given that securing basic needs (e.g. food, housing, and health care) is a large barrier for many women and girls in its county, the **Women's Foundation of Collier County (FL)** provides scholarship awards and social development mentoring to address economic mobility challenges of at-risk teens in order to shift the intergenerational impacts of poverty.

4

Maine Women's Fund prioritizes food sovereignty projects in Tribal communities, enabling Native Women to address food insecurity, decrease reliance on government resources like the food stamp program, reclaim cultural practices and return to traditional dietary staples like wild rice.

5

The **Women's Foundation of Southern Arizona's** Pathways Program provides tuition, childcare, monthly stipends, emergency funds, transportation assistance, educational and job coaching, and professional clothing assistance to support single mothers to participate in certificate programs linked to career paths with a self-sufficient wage.

6

Understanding the centrality of advancing racial justice to all of its work, the **Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham** prioritizes and invests in race equity training for its staff, board and grantees. This is also part of their two-generational work.

STRATEGY 4: EMPLOY MULTI-FACETED APPROACHES

Women's foundations employ multi-faceted approaches to advancing women's economic security. The examples below capture the diversity of approaches from place-informed to place-based, to collaboratives addressing childcare solutions, to health care nonprofits paving the way to living wage employment for the lowest paid health workers.

1

The **Women's Fund of Rhode Island** advocates for policies — such as paid family leave, paid sick time, increase in minimum wage, fair pay policies, increased pay for gender segregated industries like child and health care — to improve women's economic security. The fund is a member of both the Fight for \$15/Fair Pay Coalition and the Closing the Women's Wealth Gap Coalition.

2

The **New York Women's Foundation** invests in research focused on the impact of the criminal justice system on women's economic security. Grantee partners test new approaches, such as paying for certificate programs for formerly incarcerated women to access higher education. The foundation acts as a convener, bringing together stakeholders across the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, to learn directly from its grantees.

3

The **Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis** advances a systems change, place-based approach to reducing women's poverty. With a focus on a zip code (38126) with dramatic poverty, the foundation aims to reduce poverty in that community by one percent per year over five years — by leveraging effective strategies of partner organizations, agencies, and grantees. The project employs a two-generation approach, intentionally integrating support for services for children and adults to tackle intergenerational poverty. The foundation also leverages new employer-driven partnerships to support increased job placements and has developed a Workforce Development Curriculum.

4

The **Women's Foundation of California** supported grantees working to redesign the labor market to pave the way to living wage employment for well-trained community health workers, interpreters, home care providers, and nursing and medical assistants, who bring valuable skills to front-line healthcare delivery, yet remain among the lowest-paid in the healthcare workforce. Grantees created social enterprises, offer direct employment, and advocate for lasting change within the health care sector.

STRATEGY 5: FOSTER CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION

Women's foundations have a long history of working in partnership with key local stakeholders including philanthropy, community-based organizations, businesses, colleges/vocational training programs, and public sector agencies to advance common economic opportunity goals.

1

The **Women's Foundation of Colorado** convenes a working group of 50+ workforce development and early care and education (ECE) cross-sector stakeholders to identify actionable solutions to improve access to high-quality, affordable childcare for working families. The group includes experts from the private, government, and nonprofit sectors and represents ECE business owners, professionals, and leaders in the local economy. A plan to more fully meet Colorado's growing childcare needs by diversifying educational and training pathways for ECE professionals was developed with input from statewide stakeholders.

2

The **Aurora Women and Girls Foundation** (CT) partners with higher education institutions, women and girls serving nonprofits, the philanthropic sector, state agencies (i.e., the Connecticut Governor's Council on Women and Girls) and corporate and business partners to advance economic security for women in its region.

3

The **Women's Foundation of Mississippi** partners with nonprofits, businesses and other funders to create a successful non-traditional workforce development program focused on women in construction. The collaboration includes business leaders and funders and is being lifted up for replication throughout the state.

4

The **Washington Area Women's Foundation** brings a gender lens, its expertise and community-derived insights to numerous tables throughout the DC region. For example, in serving on the leadership council of Raise DC, which advances cradle to career opportunities for DC's youth, the foundation influenced the council to analyze and collect data specifically with a gender lens and to consider the impact of its programming on young women in particular.

5

The **Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis** forges cross-sector employer-driven partnerships (in collaboration with community-based organizations, post-secondary institutions, and local and state government organizations) to support increased job placements and other economic opportunities for low-income women.

6

The **Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation** is collaborating with the University of Cincinnati to update research on the Cliff Effect, which will inform work to pass state legislation on this issue. They are bringing together a comprehensive group of employers, government officials, service providers, chambers of commerce, and academics to develop actionable policy solutions for the Cliff Effect.

STRATEGY 6: ENGAGE IN CULTURE CHANGE STRATEGIES

Women's foundations engage in strategic culture change and communications strategies to amplify the issues and shift the narrative.

1

The **Women's Fund of Miami-Dade's** award-winning social media public engagement campaign aims to overcome barriers and foster solutions for women's economic security by focusing on equal pay, health access, mental health access, anti-human trafficking, affordable housing and other issues central to advancing women's economic mobility. Reflecting its demographic, all of the fund's communications strive to be in a mix of Spanish, Creole, and English.

2

Understanding that racial and gender hierarchy underpins many systems in the state, the **Women's Foundation of Mississippi** works to change mindsets by shifting the narrative around gender equity. The foundation's "Consider This" panel discussions provide thought-provoking conversations on a variety of topics, including #MeToo, Leading Beyond Gender and Race, and Mental Health.

3

The **Texas Women's Foundation's** five-year plus funding of the public radio series, One Crisis Away, has garnered multiple national reporting rewards and is heard across Texas. The series has a large focus on women and families, redefining what poverty looks like in Texas. This year, the foundation will also feature audio stories and photography of 12 women challenged by the key building blocks for economic security (housing, health insurance, education and childcare) to amplify the issues through the voices of those most impacted.

STRATEGY 7: LEVERAGE IMPACT THROUGH CONVENINGS

Women's foundations leverage their impact by using the power of convenings, trainings and capacity building

4

The **Western New York Women's Foundation** convenes cross-sector community partners to jointly improve economic conditions for women. Given that the burdens of child rearing and elder care often fall to women, who then face challenges (i.e. skills gap, lack of networks) re-entering the workforce, the foundation identified the need for reconnection services for this population. As a result of its convening of Buffalo, NY workforce development nonprofits and community organizations, the organizations are poised to collaborate on shared goals, and avoid replication.

5

The **Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts** partners with the Massachusetts State Treasurer and local community colleges to offer free salary negotiation workshops for women.

6

The **Women's Fund of Rhode Island** also offers workshops on financial gender equity and salary negotiation.



BUILDING ON SUCCESS WITH REGIONAL WOMEN'S ECONOMIC MOBILITY HUBS

Women's foundations have a long history of addressing women's economic security and mobility within their own communities. To increase their individual impact, WFN facilitates multi-year, multi-foundation cohorts, collaborating across the U.S. Building on the long-term impact of women's foundations applying a gender lens to poverty alleviation and women's economic security, WFN, in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is now supporting the creation of up to 10 regional Women's Economic Mobility Hubs by women's foundations in diverse regions.

Hubs will reflect their unique geographic and demographic landscape, and will magnify existing partnerships and strategies of the women's foundations. Targeted community engagement will help identify community assets and key influencers to collectively move strategic efforts and investments that build lasting livelihoods for women and advance their economic opportunities mobility and security. Hubs will focus on the critical range of social, economic, health, and environmental conditions necessary within their regional ecosystems for women to thrive.

QUESTIONS DRIVING OUR INITIATIVE

- What efforts are effective in poverty alleviation across regions and within specific regions for women and girls?
- What opportunities, by region, exist to accelerate poverty alleviation for women and girls?
- What will be needed to sustain poverty alleviation among women's and girls' efforts to achieve the outcome?
- How does the learning community support the work of regional hub leaders?
- What other inputs or conditions are needed for success in advancing women's economic mobility at regional and state levels?
- How can philanthropic partners and donors further support women's foundations to increase their impact and take their work to scale?

With the Regional Women's Economic Mobility Hubs, we hope to bring more concentrated effort in communities, from rural to urban, with the leadership of women's foundations. As best practices and innovations are identified, we have the longer-term goal of compelling additional funders to join these efforts, applying a gender lens to poverty alleviation, and to replicate the Hubs beyond the original 10 sites in order to further the initiative's reach and impact.

Acknowledgements

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The content of this report draws upon conversations with members as well as the following documents:

- Partnership for Women's Prosperity evaluation reports
- Two-Generational Policy Cohort member interviews
- Two-Generational Policy Cohort member reports
- Korwin Consulting Two-Generational Policy Cohort evaluation reports
- WFN 2020 Landscape Analysis survey of women's foundations (n=20)
- WFN 2019 Member Grantmaking Survey (n=46)