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Women’s Gain: Fund-Raising and Fund Allocation as an Evolving Social Movement Strategy

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Formal social movement organizations became significant phenomena in the late 20th century. This article is part of a large national study that examines the historical evolution of one such organization, the Women’s Funding Network (WFN), which is connected to an “industry” of social change funds. WFN includes over 70 women’s funds across the United States and Canada that define fund-raising and fund allocation as a strategy for empowering women and achieving social change. Using the resource mobilization framework of Zald and McCarthy, the author considers critical issues that women’s funds have faced since their emergence as a network (1985) dedicated to social movement goals. Examples from case studies, surveys, and participant observation are used to compare individual funds and to analyze the impact of increasing institutionalization on mission, structure, resource mobilization, leadership, and programmatic activities of WFN as a social movement organization.

All of us don’t have to take on every single issue in the world, but wherever we do our work, whatever issue—however local—must be situated within a larger framework [so that] building a battered woman’s shelter is seen as ending violence in America.

—Panel discussant, Women’s Funding Network Annual Conference, Atlanta, April 20, 1996

In the same way that art mirrors life, theoretical constructs can be expected to change with new empirical evidence. Thus, as the collective activities of protest in the 1960s turned into more stable organizational structures in the next decade and as identity politics became more important, a new paradigm developed to explain the kind of social movement that was evolving in our country and elsewhere. In their seminal work on the significance of resource mobilization for social movements, John McCarthy and Mayer Zald (1977)

Note: I wish to express my appreciation to the Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research Fund for the generous support that made this research possible. I also want to thank the Women’s Funding Network, its member funds, and the many individual women who cheerfully offered their cooperation with my efforts and their assistance with my data collection for this study. An initial grant from the Sophia Fund gave me encouragement to start this work.
argued that in the contemporary world, formal organizations—social movement organizations (SMOs)—provide an essential means for sustaining and enhancing the work of a social movement; they do this through enabling the degree of resource mobilization necessary to maintain a social movement over time. In further elaboration, Zald and McCarthy (1987) suggest that such SMOs will generally form even more expansive social movement industries (SMIs). Zald and McCarthy and other social movement theorists (Gamson, 1975, 1987; Jenkins, 1983; Jenkins & Halcli, 1999) recognize that there may be an inherent tension, even conflict, between the demands of formal organization and the concomitant drive for social change goals through individual and collective activity. But they also leave unresolved questions about the nature of this tension.

Although the significance of resource mobilization is widely recognized, the value of formal organization in social movement theory has been questioned. Indeed, in an essay in the early 1990s, Frances Piven and Richard Cloward argued a contrary position—that the formalization of social movements inevitably results in the loss of movement passion. In their view, if you get the one, you almost certainly lose the other (Piven & Cloward, 1991). On the whole, there has been relatively little empirical research on the nature of the tradeoffs between the necessities of formal organizational structure and the demand for continuing social movement passion. However some analysts of feminist organizations have suggested the importance of this line of inquiry (Buechler, 1990; Brilliant, 1992; Staggenborg, 1995).

This article focuses on the question of institutionalization and SMOs; it is part of a larger nationwide study of a defined woman’s funding movement in the United States. The study is ending at a turning point in the development of the Women’s Funding Network (WFN), an organization which is the core umbrella organization for an identified women’s funding movement. In the spring of 1999, Carol Mollner, executive director of WFN and a primary force in the network for more than a decade, resigned from staff leadership of the organization, and WFN undertook a national search for a new chief executive officer. By early spring of 2000, WFN had chosen “one of their own,” Christine Grumm, executive director of the Chicago Foundation for Women, as the network’s new executive. At the annual conference in April, enthusiasm was openly expressed about the choice; there was an expectation that the new executive would help the WFN realize the vision underlying its strategic plan and promote greater recognition and higher impact for women’s funds nationwide. Thus, my review of the past history of the WFN is concluding in a period of transition.

In my larger study, I analyze the women’s funding movement in the framework of institutionalized social movement activity and the problematics of isomorphism. I use the women’s funding movement (and the network of women’s funding organizations) to illustrate the kind of dilemmas faced by social movements that deliberately and consciously center on the development of formal SMOs as strategies for resource mobilization and the attain-
ment of social change goals. In fact, the women’s funding movement is part of a growing industry of SMOs concerned with formal mobilization of power and money by groups that believe themselves to be disadvantaged in both regards.

Organizations in the WFN can be viewed as part of a social movement that encompasses the women’s movement globally. But in another characterization, these organizations may be considered in relation to other “alternative” fund-raising groups, such as Asian American funds, Latino funds, the Black United Fund, or the environmental funding movement. In this regard, I hypothesize that women’s funds, like other organizations of this SMI, will face increasing internal strains from trying to maintain movement passion as they become more institutionalized. Thus, the more they focus on achieving broad public support, the more difficulty funds will have resisting isomorphic pressure to mimic patterns of established charities, such as elite foundations or the United Way. This suggests a second related hypothesis: As funds become more successful in resource gathering, staff expertise becomes more significant.

In their specific roles, women’s funding organizations must be understood in the context of a movement formed for the purpose of developing the concrete resources of women’s time, energy, and money and as a strategy for empowering women personally and collectively. In this sense, because of their highly participatory nature, organizations in the network can be contrasted with the new group of essentially memberless advocacy associations delineated by Theda Skocpol in her recent work (Skocpol, 1999). I also argue that because of their scope and structure, members of the network are different from the grassroots splinter organizations she describes.

This discussion focuses on the issues faced by members of the women’s funding network in their efforts to develop increased technological and organizational sophistication—with regard particularly to fund-raising, allocations, and maintenance functions—while at the same time upholding their commitment to the social movement goals of women’s empowerment and social change. In a sense, here I am revisiting questions I have asked before but that merit more attention—are social and economic goals compatible? And to what degree can philanthropic institutions and organized charity initiate or respond to demands for social change? (Brilliant, 1990, 1996). In exploring these issues, I consider internal strains within the women’s funding movement as well as external pressures on it, and I analyze the role of the core organization of women’s funds: the WFN (originally, the National Network of Women’s Funds)—in helping the movement to remain centered on a social change vision. Some findings from a sample of organizations that have received grants from members of the WFN are presented; examples from case studies of particular member funds are used to demonstrate differences and similarities among groups in the national network (Brilliant, Van Alst, & Voerhoeve, 1998).
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

My study uses an historical approach that incorporates case examples, based on intensive site visits to six specific funds, with data (and themes) from 10 years of participant observation in meetings of the WFN. In the process, I have interviewed more than 125 women, many more than once and often in long interviews of more than one and a half hours. I have also carried out two national surveys with the help of a faculty collaborator, Katherine Kraft, and graduate students. In sum, however, the study is primarily a qualitative analysis of the evolution of a social movement, and it builds on data from mini case studies to analyze organizational subparts of what can be perceived as one social movement organization, existing within both the context of the larger “industry” of organized charity and the framework of a dedicated woman’s movement.

BRIEF HISTORY: ORIGINS

As the United Nations Decade for Women was drawing to a close in April 1985, a group of about 70 women (representing 20 organizations) met in Washington, D.C. to discuss the potential power of women’s funding organizations for supporting women’s issues. The Washington conference was the outgrowth of a number of informal meetings during the preceding year. In July 1984, the Black United Fund and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) had invited a small group of women’s funds to a meeting of what NCRP called the “alternative funds.” A steering committee had also been formed to plan a conference of women’s funds and to help start an association of women’s funds that would function as a mutual support system for the emerging groups. Since that time, the network of women’s funding organizations has grown to encompass about 70 grant-making organizations that are members of what is now the WFN, and in December 1999, the network listed a total of 126 members, including associate, institutional, and individual members.

MISSION

The women’s funding movement was created with a double heritage: On one hand, there were funds that had emerged directly out of the broader women’s movement and with a commitment to supporting what were clearly defined as feminist purposes, such as the Ms. Foundation (in 1972) and Astraea, a national lesbian funding organization (in 1977). In addition, the organizations that developed had roots in the growing dissatisfaction expressed by women who at that time were working in existing and more mainstream philanthropic institutions.
On the other hand, development of the funds was encouraged as part of a burgeoning alternative fund movement, defined that way because the funds were seen as alternatives to the United Way domination of fund-raising in the workplace and as incorporating social change goals (Brilliant, 1990; NCRP, 1986). However, with only a few notable exceptions, the women’s funds never fully embraced the idea of workplace fund-raising or a federated structure, although the imprint of their beliefs in diversity and empowerment of women was compelling. In their earliest discussions, the women present expressed a commitment to a consensus decision-making process and were concerned about ensuring an inclusive, strong “affirmative action policy” regarding women of color, “physical disability, sexual orientation, age, class and/or income, and rural geography.” (Minutes of the Interim Steering Committee, 1984, as cited in Joh, 1997, pp. 8-9).

In regard to its feminist heritage, defining the quality of the earlier mission is complicated. Early on, members of the small group of funds seem to have eschewed formal identification with the term feminist and defined themselves as part of a “woman’s” funding network. The emphasis on woman and not feminist resulted from an effort to avoid conflicts that could have ensued over the formal declaration of a feminist ideology, particularly since the emphasis was on gaining resources for women (and girls). In any case, the early founders of the funding network opted for an inclusive model dedicated to diversity but which at the same time allowed feminist strategies to be mixed with a variety of ideological viewpoints. Multiculturalism was considered essential, and the organizing mission was articulated as empowerment for all women—combined with the pragmatics of an emphasis on mobilizing more resources for women and girls. An early mission statement of the WFN (1995*) signals this double thrust:

The Women’s Funding Network (WFN) is the membership organization of public and private women’s foundations, federations, and individual donors. The Network promotes development and growth of women’s funds that empower women and girls.

Three related purposes stated that the network**

- advocates for funding the needs of women and girls,
- provides training and technical assistance to members and perspective members, and
- provides national visibility for the women’s funding movement.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NETWORK:

NUMBERS AND DOLLARS

From 1985 to 2000, the women’s funding movement has grown in total resources and membership. However, the amount of growth and the financial
strength of the network as a whole have not been easy to measure because con-
sistent data are not readily available and, indeed, have been hard to obtain.
Among the primary reasons for this is that the structures and activities of the
funds vary greatly; many developed from grass-roots groups, with record
keeping initially determined by their own needs; several started as part of
community foundations. Some funds are still small or are relatively unsophis-
ticated in terms of data management, whereas others, such as the Ms. Founda-
tion, are on such a grand scale that they distort aggregate figures: A major
grant to this organization, when not omitted from the aggregate, exaggerated
the growth rate for the group as a whole in 1994. One of the principal goals of
the network itself in the past few years has been to improve the quality and
quantity of available information about the women’s funds activities, and
WFN received a grant from the Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research
Fund to develop a system for recording and collecting these data. This assis-
tance seemed essential in light of the growing financial assets and activities of
the funds.

Data provided by the network indicate that for the 28 funds reporting, net
assets in 1994 were approximately $40.27 million. In this same year, the 28
funds raised in excess of $24.59 million and awarded grants of $9.05 million.  
This was of course not the total number of funds that are grant making, and the
list of reporting funds is not provided. The figures reveal considerable growth
between 1993 and 1994; for 1993, comparable figures were respectively about
$30.67 million, $16.41 million, and $7.77 million, but as already noted in 1994,
the Ms. Foundation alone received a major grant of $5 million. The figure of 28
reporting funds would compare with about 65 total funds then affiliated with
the network, including several emerging funds that had not yet given grants.
By 1998, the efforts of the network to improve the record keeping and data
gathering of its members were paying off. For 1997, there were 50 funds sup-
plying financial and other data, and 43 of these did so for both 1996 and 1997.
For those 43 funds, assets had grown in 1997 to more than $88 million ($88,
$133, $350), an increase of 20.8% over the proceeding year. At the end of the
decade, WFN estimated that the total assets of all funds in 1998 reached $110
million. This may reflect rising stock market prices as well as increased contri-
butions, but it is a significant increase.

At points, WFN has seemed to be haunted by the problem of “fall out” of
new funds; by 1997, WFN figures indicated that as many as 30 funds known to
the network had started and then foundered. Indeed, Mollner, as executive
director, put a great deal of her energy and time into technical assistance
aimed at preventing new funds from going under. Analysis of WFN member-
ship lists for these years does not indicate that many funds have “disap-
ppeared,” probably partly due to Mollner’s efforts. However, many funds had
periods of real difficulty, and some have dropped out of the WFN for a year or
more; a few, such as the Sophia Fund, were merged or closed. Overall WFN
membership, including nonvoting affiliates and individual members, has
grown slowly but steadily during the past decade.
The movement is also marked by a great range in the assets of its members. At one end of the scale, the Ms. Foundation has a $20 million dollar endowment; close behind is the Minnesota Women’s Fund, which in the late 1990s reached an endowment of about half that amount; at the other end are funds with no endowments.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

The core organization of the network, WFN itself, has changed considerably and increased its own resources in the less than 15 years of its existence. Despite its early connection to NCRP, for a brief period of time, the network was considered a project of Women and Foundations/Corporate Philanthropy (later known as Women & Philanthropy), a group formed in the late 1970s by women from established philanthropic organizations who were concerned about women’s role in philanthropy and underfunding of women’s causes. Thus, initially Women & Philanthropy served as the network’s fiscal agent. By 1989, the informal steering committee had a full-time staff consultant, Carol Mollner, and by 1991, it was incorporated. Before then, the network had already become firmly established in St. Paul, Minnesota, where it remained throughout the Mollner years. In September 2000 (as this article was going to press) the WFN moved its offices to San Francisco.

By late 1999, the staff had increased to six women, including the executive director (an acting director in January 2000) and her administrative assistant, the director of membership, the word-processing specialist, the administrative manager, an individual responsible for computer assistance and communications, and the director of development. In past years, the network also hired consultants to do a variety of projects, including a women’s contributions survey, a grants classification project, and a strategic planning process. As a mark of the networks’s evolution, between the growth in membership fees, contributions, and its grant-making efforts, WFN’s own budget in 1999 was close to $1 million. However, the board recognized that the path ahead would require increased assets for the work of the network as well as individual member funds, and one of Carol Mollner’s last tasks before she resigned was to hire a full-time director of development. Despite its growth, at that point WFN still functioned with a small board of 11 women chosen from member funds and a small number of standing committees that met primarily through telephone calls or at annual meetings of the network.

A stated aim of the WFN is to collect data about the women’s funds, including information on their assets, grant making, and measures of staff and board diversity, and it has concentrated considerable effort on developing the systems to do this. However, the network also has the expressed goal of providing technical assistance to its members funds, individually and collectively, not only in data collection but also in regard to such immediate needs as board formation, maintaining diversity, fund-raising, and fund allocation. Thus at
times, there are problems in maintaining the balance of resources—and primarily staff time—between its two major functions. The situation was complicated further by the importance placed on helping newer and weaker funds to develop. The network recognized the dilemma but determined that critical demands of accountability and organizational development necessitated giving priority to systematic data collection and assistance to vulnerable members, even if in the short run, this resulted in difficulties with other responsibilities, such as serving as a clearinghouse or meeting ongoing needs of larger, more sophisticated member organizations.

In addition to the two delineated primary functions, WFN presents annual conferences (in collaboration with host cities) and generally two or three smaller regional and/or topical meetings during the year. Most of the funds send representatives to the larger annual conference, whose overall themes have ranged from an emphasis on the issues of health care to considerations of the implications of violence or the broader discussion of “The winds of change.” However, conference costs are a problem for many funds that would like to have several volunteers and staff participate.

Another continuing issue of concern in regard to the annual conference has been diversity; in past years, careful tracking of the composition of the group (self-reported) has generally been fed back to the group. WFN has not yet been able to ensure that 50% of all conference participants are people of color (an earlier defined goal), but in the Spring 1998 conference, they came closer to it, with only 52% of participants reporting themselves as “European” in backgrounds. Socioeconomic status is still more problematic; more than 84% of those attending the conference reported themselves as mid-middle class and above (26% as upper middle class, 9% inherited wealth, 5% earned wealth.) In discussions during the meetings, class remains an issue—which is not surprising in an organization in which the very rich often struggle in defining their role in a group with a stated goal of empowerment for all members, without regard to social or economic status (Brilliant, 1992).

Another continuous issue with regard to the WFN annual conference bears directly on the question of the network’s mission: And that is the question of the social action content of the meetings versus nuts-and-bolts efforts at strengthening fund-raising and allocation ability. There is an evident division among the member funds as to which of these directions should predominate. One woman from a more “traditional” fund assured this author that she no longer needed to attend diversity training and ethnic-based workshops; rather, what she wanted was assistance in improving her organization’s leadership and fund-raising capacity. Over the years, the network has increasingly tried to have some of each kind of activity at all of its meetings and usually features several “inspirational” speakers, such as Jean Fairfax or Barbara Ehrenreich. For more than a decade, they have also planned for separate caucuses (usually the day before the formal meeting starts) for people of color, lesbians, and White or “straight” allies. In 1998, the time allocated for these
caucuses and groups of allies became more problematic, and some concern was expressed about time conflicts and emphasis.

Planning of the annual conference is carried out by an appointed group selected from member funds of the network. In past years, the planning group was composed largely of original founders of member organizations and the WFN. However, with the growth of new funds, the departure of some of the original founders from their own organization’s leadership, and a real effort to be more inclusive, other women have wanted to be involved. Although gradual, this change in the planning group raised the more general question of whether new members of the network have the same degree of activist fervor as the “founding mothers.” In any case, despite active representation of member funds in developing the annual meetings, there are still strong differences of opinion about the outcomes. Because of its commitment to participatory governance, the network staff and volunteers (members) are constantly concerned about ensuring that conferences are responsive to criticism from attendees at previous conferences.

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

CLASSIFICATIONS AND CATEGORIES

At meetings, the network often arranges sessions directed at funds of various stages of development (i.e. older or larger funds, new and emerging funds, and others that are defined as somewhere in the middle). Another difference is recognized but in a somewhat more informal way—and that is the difference between funds that were (or are) essentially supported by one major (or rich) donor and others that started with a more grass roots composition and from the beginning, had to raise funds themselves from their communities. In past regional meetings, funds were in effect also grouped according to whether they were in particular sections of the United States; typically, the Midwest, West, and Southwest or the East. In an effort to deal with significant differences among the interests of the various member funds (e.g., size, scope, and stage of development), more recently, regional meetings as well as parts of the annual conference have been geared toward separate discussions and workshops on functional issues such as fund-raising or allocations as well as for different roles such as those of major donors, presidents, and board members or executive directors.

There is a critical dimension of difference among the funds in terms of scope and geographical area covered. Funds differ markedly in whether they are local, statewide, or national (or international) and whether they are special purpose, such as the Astraea National Lesbian Action Foundation, which is clearly targeted, or the Kentucky Foundation for Women, which has the
expressed purpose of supporting arts projects and indeed provides support for many individual artists. Moreover, the network’s membership includes the Canadian Women’s Foundation in Toronto and the Global Fund for Women, which, while located in Palo Alto, California, gives money to women’s organizations around the world. In addition, at conferences of the network in the late 1990s, there were representatives from other countries, including Mexico and Nepal. One of the women from the Canadian Fund is a woman of color who has been a long-term leader in the network and is highly visible at annual conferences. Some newer representatives of foreign funds are, not surprisingly, more diffident in their self-presentation at the meetings.

An additional significant way of classifying the funds is according to whether they are members of a community fund or, in essence, are autonomous. Of the listed voting and provisional members (WFN, 1999b), 15 were encompassed within community funds. Also important under the Internal Revenue Code is whether a fund is a private foundation or a public charity. Despite wide use of the term foundation in their names, only some funds are actually private foundations that were initiated by one or a few major donors. Including three federated (workplace fund-raising organizations), 45 of the grant-making member organizations are public charities, which raise their funds from a broader constituency. This difference matters because of the manner in which finances are secured and because of its impact on organizational culture, but it also makes a difference to the funds with regard to IRS requirements. Since the Tax Reform Act of 1969, foundations have generally had more stringent restrictions on their activities than public charities. However, these differences could become somewhat less significant in the future. With the passage of the Tax Payers Responsibility Act of 1996, in effect, public charities now also have to be more responsive to public inquiry (or suffer costly sanctions), and they are therefore also likely to face closer scrutiny from the IRS (Boisture & Mayer, 1997; Schoenfeld & Repass, 1996).

DIVERSITY

In a survey conducted by our own research project (in 1995), a majority of board members of the funds were reported to be professional women; a majority were also White. In a survey conducted in 1996 by the WFN, they also found a high percentage (66%) of the board members of affiliated funds (25 funds reporting) were White. In addition, 64% of the board members of the 25 reporting funds were recorded as heterosexual, 30% were identified as lesbian and/or gay, 1% were “all others,” and 5% were not reported. Thus, while in some respects, the WFN is finding it hard to overcome traditional patterns of the greater society, it seems to have succeeded in being a safer place for women with different sexual orientations to work effectively together.
DIFFERENCES IN MISSIONS
AND STRATEGIES AMONG FUNDS

Despite the common commitment to enhancing resources available for women and girls and advocating for their needs, there is a wide variation in the operational as well as stated ideology of individual women’s funds. Still, most of the women attending the network conferences articulate a concern for social change and a sense of satisfaction from doing the work of the movement. In addition, based on formal and informal discussions, it is evident that funds come to share their problems and are helped by doing so. Limited resources and changing leadership makes this process vital for many smaller funds. But staff changes can be a problem even for larger funds; in recent years, well-established funds such as The New York Women’s Foundation (New York City), the Women’s Foundation of Colorado (Denver), and Women’s Way (Philadelphia) have also had considerable turnover in their executive and professional staff.

There is a broad range in the ideological viewpoints of member funds. On one end of the continuum are the strongly feminist funds, operating primarily in a consensus mode and dedicated openly to a range of controversial issues and advocacy causes, including lesbian issues and programs advocating choice. On the other end, there are more politically cautious funds that attempt to support more generally acceptable but still significant causes, such as women in the workplace or domestic violence, while avoiding open promotion of programs relating to reproductive choice or lesbian issues. Although there are few funds at the conservative end of the continuum, commitment to overtly feminist causes has not come easy for all funds. In this regard, the role of the founding members and founding circumstances has had a major influence on organizational ideology; in line with Edgar Schein’s (1983) conceptualization of organizational culture, patterns established in their early history are still visible in many of the funds. Indeed, most of the funds have faced serious challenges in changing from founder-driven organizations to more complex organizational systems with demands from new volunteer leadership, staff, and constituencies. Although such change has had an impact on the ideology of some funds, there are others, such as the Women’s Foundation of Colorado, that despite great success in fund-raising, began with clear constraints in the funding of some controversial programs (Odendahl, 1990); these still remain as issues for a few key donors.

PROFESSIONALISM

Another way to analyze the funds is by the degree of professionalism they exhibit as well as by the success they have in attracting resources and members from other women’s groups. These qualities generally go together, and this is markedly so in funds such as the Atlanta Women’s Foundation; but it is not always the case. For example, the Sojourner Foundation (Detroit, Michigan)
has until now been run by dedicated volunteers without staff. But the women who run the organization have been almost entirely professionals with careers, connected also to other professional organizations and, in recent years, primarily with Black professional women. Recognizing a need to move their organization in new directions, these women, most of whom have taken leadership roles for many years, are now seeking to bring in younger women and to enhance their financial and people resources by the hiring of a professional staff person.

RECIPIENTS SPEAK: A MEASURE OF SOCIAL GOALS IMPACT

With the help of two graduate students, we carried out a survey of recipient programs. The sample was drawn from a list of 37 cooperating funds out of a total universe of 46 members of WFN that would have met our criteria for inclusion as grant makers. We divided the total list of grantees of these women’s funds into three groups according to the number of grants given by the funding organization and then drew a random sample from the 110 grantee organizations on the stratified list. In the end, we had a 44% return rate from our mailed survey to grantee organizations and individual grant recipients. Although we would have liked a greater return, we believe that the return is acceptable for this kind of survey mailing (Brilliant et al., 1998).

In general, our findings from the grantee survey suggest that the grants are indeed aimed at projects in line with defined empowerment or social change goals. For example, as reported:

- Funded programs are most frequently directed at women, but they also focus on low-income households, African Americans, young adults (18-25), youth (younger than 18), single-parent households, and Latinas.
- Self-development and self-esteem building activities were the most frequently reported focus of projects funded by women’s funds, followed by educational materials and publications, community education, and domestic violence and/or shelter activities.
- Although grants from the women’s funds frequently represented only a small portion of the project’s funding, a majority of respondents (59%) reported that execution of their projects would not have been possible without the women’s fund grant.

EMERGING ISSUES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The WFN has struggled to keep alive and to enhance the vision of social change and personal empowerment with which it was founded. As new groups have entered and evolved in their own directions, network leaders,
through the WFN, have worked to keep the movement centered and to lessen the centrifugal pull of new organizations or adverse environmental conditions on funds in their home communities. In doing this, the network has been able to build on several vital elements, including the creative energies of hard-working, committed staff leadership; dedication of long-term activist members of the women’s funding movement; and support from some notable funding sources, including individual donors and foundations who believe in the vision of the organization. WFN has also collected dues from its member funds. Member funds in turn have also been urged to develop community partnerships and collaborations, in which even smaller funds can leverage resources in cooperation with other groups in the community. However, it appears that larger funds such as the Ms. Foundation and the Sister Fund (New York City) are most successful in these collaborative efforts.

Several prestigious foundations have given the WFN substantial grants during the past few years, reflecting sensitivity to the need for a women’s funding movement as well as the availability of resources. Foundations such as the Ford Foundation value diversity and traditionally provide support and encouragement for progressive causes; other foundations, such as the Kellogg Foundation, wish to reach new market-related groups or, in a prosperous economy, have greatly increased assets to disperse for new causes. Under the law, with a growth in their assets, foundations are mandated to spend additional amounts of money (5% of assets minimally must be spent annually). The WFN has already benefited from grants in support of improved technical capacity, collection of uniform data, research on women as donors, and general capacity building in regard to fund-raising and allocation for women’s causes. The network was recently partnered in a special Kellogg grant with four other groups (the Global Fund for Women, Women & Philanthropy, Resource for Women, and the Michigan Women’s Funds). Network staff is confident that major foundation support will continue and could even increase (at least in the near future). However, they have not yet received the critical long-term support they have been seeking. Furthermore, new money from important foundations may be largely passed through the network in such a way that it goes directly to the member organizations. This reflects the network’s commitment to empowering their own member funds, but it also could restrain WFN’s growth.

The network has constantly faced problems of resource mobilization and environmental turbulence. But as the gap between the richest funds and emergent funds increases, questions about a unified movement surface with even more urgency. To some extent, this problem is exacerbated by another action the funds are taking with the encouragement of WFN—and that is the building of new, or larger, endowments. Furthermore, the division between more conservative members and those who would like to see more public social activism and policy advocacy by the movement continues and could conceivably intensify as the organization continues to grow, whereas competition for
resources increases. Interestingly, a recent promotional brochure for the WFN (1999a) suggests both a more activist direction and continued awareness of fiscal realities:

The mission of Women’s Funding Network (WFN), a partnership of women’s funds, donors and allies around the world committed to social justice, is to ensure that women’s funds are recognized as the investment of choice.

Finally, the network, at least partially because of its past successes, now faces increasing competition and challenges from targeted social change funds organized along other lines, such as Hispanic funds (male and female), gay and lesbian funds, or developing Asian American funds. Indeed, the success of women’s funds in sensitizing other foundations and funding sources to women’s issues and questions of diversity (Capek, 1998) has undoubtedly helped to expand the pool of organized charities and, consequently, to increase competition for support from common sources (e.g., Asian American women). But there are continual reports about new monies that can be raised within the communities of people of color (Shaw & Taylor, 1995) as well as from a developing group of wealthy philanthropists (e.g., George Soros, Bill Gates), emerging out of the expanding American economy at the end of the 20th century (Kaplan, 1998, 1999). Tapping into these resources will necessitate renewed efforts by women’s funds to reach their own constituencies, such as affluent women of color as well as large foundations. At the same time, community partnerships would seem to be even more important in leveraging funds for social change.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As it enters the 21st century, the network has good reason to be optimistic about its past growth and future potential. Nonetheless, like other social change charities, women’s funds are likely to find that maintaining momentum is a formidable task in a conservative political climate and a market place characterized by growing competition among worthy causes. Furthermore, differences in size increase the complications for social movement cohesion; larger organizational members become institutionalized philanthropies, whereas smaller funds continue to struggle to obtain minimal resources. In the future, holding the center of the women’s funding movement will certainly require more effort from dedicated members as well as the support of other groups and individuals who recognize its value. But in the end, the network’s continuation as a social movement may depend on both new skills (such as marketing) and the renewed commitment of a changing leadership to the old passions of the movement’s founding mothers.
More generally, analysis of the ways in which women’s funds balance the demands of increasing professionalization and institutionalized success with movement passion has significance for understanding the process of social change through organizational activity. Study of this process may have special meaning for those concerned with funding progressive activity because of the light it sheds on the issues that social change organizations face in attempting to enhance their resources and power and because the research will suggest possible approaches that can be used to assist them in their efforts. But further analysis of the issues faced by the women’s funds and their patterns of organizational adaptation will also add to our general knowledge of the complexities of organizational efforts at self-renewal and enhancement. Research may show that these are particularly intense in organizations that are developed away from the mainstream of American society but want to have an impact on the values and practices of that society.

Notes

1. The larger study is the basis of a book that I am now in the process of writing.
2. The concept of institutional isomorphism has been discussed extensively in DiMaggio and Powell (1991). In its essence, the term refers to the tendency of organizations, particularly those in the same field of activity (e.g., universities or fund-raising charities) to mimic one model and come to resemble each other over time.
3. The first survey, carried out with Dr. Kraft, was mailed in 1995 to all members of the network; it produced a return of 43 usable questionnaires (61% of funds that met the criteria for inclusion). The second survey (in 1998) was sent to a sample of grantee organizations and is discussed later.
4. This figure was reported consistently by respondents connected with the network. However, the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) suggested there were 25 groups represented in the Washington Conference, which is more than the number generally used by the network. For the larger figure, see NCRP (1986, p.16).
5. For a more complete discussion of the alternative funds movement and the role of the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy, see Brilliant (1990).
6. Numbers come from the Women’s Funding Network (WFN) Membership Directory (1999b). However, staff indicated uncertainty about the status of a few names on the list, and some voting and provisional members (70 listed in December 1999) were not grant making. It should be noted that Capek (1998) cites a larger figure of 100 women’s funds and foundations, but not all of these are included in the WFN, and I have been unable to confirm this number in my own research.
7. Figures in this section come from charts developed by the WFN and presented at the 1997 network conference in Bloomington, Minnesota (September 24-28, 1997). All figures are given in rounded numbers.
9. Jean Fairfax is an African American woman, described by the *Chronicle on Philanthropy* as a “famous Arizona philanthropist.” Barbara Ehrenreich is a well-known social activist and writer on social policy issues.
10. This comes from discussions at a regional WFN meeting at the Astraea Foundation, New York City, October 11, 1996, and personal interviews with numerous key respondents.
References


Women’s Funding Network (WFN). (1999b, December). The Women’s Funding Network membership directory. Unpublished list from the WFN.


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