

Activist Collaboration Fund Interview & Research Insights

FOUNDATIONAL INSIGHTS FOR LAUNCHING MS. FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN'S NEW ACTIVIST COLLABORATION FUND

The Ms. Foundation is launching the Activist Collaboration Fund in early 2020 to invest in collaboration in and across social justice movements for women and girls of color. Its creation comes at a time when movements for justice and equality face increased political challenges. As multi-pronged attacks on women and girls of color, immigrants, LGBTQ, indigenous, and low-income communities continue, social justice activists and organizations across diverse movements are organically coming together to build stronger relationships and collaborations to defend against threats and proactively strategize toward a future of justice and shared liberation. Collectively, they are asking for greater funding and resources to support collaboration in meaningful and non-prescriptive ways. This Fund seeks to respond to this call.

The vision for this fund is to be a critical tool to deepen movement-building collaborations, learn from front-line leaders, and strengthen connections within and among diverse social justice movements across the country. It also aims to bring other funder partners to the table to increase investments for women and girls of color.

The strategy and operational decisions for the Fund's pilot were heavily informed by insights that activists and movement leaders shared with Ms. staff and its consulting partner, Groundwork Partners, during a four-month literature review and stakeholder engagement process. During this time we interviewed 22 activists and movement leaders, and 9 funder partners, and reviewed several published reports relevant to this fund. In the appendix of this document, you can find the list of interviewees we engaged, and the reports we reviewed to inform our strategy. The high-level findings from this effort are outlined in this document.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Ms. and Groundwork Partners held conversations with over 20 grassroots leaders, activists, grantees, and funders regarding the extent and nature of collaboration in the field, the support groups are currently receiving to engage one another, and what additional needs groups face to increase and strengthen collaboration in and across movements. Key themes included:

1. **Movement leaders and activists view “collaboration” as a core function of organizing.** Activities like educating peers and developing shared messages across issue areas, launching campaigns in coalition, and collaboratively planning events and mobilizing people across movements are all already deeply embedded in what community organizing and power building groups do. Thus, movement leaders encouraged that the field, including funders, think of collaboration as part of organizations' core work and not a separate strategy for achieving impact. With this in mind, **movement leaders suggest the Fund strategy include a focus on “deepening” existing relationships and networks, rather than solely on sparking new collaborations.** Several also suggested supporting research and learning on both

how collaboration is already happening across social justice movements and ways to build upon that existing foundation.

2. **Foundations can be long-term partners by meeting groups considering collaboration where they are at and strengthening efforts from there.** Movement leaders described collaboration as an ongoing multi-step trust-building process. Foundations seeking to support collaboration should assess where relationships are across the following spectrum, and structure the resources and supports based on that:
 - a. Building interpersonal relationships across organizations: Prior to working together, groups need time and resources to gain familiarity with each other's values, strategies, and specific efforts. Resources needed for initially forging relationships often include money for travel, convening, conference participation, and other things that create space to be in community together.
 - b. Aligning on analysis: Once that baseline of relationships is in place, groups build deeper trust and relationship by understanding each others' culture and analysis of systemic oppression. Every social justice group comes to their work with a particular identity or experience "centered," as well as their own blind spots especially around intersectional identities. Anti-black racism and transphobia in particular were noted as prevalent across social justice movements, and often create breaks in trust and end collaboration, as well as gaps in analysis based on experiences of immigrant and indigenous communities. Cross- movement groups working to align on analysis often need resources for facilitators, trainings, convenings, and individual and collective self-care and healing (i.e., trauma-informed philanthropy).
 - c. Partnering on events/initiatives: As understanding and trust develops among groups, they begin to coordinate on events or initiatives to test how well working styles and organizational structures can mesh to take on shared work. Collaborating at this level requires working with people from different organizations as if they were part of your own; therefore resources are often needed for staffing, regular planning meetings, translation, and other project specific implementation expenses.
 - d. Developing shared vision and strategy: Once groups know that they are compatible, in terms of values, culture, goals, and working styles, they are finally primed for moving into deep transformational relationships, which requires multi-organizational visioning, culture building, and short- and long-term planning. This requires collectively bringing together significant resources, not only to cover the time for retreats and regular planning meetings, but also to be able to implement the transformational goals and strategies developed collectively together.
3. **Movement leaders consistently asked for greater flexibility in funding, so they could determine how to use the funds as collaborative work unfolds.** Groups collaborating typically determine their next set of goals and activities as the environment

shifts, trust and understanding builds, and their work progresses. This is because authentic community engagement requires listening to constituencies, acknowledging power dynamics and group politics, and designing community actions and events based on what is being observed in real time. With this in mind, foundations can support the collaborative work of movement organizations by practicing [trust-based philanthropy](#) which includes offering dollars that are unrestricted and allowing movement groups to determine exactly how they will be invested over time.

- 4. Movement groups need more staff capacity, as well as support for individual and collective health and healing in order to deepen cross-movement collaboration.** Social justice organizations on the whole are significantly under-resourced, especially those operating in southern states. Movement groups need funds that increase capacity and sustainability for collaborative work, including funding for additional staff, training existing staff to take on new roles, or other supports that create more time and space for collaboration activities. Leaders also consistently emphasized how the work of engaging collaboratively, especially when it requires educating others on their own experiences of oppression, can be exhausting and even physically demanding. This is because activists and leaders have often experienced systemic racism, trauma, and health inequity themselves. Funders can support organizations to have policies and supports for medical leave, sabbaticals, traditional healing rituals, livable pay, reasonable working hours, as well as collective space for joy and celebration to support people driving cross-movement efforts.
- 5. Movement leaders' preferences and priorities regarding partners, resource needs, and what to collaborate on vary by region, political climate, organization size, and movement focus among other salient factors.** Given the extensive time and resources required for collaboration, groups describe a need to be selective and targeted with seeking collaborative partners. Movement leaders consistently highlighted that foundations should not be “forcing marriages” between groups, and instead emphasized a need for resources that will deepen existing relationships and collaborative work underway. The following are examples of how the movement leaders that Ms. and Groundwork spoke with would want to utilize new resources for cross-movement collaboration:
 - a. **At the national level**, three major reproductive justice networks each center on a different race and ethnic group: Asian Pacific Islander, Black, and Latinx communities. These three groups enjoy a long-established collaborative relationship, and together they have co-designed convenings, mobilized their constituents, and applied pressure on Capitol Hill. With greater resources for collaboration, these groups would want to deepen their collaboration and figure out how to work collaboratively in localities and states with each of their respective affiliates.
 - b. **In the conservative Southern states**, movement groups often only have 1-2 full-time staff members per organization. Those individuals often work closely with staff of other movement organizations out of necessity. In these cases, there is

already comfort and understanding with the intersection of reproductive justice and other social justice movements, and with additional resources, these groups would want to prioritize investment in additional organizing staff (part or full-time) to be able to do more.

- c. **In states with more supports and established social justice organizations,** movement groups expressed a desire for facilitation support and resources for more collective planning, training, and convenings, to be able to have tough conversations on anti-black racism and transphobia, and to take on more transformational long-term planning across organizations.

APPENDIX: Interview List and Research References

Interviews

We give our deep thanks to the following movement leaders that shared their experience, expertise, and time with us:

1. Cristina Aguilar, Consultant, formerly with COLOR
2. Vivian Anderson, Every Black Girl
3. Felicia Brown-Williams, Planned Parenthood Southeast
4. Bree Campell, Trans Sisters of Color Project
5. Samantha Daley, Power U
6. Tannia Esparza, formerly with Young Women United
7. Jessica González-Rojas, formerly with National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
8. Deon Haywood, Women with a Vision
9. Marcela Howell, In Our Own Voice
10. Mary Ignatius, Parent Voices
11. Laura Jiménez, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice
12. Kierra Johnson, National LGBTQ Task Force
13. Destiny Lopez, All Above All
14. Marissa Nuncio, Garment Workers Center
15. Marcia Olivio, formerly with Miami Workers Center
16. Shannan Reaze, Atlanta Jobs with Justice
17. Cherisse Scott, SisterReach
18. Monica Simpson, SisterSong
19. Joanne Smith, Girls for Gender Equity
20. Charo Valero, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
21. Cassandra Welchin, Mississippi Women's Economic Security Initiative
22. Sung Yeon Choimorrow, National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum

We also thank our partners in the funding community for sharing their experience and expertise, including:

1. Andrea Lynch, Consultant
2. Laura Katzive, WellSpring Fund
3. Chi-Ante Singletary, Solidaire
4. Shalini Eddens, Urgent Action Fund
5. Cecilia Saenz Becerra, Groundswell Fund
6. Shira Saperstein, Consultant
7. Maria Miranda, ST Buffett Foundation
8. Leah Pryor-Price, Proteus Fund
9. Joanna Lauen, Irving Harris Foundation

Literature Review

In addition to interviews, we read the following articles to ground and inform our strategy:

- [List of Social Justice Community Foundations, Rapid Response Funds, and Intermediaries](#) (including review of websites of funds listed)
- [Deciding Together: Shifting Power and Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking](#), by Cynthesis Consulting
- [Increasing Support for Girls of Color](#), by CLASP, Grantmakers for Girls of Color, and Frontline Solutions
- [Authentic and Equitable Partnerships: A Framework for Building Movements](#), by OpenSource Leadership Strategies and MP Associates, for Funder for Reproductive Equity
- [Moving Beyond Siloes to Advance Reproductive Health, Rights, and Justice](#), by Building Movements Project
- [Five Elements of a Thriving Justice Ecosystem](#), by Change Elemental
- [Funding Social Justice Movements: How Mass Protest Makes an Impact](#), by Ayni Institute
- [Social Movements and Philanthropy: How Foundations Can Support Movement Building](#), by MastersPolicyConsulting and The California Alliance