Advancing the Economic Security of Gender-Based Violence Survivors

SURVIVOR-INFORMED GRANTMAKING STRATEGIES

ASSET FUNDERS NETWORK
Grantmakers Advancing Economic Equity

Case Study

THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S FOUNDATION
Radical generosity.

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY-LED SOLUTIONS FOR GENDER, ECONOMIC, AND RACIAL JUSTICE

Executive Summary

The New York Women's Foundation is one of the largest women-led grantmaking organizations in the world, advancing gender justice. Since its founding, the New York Women's Foundation has invested more than $133 million in over 500 organizations, supporting more than 500,000 people – advancing economic opportunity, racial and gender equity, and the full potential of young people and communities. Over its history, the New York Women's Foundation has evolved its longstanding intersectional work to advance survivors' well-being and self-determination and has deepened its commitment to representation by the most marginalized communities.

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Background and Context

About The New York Women's Foundation

The mission of the New York Women's Foundation is to advance an equitable and just future for all cis/trans women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals. On average, the Foundation gives $10 million annually to more than 100 organizations that support women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals with low incomes in New York City and across New York state. Founded in 1987, the New York Women's Foundation has been committed to economic justice from its beginning – investing in interrelated strategies: workforce development, violence prevention, reproductive health and choice, economic security, and ending gender-based violence.

Currently, the New York Women's Foundation has three interconnected grantmaking strategies that reflect inseparable realities for women, particularly women of color: 1) economic justice and environmental justice, which includes community ownership, nontraditional occupations, worker cooperatives, and affordable housing; 2) safety, healing, and bodily autonomy, which includes criminal justice and policy reform, well-being and leadership of young people, and reproductive healthcare access; and 3) civic engagement, democracy, and leadership, which includes increased representation by the most marginalized communities. The Foundation invests in survivors of gender-based violence at the intersections of survivor safety, economic justice, and bodily autonomy and health, supporting them to advocate for themselves and their communities.

Amplifying Community-Led System Change

Since its origins almost 40 years ago, the New York Women's Foundation has centered women and girls in its grantmaking strategies with anti-violence and economic justice serving as cornerstones. More recently, in 2018, the New York Women's Foundation took an explicit stand against gender-based violence through its national Fund for the Me Too Movement in partnership with Tarana Burke, supporting immigrant, low-income, and justice-impacted survivors. Since then, the Foundation has continued to be responsive to women's material needs through policy change – advancing economic opportunities and preserving economic rights and freedoms that can be protective factors against abuse. In 2024, sustained investments in grassroots advocacy yielded policy breakthroughs related to rental protections and fair housing opportunities for people who are impacted by the justice system, to the benefit of gender-based violence survivors who were criminalized and incarcerated for their own self-defense.

The New York Women's Foundation continues to prioritize funding for emerging organizations led by women and women of color that are responding to communities increasingly facing the greatest economic risk – such as women, trans people, young people, and immigrants in New York City – and implementing community-led solutions to advance gender, economic, and racial justice.

Grantmaking and Investing Strategies

Across multiple grant portfolios, the New York Women's Foundation supports local, community-based organizations that address a holistic set of needs. In particular, the Foundation's safety and healing justice initiative invests in approaches that center survivors, especially survivors who have been historically overlooked, to end all forms of gender-based violence and expand economic, healing, and transformative resources.

Responsive Funding that Reflects the Complexity of Survivorship: The Intersectional Impacts of Supporting Survivors' Economic Security

The New York Women's Foundation is responsive to survivors' needs by partnering with and investing in grassroots organizations, many of which are survivor-led and possess first-hand, authentic knowledge of their communities' lives. The Foundation has a longstanding practice of partnering with organizations led by people who are proximate to issues based on the conviction that people with lived experience are the best experts on their positions, situations, and goals. Utilizing a trust-based philanthropic approach over the years, the Foundation has prioritized disbursing general operating and multiyear grants to survivor-led organizations. This approach has a twofold economic justice impact: by investing in survivor-led organizations, the Foundation supports the creation of quality leadership and employment opportunities for survivors in the community. Second, by providing general operating grants, the Foundation frees the flexible capital to respond to survivor economic needs via direct cash assistance, developing cooperatives or other nontraditional business models, and supporting safe housing or other urgent financial needs as they arise. Survivors in the organizations and the community members they serve are trusted to use resources to create their safety, rather than assuming that the grantmaker holds the answers.

In addition to a trust-based philanthropic approach, the New York Women's Foundation recognizes that investing in approaches that center survivors to end all forms of gender-based violence and expand economic, healing, and transformative resources ensures that all women, nonbinary, and gender-expansive people are safe. The Foundation has predominantly supported culturally-responsive organizations meeting immediate survivors' needs and safety, including those that provide mutual aid to undocumented immigrants who cannot access benefits. These organizations include the New York City Anti-Violence Project supporting LGBTQ+ and HIV-affected survivors; the Survivors Justice Project supporting justice-impacted survivors; Malikah supporting Muslim women survivors; and VIP (Violence Intervention Program) Mujeres supporting Latinx survivors and building their capacity to develop and run worker cooperatives.

The Foundation understands that safety and economic security are deeply intertwined – that a survivor cannot fully access safety without economic stability, and that economic empowerment requires freedom from violence and coercion. This intersectional lens shapes every aspect of the Foundation's grantmaking, from which organizations it funds to how it structures its grants and measures success. By centering the experiences of those most marginalized – including transgender individuals, justice-impacted people, undocumented immigrants, and women of color – the Foundation aims to drive change that benefits the broadest possible community.

Collaborative Funds: Mobilizing Philanthropic Capital to Invest in Survivor Leadership

Alongside its grantmaking focused on funding community-based organizations advancing gender, economic, and racial justice in New York, the New York Women's Foundation collaborates with other funders and government agencies to establish special funds for specific purposes. Two of the Foundation's recent collaborative funds, the Me Too Fund and the New York City Fund for Girls and Young Women of Color Fund, have invested in survivor-led organizations that have contributed to strengthening a leadership and professional pipeline for survivors to have quality and meaningful employment while continuing to organize for systemic change.

In 2018, in partnership with the movement, the New York Women's Foundation established the Me Too Fund with an initial $1 million in seed funding. The four-year Fund employed a trust-based philanthropic approach that engaged organizations across the U.S. to uplift survivor voices, particularly voices of women of color and from other historically marginalized communities, and develop survivor-led programs. After the close of the Fund, The New York Women's Foundation and the Strength in Numbers Consulting Group conducted a summative evaluation that explored the development and implementation of The Fund's efforts, resulting in specific recommendations for how funders and activists can work together to advance a common agenda and spark change.

This 2018 national Fund was complemented by local investments in the safety and healing of the next generation of young women and gender expansive people, the New York City Fund for Girls and Young Women of Color Fund. The first fund of its kind in the United States, the New York City Fund for Girls and Young Women of Color Fund was formed in collaboration with community partners like Girls for Gender Equity in 2015 to address systemic inequities and gender-based violence that girls, young women, and gender-expansive youth of color faced in their communities, schools, homes, and even juvenile justice systems. Now in its second phase, The Fund is a collaborative and participatory initiative hosted by the New York Women's Foundation and has included 25 funders that have invested $20 million in 80 community-led nonprofits that focus on economic justice, health, leadership, advocacy, and safety.

Systems and Policy Change to Drive Justice and Inclusion

The New York Women's Foundation also supports coalitions and advocacy efforts to drive long-term systemic change toward economic justice for survivors. The Foundation has supported survivor-advocate ecosystems and survivor-leaders to advance the recognition of economic abuse as violence and the impact of coerced debt on survivors, while reducing barriers to survivor resources, such as eliminating police reports for victim assistance.

As an example, The New York Women's Foundation invested in the Center for Survivor Agency and Justice (CSAJ), a national organization that helps advocates, organizations, and systems respond to the self-defined economic needs of domestic violence survivors. CSAJ maintains a policy and funding map for coerced debt, direct cash, and flexible funding. CSAJ also keeps a survivor economic equity data dashboard to equip the gender-based violence field with data and story to fuel systems and policy change and record impact. With the support of the Foundation, CSAJ convened anti-violence organizations and a focus group of survivors to develop a survivor-centered platform to advance their economic justice at the height of the COVID-fueled affordability crisis. That opportunity to convene and strategize helped lay the research foundation for coerced debt policy wins years later.

Over the last few years, the Foundation has supported community partners who have achieved policy breakthroughs spanning housing access, criminal legal reform, and economic security, demonstrating the impact of the New York Women's Foundation's sustained investment in grassroots advocacy and policy reform. These protections not only protect survivors but can be preventative, as they also are critical for women, gender-expansive individuals, and families to thrive, including:

- **Good Cause Eviction Law,** which prevents unfair evictions and sudden rent hikes—making it easier for as many as 1.2 million renters and vulnerable New Yorkers to keep their homes.
- **Clean Slate Act,** which removes barriers from old criminal records by sealing misdemeanor and some felony convictions, giving an estimated two million people a fair shot at jobs, housing, and a fresh start.
- **Fair Chance For Housing Act,** which expands access to safe housing for those with past convictions, ensuring second chances are possible and reducing barriers to stable homes.
- **Coerced Debt Law,** which establishes legal protections for survivors of economic abuse, allowing them to dispute and discharge debts coerced through fraud, threat, force, or manipulation. It prohibits creditors from enforcing these debts and allows victims to shift financial liability to the perpetrator.

How the New York Women's Foundation Structures Its Support

Aiming to build long-term partnerships with grantees, shift power, dismantle inequitable structures, and center the leadership of women, girls, and gender-expansive people, the New York Women's Foundation generally provides general operating support and early investment grants focused on gender, racial, and economic justice. The Foundation prefers multiyear funding to foster organizational sustainability and lasting change. The Foundation uses a trust-based model and participatory grantmaking approach that includes community members and advocates in the decision-making process – shifting power to community experts, resulting in better outcomes, and strengthening local movements.

Survivor-Led Recommendations for Grantmaking Practices

The New York Women's Foundation's work has been shaped by its relationships and practices of trusting community leaders. Recommendations include:

Invest more in the movement.
The New York Women's Foundation supports community-led organizations and cross-cultural coalitions to end gender-based violence. The Foundation's support of coalitions and movement building provides long-term, flexible funding for infrastructure, leadership development, shared learning, and network collaboration to advance equity and systemic change.

Prioritize flexible funding and remove restrictions.
The New York Women's Foundation's grantmaking is grounded in partnership. General operating support, reduced reporting requirements, and participatory grantmaking express trust and value in lived experience and community leadership. These shifts in power help create more trusting, effective, and equitable partnerships. The New York Women's Foundation's grantmaking approach enables community partners to define their own goals and success – and adapt as needed.

Promote and provide funding for cash programs without restrictions.
Survivors of gender-based violence are diverse; some have intersecting marginalized identities of race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, incarceration, and immigration status that shape both risk and access to support. The New York Women's Foundation focuses on the most marginalized – transgender people, justice-impacted people, and undocumented immigrants – recognizing that the most powerful social change starts at the margins.

Emerging Insights and Impacts

Leveraging the Foundation's Platform for Survivors to Shape the Narrative

While the New York Women's Foundation's grantmaking strategies are interconnected, it requires intentional efforts for staff to develop a shared understanding of an issue like gender-based violence that touches and intersects with multiple strategies. To facilitate ongoing collective learning and practice for Foundation staff, supporters, and the broader community, the Foundation has utilized its own position to:

- Provide staff space for continued learning and conversation on emerging survivor needs, such as a staff-organized training and workshop led by anti-violence thought leaders, Cara Page and Erica Woodland, co-authors of Healing Justice.
- Create paid opportunities for grantees to lead workshops with their board of younger supporters, the Emerging Leaders Network. The Foundation has also paid and honored survivor leaders at its annual celebrations. Centering survivor-led organizations through paid opportunities builds further capacity for survivor leaders to discuss their work and build their own relationships with the Foundation's community of supporters.
- Partner with survivor-led organizations and survivor-led research institutions to uplift the intersection of poverty and survivorship that disproportionately puts marginalized survivors at risk of arrest and incarceration. The Foundation has also used its webinar and social media platforms to complicate public narratives about how to best support survivors' safety and autonomy.

Key Lessons for Other Funders

Invest early.

Funders can make early investments to support and champion survivors of gender-based violence. Early trust in organizations has ripple effects, allowing them to grow and strengthen and amplify their impact.

Be bold.

Transformative change requires courage, risk-taking, and faith in the people closest to the issues. Funders can invest in people and work that others overlook, making a statement about who deserves to be believed in and who deserves to lead.

Fund at the intersections.

While economic security is a crucial component of survivor safety, consider the other aspects of survivors' lived experiences – like their disability, immigration, or incarceration status – that may further or hinder their financial wellbeing. Through listening and learning from survivors in your community, consider other systemic barriers that prevent survivors from maximizing their financial wellbeing and the cross-movement partnerships that can accelerate needed change for marginalized survivors.

This case study was developed based on an interview with Sojourner Rivers, who is a senior program officer of the Safety, Healing, and Reproductive Justice programs at the New York Women's Foundation. It is part of a series produced to inform the philanthropic field on grantmaking practices that advance economic security and well-being for gender-based violence survivors.