

New England Journal of Public Policy

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Women and Economic
Empowerment*

Article 28

3-20-1990

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Recommended Citation

Spring, Micho F. (1990) "A Critique of "Women and Philanthropy: New Voices, New Visions"," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol6/iss1/28>

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A Critique of “Women and Philanthropy: New Voices, New Visions”

Micho F. Spring

The debate is classic: should women work within existing institutional systems and organizations to help shape them, or should they establish their own? Micho Spring offers her own views about Marcy Murningham’s study of alternative philanthropies.

Marcy Murningham’s article, “Women and Philanthropy: New Voices, New Visions,” is a thought-provoking piece on the challenges, moral premises, and economic rationale that are nurturing opportunities for women to revitalize organized philanthropy and enhance the lives of women and girls across the nation.

The article presents a particularly strong case for women to define and embrace a meaningful set of core values before establishing a blueprint for action. Philanthropic organizations must exercise discipline and forethought to keep values at the center of all advocacy, fund-raising, and grant-making activity. The set of nine values cited as driving the women’s fund movement — justice, equality, love, freedom, hope, truth, temperance, prudence, and valor — should be considered by all philanthropic organizations, regardless of mission, as a strong and worthy portfolio of core values.

It is quite clear that the real challenge for women in philanthropy is the consistent and successful extension of core values into practices that help meet community needs. This is the challenge at the heart of the six caveats Murningham outlines near the end of her article. The dangers of self-importance, isolation, despair, emulation, exhaustion, and sexism are all real potential barriers to women seeking sustained success in advancing the field of philanthropy and improving the lives of women and girls. It is the danger of isolationism that should be viewed as a critical issue by leaders of the women’s funding movement.

The danger of isolationism stems from various factors. Many of these, as Murningham points out, are external to the women’s funding movement. “Traditional benevolent practice” is an example of one such external factor.

It is, however, the tendency of some proponents of the women’s funding movement to create and nurture elements of potential isolationism that are internal to the movement

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itself. These factors must be moderated if women are to have a positive, long-term, and broad-based impact on philanthropy and, in particular, the lives of women and girls.

I would assert that bringing about change within established foundations and other “mainstream” philanthropies is the most direct and efficient means of institutionalizing the societal benefits sought by the women’s funding movement. Many traditional philanthropies are changing rapidly to involve more women in leadership and address more women’s issues. By being in a position to leverage existing financial, power, and provider networks, women in these organizations have the capacity to implement high-impact programs with both near- and long-term benefits.

Leaders of the women’s funding movement should be cautious in leveling any criticism of “established philanthropies” that is not well informed and does not fully recognize the many advances made in recent years. Broad-based criticism can serve to alienate many women within the mainstream who have been successful in strengthening traditional philanthropies and increasing support for programs for women and girls. Nurturing the growth of women’s funds should not come at the expense of building influence within mainstream organizations.

Another potential source of isolationism that is internal to the women’s funding movement is the very separation of women and girls from other people in need. One of the critical issues of our time is the steady disintegration of family values and the family unit. Many barriers to full development and empowerment of women and girls can be traced to family disintegration. Be they “traditional” or “nontraditional,” it is quite clear that our families need to be strengthened. It is also clear that strengthening families is an immense task that needs to be shared by the broadest possible partnership — government, educators, the religious community, employers, and all philanthropic organizations. Separating women and girls from the mainstream, and in particular the family, may well serve to distance the women’s funding movement from an essential societal partnership.

The data presented by Murningham seems to outline a strong case for just such a separation. In fact, the data cited in the article seems to imply a relatively long-standing pattern of sexual discrimination in the foundation community with respect to funding programs for women and girls. The article indicates that in 1988, only 3.4 percent of all foundation dollars went to programs directed toward women and girls.

It is quite likely that the data presented is not inclusive of the many programs that benefit adults and children of both genders. In fact, the data may not include programs whose primary beneficiaries are women and girls. For example, affordable child day care, quality elder care, supporting pregnant teens, and dealing with teens who are abusing alcohol or drugs are not strictly women’s issues, but they are illustrations of problems for which women generally carry the burden of responsibility. Funding solutions to these problems must be considered supportive of the empowerment of women. To treat such funding as distinct and separate from programs for women and girls would heighten the danger of the women’s funding movement being perceived as isolationist.

Finally, leaders of the women’s funding movement may accelerate the expansion of values into practice, and dilute the danger of isolationism, by looking into the provider community for models of successful innovation and change. The number of women who have established themselves as presidents, executive directors, board presidents, and other leaders at the top of human service, educational, and other organizations committed to enhancing the lives of women and girls is impressive. The accomplishments of these women are even more impressive.

The women's funding movement is providing a healthy complement to the increasing impact of women on more traditional philanthropies. As Murningham says, "The presence and influence of women in philanthropic decision making — particularly manifest in the women's funding movement — can help foster an effective method for meeting the needs of human community and thereby advancing the human good." The movement can maximize the opportunity to advance the human good by extending core values into practice and working closely with mainstream philanthropies and networks. 269