

Mind the Gap – How Philanthropy Can Address Gender-Based Economic Disparities

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By Administrator (<https://forwomen.org/author/msfadmin/>)

Mind the Gap

Today marks the 107th observance of International Women's Day (<http://www.internationalwomensday.com/>). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, we'll have to wait until the 150th observance for the wage gap between men and women to close.

The women garment workers in New York City who marched on this day in 1857 and again in 1908 demanding safer working conditions, a ten-hour day, an end to child labor, and fair wages understood, as do movement leaders today, that we cannot wait. Not only is realizing gender equality in our economic, political, and social systems imperative to women's economic security, it is necessary for those systems to thrive.

More than a century after those demonstrations, media are celebrating what they're calling the Year of the Woman and trusting that Americans will finally recognize the importance of women's economic security. But how far have women come, really, if we continue to see gender-based economic disparities all around us? Could *this* be the moment when Americans finally stand up and insist that decision makers change policy and address the persistent economic inequality that women, and women of color in particular, have had to bear?

There is reason to be optimistic. We have a viable woman presidential candidate, and there is a very real possibility that the United Nations will have its first-ever woman secretary-general. In addition, women will decide the outcome of the next national election. According to the Voter Participation Center (<http://www.voterparticipation.org/>), in 2012 single women drove turnout in practically every demographic, and despite increasing voter suppression tactics that disproportionately target women of color's access to the polls, voter turnout was higher among African American women than any other demographic group. In the process, the national discourse around social, economic, and political disparities affecting women — much of it generated by social movements, community-based organizations, and social-justice philanthropy — has been elevated to a new level.

Philanthropy and community advocates have long pushed for economic security policies with a clear gender-justice frame. Many funders — including the NoVo Foundation (<http://novofoundation.org/>) and Ford Foundation (<https://www.fordfoundation.org/>) — have provided crucial support for women’s economic security and safety issues. For over four decades, the Ms. Foundation for Women (<https://forwomen.org/>), the oldest public women’s foundation in the country, has played a critical and unique role in identifying and investing in new grassroots leadership and providing capacity building support to local women-led campaigns and initiatives.

Over the past several months, Surdna Foundation has begun to forge a partnership with the Ms. Foundation. In 2015, the Ms. Foundation invested in the development of a women’s economic agenda in Mississippi through a partnership with the Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative (<http://www.mschildcare.org/>). Through the “Making Mississippi Women Secure” campaign, which held eight town hall meetings across the state, women and women of color deeply connected to Mississippi were able to provide their input and shape policy priorities that reflected their own lived experiences, including a focus on higher-paying jobs for women, affordable access to education, affordable child care, and other issues that have a profound impact on working women and women who want to work.

The partnership with the Ms. Foundation creates an opportunity for Surdna to refine and strengthen its organizational analysis on gender-based economic disparities and empowerment, including issues of job quality that directly impact women, particularly women of color. To that end, the foundation has begun to articulate its commitment to addressing economic insecurity faced by millions of low-wage women. For the past several years, Surdna has funded organizations that have been working to advance women’s access to economic security through innovative campaigns that are transforming many sectors of the low-wage economy and broadening the scope of workplace policies.

That’s why Surdna has invested in the National Domestic Workers Alliance (<http://www.domesticworkers.org/>) and Restaurant Opportunities Center United (<http://rocunited.org/>) (ROC United), two organizations dedicated to making industries like home health care and food service that primarily employ low-income women of color more equitable and economically secure. They have also succeeded in conferring dignity on work that is done by a too-often exploited workforce. Others have been moving local and state policy campaigns for earned sick days and family medical leave, and organizing and advocating on behalf of equal pay for caregivers.

This September, the work of Surdna and the Ms. Foundation’s grantee partners will be amplified at a national Working Women’s Power Summit where more than a thousand organizers, advocates, and civic leaders will gather to advance a comprehensive women’s economic agenda that includes and addresses fair pay, paid sick and family leave, elder care and child care, health care, immigration, voting rights, and criminal justice reform.

With increased investment in women’s funds and grassroots leadership, we can achieve gender equity in the economy. As Surdna and other funders move to further develop gender-based analyses of their economic justice funding, we are keeping in mind those marches of more than a century ago and how much farther we have to go.

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The mission of the Ms. Foundation for Women is to build women's collective power in the U.S. to advance equity and justice for all. We achieve our mission by investing in and strengthening the capacity of women-led movements to advance meaningful social, cultural, and economic change in women's lives.

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