



**Kerrin:** Hello, and welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast. I'm your host and Fluxx co-founder, Kerrin Mitchell. I've spent my career exploring technology's role and amplifying impact within our social sector and, more specifically, helping funders to learn to leverage technology and data to connect and better serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

In this podcast series, my team and I will profile social sector leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry futurists to explore this fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most critical and formative topics and trends that shape philanthropy both today and tomorrow. We hope this series leaves you inspired to think and act through a more collective and visionary lens.

We bring you today's podcast during a pivotal time in our nation's history. Roe versus Wade has been overturned and for millions of women in our country, their safety, their right to reproductive health, and more has been compromised. The ramifications of the Supreme Court ruling are extensive. But feminist movements are powerhouses for social change, but they're also under-resourced, undervalued, and they're grossly underestimated. During this time, we want to focus on action, on hope, and on change. This week's podcast features Debby Bielak, the Bridgespan Group's Partner who recently published a report urging philanthropists to fund more feminist movements.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Debby. It is an incredibly important conversation.

**Debby:** Thanks so much, Kerrin. Thanks for having me on. It's an absolute pleasure to be speaking with you.

**Kerrin:** I'm so excited. You know, sometimes you plan out these podcasts, and then they end up finding a perfect place in time. And I think this topic that we've put together is so incredibly important.

Please share a little bit about yourself and your journey so our listeners get a sense of who you are today and the lens you're bringing to the conversation?

**Debby:** Sure. So, I'm Debby Bielak and I'm a partner at the Bridgespan San Francisco office. In terms of my background, I'm a nerd and a former activist who made my way to this work doing grassroots advocacy, and econometrics, research, and teaching. Now, I've been at Bridgespan for a long time; since 2008. And I've stayed because I get to apply my passion for equity and justice, to think analytically, and work closely with amazing social leaders addressing important questions like how to support our fragile democracy or tackle centuries of hardwiring gender inequities. And I get to work with and learn from extraordinary colleagues.

**Kerrin:** That's incredible. And I think it's really interesting because you blend your knowledge of past experiences with the work you get to do now and make some pretty big challenges. And there is a specific report, of course, for today that I'd love to focus on.

But before we do that let's get into the history of funding these movements. And I know you were joking with us earlier that you're not a historian, but I would love to hear a little bit about that sort of historical path of these movements. So, tell us a little bit about that.

**Debby:** Great. I'll just start with the definition of feminist movements. So, in our work with Shake the Table, an extraordinary organization and network of a feminist leaders, we use the definition



from women's rights advocates. And so, the definition of feminist movements is organizations, leaders, and networks working together to change power structures that reinforce gender and other inequalities.

You know, as we look at feminist movements, they focus on power and rights. They use intersectional analysis, and themselves are intersectional in nature, they are constituency-led, they operate as collectives, they operate with care, and they work on multiple time horizons. So really exciting, extraordinary movements.

You know, you mentioned that they're powerhouses. And we very much agree they've been the forces behind wins for gender equity and other issues, ranging from democracy to the environment. And yet they've been starved for resources historically. I'll share a few data points to illustrate this. So, the Association for women's rights and development shares that less than 1% of total foundation giving was directed to women's rights, and less than 1% of gender-focused international aid was directed to women's rights.

But it's more than just giving funding to women and girls. Many focus on issues that are symptoms, not the root causes of inequities. And when you look at the dollars that ultimately trickle down, for those organizations that are fighting to change the system, they're incredibly small. Most women's rights organizations have never received core or multi-year funding. Most of the funding also goes to global North-based organizations, and only a fraction goes to proximate leaders.

**Kerrin:** It's incredibly jarring.

**Debby:** There's one other data point I want to share. So, there was a survey of nearly 4000 women's rights organizations, and they found that they had a median income of \$30,000. So we have our work cut out for us.

**Kerrin:** And that's one of the things that I look at and think, Okay, there's obviously funding out there. But 1% is very jarring. So, I know there's also a tendency to fund symptoms of patriarchal injustice rather than the root cause. Can you say more about that?

**Debby:** Sure. And let me be clear, I think it's critically important to fund across the spectrum when we think about gender inequity. But an example of a symptom is funding for girls' education and improving access to education, without really considering the belief systems that lead families and communities to think that girls don't deserve to have an education. So even if they have access, they won't be going to those schools. So it's getting underneath those cultural norms and the informal policies that I'm talking about, and then the formal policies themselves that restrict the opportunity for women, girls, and non-binary folks across the world.

Now, this being said, there are some promising signs. So, for example, the Government of Canada gave \$300 million in 2019 to launch the Equality Fund to build sustainable funding flows to feminist movements. Then, in 2021, the generation equality funders committed 40 billion to advance gender equality, so that's incredibly exciting. But only 2.9 billion, so less than 10% of those commitments, mentioned that a portion of the support would go to feminist movements and leaders. So you know, as we say in the report, this is a huge opportunity to accelerate social change that we're excited for funders to seize.



**Kerrin:** And you also are urging funders and philanthropists to invest 6 billion into feminist movements by 2026. Is that correct?

**Debby:** That is correct. That's our call to action.

**Kerrin:** So, let's move into this idea of the different recommendations you're putting forward and how this can happen. You have this incredible report, lighting the way for philanthropy on the power and promise of feminist movements. And in it, you offer ideas on how this might happen, from reviewing power structures to risk management, to funding ecosystems. Let's dive into that. Would you mind giving a little synopsis of the paper and some of the recommendations at a high level?

**Debby:** So, you know, we begin with a pervasive problem. Gender inequity is hardwired into our homes, communities, and systems globally and has been for centuries. To illustrate, I can just talk about natural disasters. In California, we've been facing things like fires. But as one example from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami illustrates, men outnumbered women survivors three to one! And a lot of that was due to cultural norms in Sri Lanka. It's inappropriate for women to learn to swim. When we pull back more broadly, women are 14 times more likely to die during natural disasters.

So, we start by sharing just how pervasive gender inequity is. And then, we introduce our heroes: feminist movements. So, the leaders, networks, and organizations that are on the ground; working to address inequities. And we include some highlights of their wins. And I'll share that these movements are highly intersectional. They're led by and for people who experience multiple forms of oppression.

And so, we share some great examples of the impact that these organizations have had, including their work to advance women's rights. Some wins range from the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1946. Recent reproductive rights won in Mexico, Argentina, and Ireland. Banning non-disclosure agreements and sexual misconduct cases and abuse of special police squad in Nigeria. So, it's critically important the work that feminist movements do to advance women's rights. And at the same time, they do so much more. For example, they've set an international legal precedent for indigenous peoples' collectives with the Movimiento Nacional winning a case preventing global fashion companies from stealing Mayan textile designs; or a feminist movement pushing to get large food companies such as McDonald's and Aramark, to only source produce from farms participating in programs that have raised labor standards for farm workers.

So, feminist movements are on the ground working for all of us. But then we note that despite being these total powerhouses, feminist movements are incredibly undercapitalized. What's exciting to us is that there's real action to take at this point. We know that there's so much money on the sidelines and so much appetite for social change and social justice. Our work was based on interviews with dozens of funders and funder advisors and guidance from feminist leaders on how to support feminist movements.

The first recommendation is to get into what we've started to talk about in terms of systems change — getting underneath and understanding the power structures that shape our homes, our communities, and our systems, and the ways in which gender inequity bears out across our lives. The second is to think about risk differently and reexamine it. Many funders are used to



funding direct service programs with short-term and linear outcomes. So, they see investing in feminist movements, which are often long-term, as risky, they're just less familiar.

We sense that the greatest risk is not investing in the feminist leaders and organizations that are actively tackling systemic injustice and that have the insight on the ground on how to change these systems. Our third recommendation is if you want to fund feminist movements, there's an extraordinary set of organizations and networks. These are primary supporters of feminist movements. They have done the heavy lifting of building relationships with leaders and communities across the world and are ready to absorb capital.

Part of how we developed the 6 billion was just looking at the opportunity to multiply current giving and feminist funds. With Bridgespan's research on collaborative funds, we learned that those who focus on gender and equity believe they could absorb 10 times the amount of capital that they currently receive. If you're interested, go to [weshakethetable.org](http://weshakethetable.org) to look for a starter list of organizations you can invest in as funders.

The fourth recommendation is to shift practices and think differently about how you fund and weave in a gender equity lens. So, this can be things like expanding sourcing beyond your close network. Often, donors or those sitting in the Global North may not be as familiar with organizations in the Global South, particularly those led by proximate leaders and feminist movements.

Ensure that your diligence practices screen in feminine movements instead of crowding them out with questions like the size and age of the nonprofit. In some cases, we've even learned that incorporating a nonprofit is politically risky. So, I think we should reconsider practices, sourcing, diligence, and then funding across the ecosystem. We want to move away from kind of the individual as a winner mindset. And think about the interconnection of actors, feminist movements exist and work in collaboration. And then finally providing long-term general operating support.

As you think about what it means to be proximate, think about those who have experience with gender inequity and other forms of inequity, taking an intersectional lens, and then finally, measuring what matters to movements. So, I talked earlier about what funders might be used to in terms of looking for evidence, but there is so much impact that feminist movements have, and they know intimately how they're measuring their impact. And so listen to them. So, we urge funders to work with grantees to define success and then also to allow them to pivot as needed.

**Kerrin:** So, actually, one of the things you mentioned was that feminist movements are intersectional in nature. And I'd like to drill into that because this movement does have historically whitewashed structures around it, I think that's compelling. So how do we best support women of color who are working to address feminist issues?

**Debby:** I am so glad that you brought that up, Kerrin. When we started this work, some people we spoke with were hesitant about using the word feminism, or feminist, and we're concerned with this framing. And they also misunderstand feminism to be a white women's movement. As you mentioned, the feminist movement has been whitewashed, it never was a white women's movement.

The feminist leaders and collaborators that we've worked with, including black and Latino leaders, felt very strongly that it was important to name this work feminist. Black women, Latina



women, indigenous women, women of the Global South, and those who have other identity markers that are marginalized have always been at the forefront of feminist movements. They faced inequities for centuries across all systems and issues. So, with them specifically, they're also uniquely positioned to tackle these systemic issues. To support women of color to support trans women, indigenous women, and disabled women, to fund them, we should prioritize their experience and insight and use criteria that bring them in versus crowd them out.

**Kerrin:** So, as we look at these structures and recommendations, it can be intimidating. What have you seen in terms of the reaction from leaders or community members who have seen this report?

**Debby:** Thanks for asking, you know, we're still in the early days of sharing this work. And thank you for helping us get out the message. And so far, we've seen a lot of positive responses. This has underscored or really raised the need to consider gender and equity and to see the broader value of feminist movements. Others who have already been in this space appreciate the concrete recommendations, including the reference list of organizations on Shake the Table's website.

**Kerrin:** Interesting. I guess the next question I have is the reaction to the report. Especially given the current events of Roe. Have you seen a material change in metrics or funding from these leaders?

**Debby:** It's hard for any of us not to take action and respond. And when we look out at what's been happening since the decision. This is all incredibly timely, incredibly important giving. But I want to join others in saying this isn't just about reproductive rights. Absolutely. Feminist leaders were disappointed but not surprised by the decision, Kerrin. And we anticipate further decisions related to women's rights and human rights more broadly. You know, feminist movements on the ground across the US and globally are continuing their day-to-day work to address inequities. So, while we're pleased to see a kind of spike in funding, we hope that this is not narrow in its giving and that it continues. So I'd say give and give generously. Because, as we know, lives are at stake.

**Kerrin:** Obviously, that 6 billion deployed by 2026 is meant to cover the full gamut of feminist issues. So maybe, could you break that down for me and some of the things that you're that drive those numbers, the things that you want to see change? If you had a magic wand? Like what would that look like as you start to deploy these funds outward?

**Debby:** So, let me start with grounding the call to action and sharing how we got to that number. And what I'll say is that to us, it's a floor. I mentioned before that Bridgespan has done research on collaborative funds with dozens of collaborative funds globally. And those who focus on gender equity said that they could readily absorb 10 times they're giving. Now, these funds currently receive \$100 million a year. And so, if we do the math, that means that they could absorb a billion dollars.

And then, you know, as another piece to estimate, foundations give \$600 million a year to women's rights organizations. And we assume that organizations can absorb twice that. So that would make an incremental \$600 million. But that's a floor. So, one of the issues with feminist movements is that we don't have great data on them. We sense that feminist movements could absorb far more than 6 billion, but we wanted to put out a floor something to start with.



**Kerrin:** So what would you hope to see happen with all that? What could this potentially change?

**Debbby:** There are so many changes, ranging from advancing rights around the globe and helping prevent further retrenchment of rights, including reproductive rights. I know so many of us in the US and worldwide are still reeling from the recent decision. It could lead to fairer and more dignified work. It could support climate justice; it could advance work to reduce gender-based violence. It could protect democracy and push back against authoritarianism sweeping the globe. It could lead to greater representation and political bodies.

And we know that in countries where women share representation, political bodies are 30%, or more democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive. It could increase education, and we know that an extra year of primary school boosts girls' eventual wages by 10 to 20%. One more year of secondary school boosts eventual wages by 15 to 25%. And each year of secondary education reduces the likelihood of child marriage by five percentage points or more.

It could lead to more land ownership. And when women own the same amount of agricultural land as men, crop yield increases by 10%. It could enable women and girls to earn income, and we know that on average, women and girls reinvest 90% of their income into their families, versus only 30 to 40% for a man. I say all of this, and yet, perhaps most exciting is that this investment would lead to outcomes we can't even imagine. When I think of all that feminist movements, have done on a shoestring. It's thrilling to think of what this investment could yield.

**Kerrin:** So, Debbie, \$6 million is a lot of money. Where is this coming from what is sort of the vision for where we can start to mobilize that level of funding?

**Debbby:** So, \$6 billion is a lot. And we sense that it's just a small fraction of the money that's waiting on the sidelines that funders are eager to give. Our research shows that nearly 80% of the biggest donors identify social change. So, for example, eliminating disparities in healthcare, or providing better educational opportunities for people in need are among their top three philanthropic priorities. And feminist movements work to affect social change across all of these issues.

So, they are working to address donors' biggest priorities. But there's a gap between this aspiration to give and actual giving. From 1990 to 2008, the top 1% of wealth grew commensurate with their giving. But since 2008, wealth has drastically outpaced giving rates. Our research from 2018 indicates that the wealthiest U.S. donors are giving just over 1%, or I should say, only over 1% of their net worth annually, to charity. And that number is not even close to keeping pace with their annual wealth accumulation, something that in the past few years dramatically accelerated, even despite recent market turbulence. And so, there's this huge aspiration gap between intention to give to social change. Feminist movements are a great investment opportunity for donors.

**Kerrin:** So, let's go ahead and share with the listeners a little bit about where they can find this because all this detail with practical ideas on how to bring forward gender equality into their practices. Where is this report? And how do we get folks directed towards reading it?

**Debbby:** So please just go to [bridgespan.org](https://bridgespan.org). **Our report is called *Lighting the Way: a Report for Philanthropy on the Power and Promise of Feminist Movements*.**





**Kerrin:** Fantastic. And before we wrap up the podcast, I want to run through a few rapid-fire questions, and I encourage you to respond with the first thing that comes to your mind. Are you ready? All right, what current industry initiative makes you feel hopeful for the future of philanthropy?

**Debby:** In terms of the social sector, something that I'm pretty excited about is investing in feminist environmental justice groups that are doing work to protect our planet at the same time as thinking about protecting gender equity and other rights.

**Kerrin:** If you could have dinner with any feminist alive today or from history, who would it be?

**Debby:** Oh goodness. This is tough. So, I'm going to go with a writers dinner party because they're coming to mind. So, I would have around the table Bell Hooks, Adrian Marie Brown, Toni Morrison, Roxane Gay, let's see Rebecca Solnit, and then Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. So some of these names people probably recognize their contemporary amazing leaders and thinkers have recently departed. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a 17th-century Mexican writer, scholar, and nun renowned for her love of learning and her fight for women's rights to education.

**Kerrin:** I love it. Roxane Gay is one of my total heroes, too. She's so fantastic. So wonderful. I love your dinner table. Final question. What are you most proud of accomplishing in your career?

**Debby:** I would say I'm pretty proud of helping direct some serious sizable philanthropic dollars towards addressing inequities. And getting to work with visionary changemakers and doing so.

**Kerrin:** Thank you, Debbie. We just so appreciate you being here today. Our listeners can learn more about the Bridgespan Group at [bridgespan.org](https://bridgespan.org).