

Philanthropy Together

Gender equality and women's and girls' issues have taken center stage in recent years. From the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements to parental and family leave, to equal pay and workplace equality, there is a heightened awareness of gender issues from the grassroots level on up.¹

Recent research by the Women's Philanthropy Institute at Indiana University shows that women, across all categories of age, race and ethnicity, are more philanthropic than men. They give more, more often, and through more vehicles. Women appear particularly interested and involved in collaborative giving and participate this way at significantly higher rates than men.² In 2016, nearly half (48.5%) of all Giving Circles in the United States were identified as women-only groups, and 70 percent of all Giving Circle participants were women.³

What is a Giving Circle or Collective Giving Group?

The concept of collective giving has been around for centuries and crosses every culture, faith, and civilization: a *Tanda* in Mexico, *E-so-so* in Nigeria, *Arison* in Indonesia, *Potlatch* in Northwest Native American cultures, the list goes on and for many immigrant communities these cultural sharing circles replace banks.

Definitionally, a Giving Circle is any group of people—friends, family, co-workers, or co-located individuals—who pool their funding and collectively agree on how those funds will be allocated. Most run some sort of educational event or process regarding local issues and nonprofits.

Most Giving Circles give to 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, though some give directly to individuals, or to rapid response disaster relief issues. Some are more formal and are housed within a local community foundation or other fiscal sponsor, while others have members each write an individual check and deliver it straight to a local organization.

Giving Circles come in all shapes in sizes—from a few people to several hundred, from a few dollars to hundreds of thousands, meeting regularly or once a year. This form of collaborative giving democratizes and diversifies philanthropy as anyone—especially women and donors of color—can engage as a philanthropist and do so in safe and close connection with their peers and community. The power of the Giving Circle model is the infinite flexibility to align with the needs and desires of participants.

Why Join a Giving Circle?

¹ <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/19913/all-in-report.pdf>

² Women's Philanthropy Institute. (2015). *How and why women give: Current and future directions for research on women's philanthropy*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy.

³ Bearman, J., Carboni, J., Eikenberry, A., & Franklin, J. (2017). *The landscape of giving circles/collective giving groups in the U.S., 2016*. Indianapolis, IN: Women's Philanthropy Institute at the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

Research has shown repeatedly that Giving Circle members give more, give more strategically and proactively, give to a wider array of organizations, volunteer more, and are more likely to engage in civic activity.⁴

In a time as divisive and uncivil as this, when individuals report feeling isolated and increasingly lonely, when women and particularly women of color feel themselves and their lifestyles to be under attack, women's Giving Circles can be a powerful antidote. They can provide a network of like-minded women who become friends, allies, campaign resources, business contacts—the possibilities are endless. Even in very large circles, talking about community needs and gaps in services can help people see beyond partisan differences to recall a shared humanity.

By the Numbers:

- Giving Circles provide a deep sense of community as 66% meet at least quarterly (mostly in person) and membership is most often local.⁵
- 58% of Giving Circle members engage in discussion about funding recipients/ issues, and Giving Circle participants are more likely to seek out diverse viewpoints and their social networks are more diverse.⁶
- Giving Circle members give significantly higher amounts of money (and solicit more from those outside the circle) and volunteer hours compared to donors not in Giving Circles.⁷

But beyond the figures, it is the uniquely powerful experience the women's Giving Circle members share every time they meet and pool their assets—time, talent, treasure and testimony—to invest in local community. Issues we care deeply about are the deepest thing that connects us all, across race, age, wealth, politics, and more. Collective giving can unite us.

Jenny Berg, former President of Impact 100, a large Giving Circle with several hundred participants in Cincinnati that started making grants in 2001 happily makes her annual \$1,000.00 contribution every year. When it comes time to go to the annual meeting where members vote on the allocation of the pooled funds, she likes to tell people “I’m going to be making \$400,000.00 in grants this afternoon.”

Giving Circles offer such a variety of powerful experiences, and vary tremendously from circle to circle. Felicia Herman, founder of Amplifier, a network of close to 200 circles inspired by Jewish values writes how many Giving Circles are⁸:

⁴ <https://philanthropy.iupui.edu/institutes/womens-philanthropy-institute/research/giving-circles18.html>

⁵ <http://johnsoncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Giving-Circles-Research-Full-Report-1-WEB.pdf>

⁶ <http://johnsoncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Giving-Circles-Research-Full-Report-1-WEB.pdf>

⁷ <https://scholarworks.iupui.edu/bitstream/handle/1805/17743/giving-circle-membership18.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.amplifiergiving.org/resources/giving-circle-essentials/>

- **Accessible:** Anyone at any giving level, at any age, in any place, with any funding interest can start or participate in a Giving Circle.
- **Collaborative:** Members make decisions together in a democratic process, leveraging each other's experiences and wisdom, as equals and peers.
- **Communal:** Members connect with each other and with their communities, building meaningful relationships with each other and with those they support.
- **Empowering:** Members leverage their dollars to do something bigger — and perhaps better — than they could on their own.
- **Educational:** Members learn about the needs of their community or focus area and can be intentional and proactive about how they give to the causes they care about. They also learn from each other by exploring and welcoming diverse viewpoints.
- **Fun!:** Giving Circles bring people together to accomplish some serious good in a joyful way. It's a social experience: in addition to giving together, members often share meals, stories, and their lives in meaningful ways.
- **Hands-On:** *In addition to active engagement with philanthropic decision-making, some Giving Circles also offer members a chance to volunteer with or provide pro bono professional assistance to grantees.*

A Growing Movement

Over the past two decades, Giving Circles have proliferated in the United States going from just a handful of circles in the early 2000's to over 1600 circles, reaching 150,000 people, and collectively raising an astounding \$1.29 billion for community impact over the past twenty years—and a majority of these are comprised of women.

Close to half of these circles are organized together into networks that share lessons learned, resources, and community, and several of these networks exclusively focus on women: Philanos, Dining for Women, Impact 100, and Jewish Women's Funding Network. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been directed to communities because of the powerful work of these networks and a wider set of grassroots circles.

This accelerated growth of the Giving Circle field has generated broader interest from the philanthropy sector, which is itself asking deep questions about who sees themselves as a giver, how giving is happening, and the impact and accountability to local communities.

Since 2019, there is an ambitious effort afoot to connect and catalyze all these thousands of Giving Circles in a much broader and bolder way to democratize and diversify philanthropy. Launching in 2020, this new national Giving Circle initiative will intentionally scale and strengthen the thousands of Giving Circles around the country. Imagine a world where hundreds of thousands of people are in values-aligned, money-moving communities, engaging in

meaningful and intentional giving through robust discourse, and building bridges with fellow givers and funding recipients to create change in the world — this is the vision for the future of philanthropy with women at the helm.

A Look Inside A Few Women’s Giving Circles

GREENVILLE WOMEN GIVING. Greenville Women Giving, based in Greenville County, South Carolina (County Population 500,000) was founded in 2006 as an initiative of the Community Foundation of Greenville and has grown very quickly to be one of the largest Giving Circles in the country, with more than 575 members. They ask women to make a three-year commitment to give \$1200 annually. Of that, \$1000 goes into their pooled grantmaking fund, and \$200 supports operations, including educational events. Their grants support arts, education, environment, health, and human services. Their tagline is: Giving Collectively, Granting Strategically, Growing a Greater Greenville. When they recently reached a funding goal, they started referring to themselves as “The Six Million Dollar Women.”

What accounts for their rapid growth and success? Sue Priester, a founder and still active member says their secret sauce is a combination of timing (starting in 2006 when no one was expecting a downturn), a local culture of cooperative problem solving, the support of their Community Foundation, and the complementary skills of the three founders. “GWG is a learning organization,” according to Sue, “constantly improving our processes as we work to create and nurture effective women philanthropists. We enjoy what we’re doing, plus we see the many positive effects on both our members and the nonprofits we support. All of that constitutes our formula for growth.”

CENTRAL VALLEY GIVING CIRCLE. The Latino Community Foundation's Latino Giving Circle Network is the largest network of Latino philanthropists in the nation with 22 Circles across California each centered around love, culture, and justice. Each member contributes a minimum of \$1000 per year and each Circle chooses their own giving priorities. In 2018, the Latino Giving Circle Network reached their million dollar milestone of investments into Latino-led organizations that are hubs of hope, healing, and opportunity for communities up and down the State.

America Hernandez joined the Central Valley Giving Circle to live out values of giving and generosity she learned from family and neighbors at an early age. She cherishes the opportunity to make a difference right in her backyard by participating in collective philanthropy with her mentors, heroes and neighbors. America reflects, "Every time I’m part of the Giving Circle, it’s a special space like no other because everything we do is rooted in our Corazon, our heart. Our culture is filled with love and generosity and through the Giving Circle movement we are sharing those gifts with the world."

ASIAN WOMEN’S GIVING CIRCLE. Hali Lee, the founder of Asian Women’s Giving Circle, started her Giving Circle based on the tradition of “geh” in Korea. Over the past 15 years, the Asian Women’s Giving Circle has raised and distributed over \$1M to Asian American Pacific Islander women and girls causes who use the tools of arts and culture to bring about equitable social change in their NYC communities. We pool our resources to fund projects led by Asian

American women artists and community groups; take risks by investing in emerging and cutting-edge change makers; stay rooted in the community, learning and innovating together and believe funding can be a form of activism.⁹

Ways to Start, Join, or Connect with Giving Circles

There are over a dozen networks of Giving Circles in existence that connect and support hundreds of local circles. Connecting with one of these networks is the easiest way to start a new circle (and receive support in doing so), find an existing circle accepting new members, or learn about the Giving Circle model in general and how you can get involved. You can also search for one in your local community by googling “Women's Giving Circle” and the name of your town or county. Additionally, there are many other networks that support hundreds of Giving Circles with various affinities, including many that include issues relevant to women.

This article was written in November 2019 with contributions from Jenny Berg, Masha Chernyak, Jacqueline Garcel, Liz Fisher, Felicia Herman, America Hernandez, Paula Liang, Hali Lee, Marsha Morgan, Isis Krause, Sue Priester, and Sara Velten.

⁹ <http://asianwomengivingcircle.org/>