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OPINION

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PREMIUM

To Help Women Gain Economic Security, Local Programs Need Support

By Ana Oliveira and Ruby Bright

Leaders of women's foundations in New York and Memphis

The past few weeks have made it clearer than ever why it's important that so many women are in elected office in our nation's capital. From the introduction of the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights in Congress to the calls for compassionate immigration policies and to efforts to stop gun violence, the voices and leadership of women are making a difference at the highest levels.

But achieving real and lasting progress for women isn't just about what happens in the nation's capital. It's also about working locally to help women and their families thrive.

By embracing and supporting local solutions, philanthropy can enhance the work nonprofits are doing to create measurable, positive changes in the lives of women, their families, and communities. We know this firsthand. Our two foundations are part of a national coalition that is making investments to support local leaders and organizations that are advancing women's economic security. It's called the Partnership for Women's Prosperity, and it includes six women's foundations and the Women's Funding Network.

Over the past three years, for example, the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis has helped increase the average household income in one of the poorest parts of the city by 44 percent through a place-based strategy called Vision 2020. The effort works to ensure that women and their families in the South City neighborhood of Memphis can obtain resources to meet their basic needs. It also connects them to services they need to get good-paying jobs, child care, health care, and more.

So far, the Women's Foundation for a Greater Memphis has awarded \$4.7 million to 115 programs — and the results speak for themselves. More than 1,000 people have been connected to employment, 706 children have been enrolled in early-education or child-care programs, and more than 2,700 young people have participated in youth-development offerings.

Meanwhile, the New York Women's Foundation's Resilience NYC project is supporting community-led solutions to the immense challenges facing women and families in the most vulnerable

communities across America's biggest city. The effort was started after the 2016 elections, when it became clear that new federal policies were destined to cause severe harm to the city's women, particularly immigrant women.

In the first round of Resilience-NYC funding, the foundation awarded multiyear grants totaling \$1 million to 22 grassroots organizations. Each one is working with women and families who have been adversely impacted by changes in federal policy and an increase in discrimination and violence against immigrants and LGBTQI women.

What It Takes to Help

Resilience-NYC and Memphis's Vision 2020 are just two examples of the kind of effective local investments that can improve women's economic security. As our foundations continue to carry out this work, we're learning a lot about what it takes to make a real, ground-level difference in the lives of women and their families. Among the lessons that stand out:

Put the people you want to serve in the driver's seat. Grant makers should develop processes that allow women in their communities to share their needs and their ideas for solving the urgent problems they deal with every day.

Commit to multiyear funding. Change doesn't happen overnight. We need to provide support over the long haul to build and strengthen services that support women and families and to remedy problems that have grown over years, if not decades.

Communicate broadly and often. Foundations and the organizations they support need to keep the people they serve informed every step of the way and to seek feedback at every possible opportunity.

Put partnerships first. When we engage grassroots organizations and local leaders as genuine partners, foundations build trust and strengthen the ability of community leaders to develop solutions and organizations that will be enduring and effective.

Share what you're learning. For local efforts to succeed across the country, foundations need to share knowledge with one another about what's working and what isn't. This is one of the main reasons we've come together in the Partnership for Women's Prosperity — and we welcome new participants in our coalition.

The urgent problems facing women and communities across the country demand that we work together — grant makers, local nonprofits, and the families they serve — to support grassroots solutions. Philanthropy can lead the way on women's economic security and other critical issues by putting the focus on the grassroots.

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