

GRANTS ADVISORY COMMITTEE TOOLKIT

THE NEW YORK WOMEN'S FOUNDATION

An Introduction to Participatory Grantmaking at The New York Women's Foundation



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Glossary

This glossary includes terms that you may encounter in this guide or during the participatory grantmaking process. This is not a complete list, and the definitions are not exhaustive—they are offered to help establish a common language around grantmaking.

Participatory grantmaking

Participatory grantmaking shifts the power to make funding decisions to the very communities that a foundation aims to serve, including power over the strategy and criteria behind those decisions. (Adapted from [Grantcraft](#))

Trust-based philanthropy

Trust-based philanthropy is an approach to giving that addresses the inherent power imbalances between funders, grantees, and the communities they serve. Trust-based philanthropy is about redistributing power—systemic, organizational, and interpersonal power—to develop a healthier and more equitable nonprofit ecosystem. On a practical level, this includes multi-year unrestricted grantmaking, streamlined applications and reporting, and a commitment to building relationships based on transparency, dialogue, and mutual learning. (Adapted from the [Trust-based Philanthropy Project](#))

Social justice

Social justice is a vision of society in which resources are distributed equitably, and in which all people are physically and psychologically safe and secure. (Adapted from [Brandeis University](#))

Racial justice

Racial justice is the elimination of racial hierarchies to advance collective liberation. It works towards a society where Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern, North African, and other communities of color have the dignity, resources, power, and self-determination to fully thrive. (Adapted from [Race Forward](#))

Structural racism

Structural racism is racial inequity that is deeply rooted and embedded in our history, culture, and our economic, political, and legal systems. The term emphasizes the way that racism operates as a system of power which creates racial inequities across all indicators for success. For example, the “racial wealth gap,” where white people have many times the wealth of people of color, results from structural racism across generations. (Adapted from [Race Forward](#))

General operating support

General operating support is unrestricted funding that can be used to cover any of a nonprofit’s expenses. It supports the overall activities of the organization rather than for a particular program or project. (Adapted from [Inside Philanthropy](#))

Program-specific support

Program specific support is funding that is restricted in what it can be used for. This type of support can help maintain an existing program at its current level, grow or strengthen a program so it runs more effectively and/or serves more individuals, or initiate a brand-new program.

Directly impacted

Directly impacted individuals have a lived experience with the issue and/or system being referenced. For example, a formerly incarcerated person has been directly impacted by the criminal justice system. ▶

System impacted

System impacted individuals are impacted by a policy, program, or social system (such as the criminal justice system), as well as those related or closely connected to directly impacted individuals. For example, both an incarcerated person and their child, or a person who lives in an over-policed neighborhood are system impacted.

POC or BIPOC

POC is an acronym for person/people of color. BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and person/people of color. Many people and groups prefer one term over the other, but they can be used interchangeably.

Priority communities

Priority communities is a term used by funders to describe communities in which they prefer to invest in. Often these are communities that have been under-represented in grantmaking and may lack access to resources that allow them to meet their needs.



Overview of The New York Women's Foundation



Rooted in Community, Committed to Gender and Social Justice

The New York Women's Foundation's mission and vision is to create an equitable and just future for women and families by uniting a cross-cultural alliance that ignites action and invests in bold, community-led solutions across the city.

The New York Women's Foundation was established in 1987 as a public philanthropy to be a voice for women and a force for change. We are a cross-cultural alliance of women (cisgender and transgender) and gender nonconforming and non-binary people. We work to catalyze partnerships and leverage human and financial capital to achieve sustained economic security and justice for women, girls, and their communities. Our primary areas of grantmaking are: Economic Justice; Safety & Healing Justice; Health Equity & Reproductive Justice; and Expanding Democracy & Leadership. We also manage collaborative groups of funders, including The Justice Initiative and Collaborative Fund, and the NYC (New York City) Fund for Girls and Young Women of Color.

We are a **community foundation** that is sustained by and is responsive to our New York City community.

This means that we raise every dollar we invest. It also means that we bring an intersectional lens to our grantmaking, because we understand that historically marginalized communities of women and girls (cis and trans), and gender-expansive people face interconnected systems of oppression.

The Foundation understands our work as anti-racist, as we support advocacy and organizing at the intersection of gender and racial justice. We are committed to mobilizing and demanding change until the policies and systems that sustain racism are dismantled. We fund people and their movements and world views which are rooted in justice and liberation.

Our work is grounded in participatory grantmaking and trust-based philanthropy traditions, bringing together NYC community members, philanthropists, volunteers, and advocates to transform communities and the city. With fierce determination, we mobilize hearts, minds, and resources to create an equitable and just future for women, girls, gender-expansive people, families, and communities in New York City.



Like all other forms of wealth in the U.S., philanthropic wealth can be directly traced back to industries of extraction and exploitation, including slavery, stolen land from indigenous people, and the systemic undervaluing of 'women's work'...

–Justice Funders

Why Participatory and Trust-based Grantmaking?

PARTICIPATORY MODEL OF PHILANTHROPY

A grassroots-driven, transparent, inclusive process that responds to and is more accountable to local communities



TRADITIONAL MODEL OF PHILANTHROPY

A top-down, closed process with little transparency and few opportunities for community feedback

Participatory and Trust-based Grantmaking: Tools for Social and Racial Justice

Participatory grantmaking re-centers the power to make funding decisions to the very communities that a foundation aims to serve, including power over the strategy and criteria behind those decisions.² Participatory grantmaking has been described as a “people-led”³ and “regenerative”⁴ practice that can help us build a liberatory and inclusive world. It has been praised by social justice advocates for shifting conversations about equity from rhetoric into action. It resonates with the popular organizing slogan “nothing about us without us!”

There are many ways to practice participatory grantmaking. Some funders invite community members to lead the entire process from determining grant guidelines to the application and selection stages, while others only engage community members in certain stages. The process can also vary depending on the mix of participants, which could include community members, program staff, and/or donors. What is most important is that the funder designs the process with intention and care, to ensure that community participants have true decision-making power, and that the process respects their capacity and aligns with their values.

Trust-based philanthropy is an approach to giving that addresses the inherent power imbalances between funders, grantees, and the communities they serve. Trust-based philanthropy is about ▶

redistributing power—systemic, organizational, and interpersonal power—to develop a healthier and more equitable nonprofit ecosystem. On a practical level, this includes multi-year unrestricted grantmaking, streamlined applications and reporting, and a commitment to building relationships based on transparency, dialogue, and mutual learning.

The core values of trust-based philanthropy include a commitment to advance anti-racism and other strategies that break down systemic inequities; power-sharing; collaboration and relationship-building; accountability; and learning with humility. These values shape four primary areas across a grantmaking organization: its organizational culture, infrastructure, practices, and leadership.

Here is how The New York Women’s Foundation leans into our commitment to trust-based philanthropy:

Trust-based Philanthropy’s 6 Practices⁷	The New York Women’s Foundation’s Aligned Practices
<p><u>1. Give multi-year, unrestricted funding:</u> The work of nonprofits is long-term and unpredictable. Multi-year, unrestricted funding gives grantees the flexibility to assess and determine where grant dollars are most needed. It allows for sustainability, emergent action, and innovation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → The majority of our grants are unrestricted. → An increasing number of our grants are multiyear.
<p><u>2. Do the homework:</u> Nonprofits often must jump through countless hoops just to be invited to submit a proposal. Trust-based philanthropy makes it the funder’s responsibility to get to know prospective grantees, saving nonprofits time in the early stages of the vetting process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Our grantmaking staff are committed to researching and staying up to date on emerging issues in the areas we fund. → We listen to community stakeholders about organizations and focus areas that we should learn more about.
<p><u>3. Simplify and streamline paperwork:</u> Nonprofits spend a large amount of time on funder-driven applications and reports, which can take time away from their mission-critical work. Streamlined approaches focused on dialogue and learning can pave the way for deeper relationships and mutual accountability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → We have streamlined our grant applications to eliminate opaque or burdensome processes. → We have adjusted grant application lengths to match the level of funding—smaller grants have shorter applications.



<p>4. Be transparent and responsive: Open, honest, and transparent communication supports relationships rooted in trust and mutual accountability. When funders model vulnerability and power consciousness, it signals to grantees that they can show up more fully.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → We use a participatory grantmaking approach that invites community members to guide both our grant decision-making and the strategy behind our funding process.
<p>5. Solicit and act on feedback: Philanthropy does not have all the answers. Grantees and communities provide necessary perspectives that can inform a funder’s strategy and approach, making its work more successful in the long run.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → We invite former grantees and community stakeholders to inform our strategic visions, planning, and grantmaking processes through our Justice Advisory Committee, Grants Advisory Committee, and other opportunities
<p>6. Offer support beyond the check: Responsive, adaptive, non-monetary support bolsters leadership, capacity, and organizational health. This is especially critical for organizations that have historically gone without the same access to networks or levels of support as their more established peers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → We partner with values-aligned technical assistance providers to offer our grantee partners coaching, skill-building, and trouble-shooting support. → We collaborate with local and aligned funders to offer additional capacity building and networking opportunities to our collective community of grantee partners.

“ Because philanthropic wealth comes from these industries, it is understandable how wealthy individuals and families have managed their philanthropy in many of the same ways that they have managed their for-profit businesses. A core challenge of this approach is that our most pressing issues cannot be resolved by investment and grantmaking practices that reinforce the most harmful aspects of our economy...

–Justice Funders¹⁰

Why Participatory and Trust-based Grantmaking?

The New York Women's Foundation understands that the traditional, dominant, philanthropic model is top-down, opaque, and insular. Often, funding decisions about impacted communities are made in a vacuum, without those communities at the table. The Foundation works to change this model, beginning with the following core practices for our grantmaking:

- Subverting the dominant model of philanthropy and challenging traditional power by practicing participatory grantmaking.
- Engaging stakeholders through the Grants Advisory Committee to democratize decision-making, incorporate a diversity of perspectives, and include communities who are not often at the funding decision-making table.

Using these practices, we listen and learn from our partners, who are experts on how to create change for the people they serve. We value the expertise that organizations bring to the table, teaching us about the needs of their constituents and the most effective strategies and solutions to meet them.

Moving From an Oppression Economy Towards a Liberation Economy

The economic justice and policy organization [Liberation in a Generation](#) envisions a world where we transition from an “Oppression Economy”—an economic system built on theft, exclusion, and

exploitation of people of color and other historically oppressed people— to a “Liberation Economy,” which is centered on meeting all peoples’ basic needs, safety, and security for all, belonging for all, and valuing all contributions to society.

Traditional philanthropy reinforces an economic system in which resources and decision-making are confined to those who already hold power, specifically those with inherited and accumulated financial, racial, and gendered power.

Philanthropy can reflect on and begin to change its own practices by working towards, and not against, structural change. Through participatory and trust-based grantmaking, philanthropy has an important opportunity to support the shift from an Oppression Economy to a Liberation Economy. This happens through a commitment to transformative long-term work, policy, and political organizational infrastructure, and thought leadership that uplifts radical visions of collective care.⁸

Philanthropy can also support a Liberation Economy by shedding its “charity” and “investment” framework, and instead embracing a redistribution and reparations model that centers the historically exploited and excluded communities that built this country’s wealth.⁹ These are the very communities that should be determining how philanthropic funds are spent.

What is the Grants Advisory Committee?



The Grants Advisory Committee (GAC) is at the heart of The Foundation’s participatory grantmaking and reflects our belief in philanthropy by and for New York City’s abundant community of women, girls, and gender-expansive people

The Grants Advisory Committee (GAC) is a committee of cis and trans women and gender-expansive New Yorkers who have diverse professional and life experiences, and who are committed to social justice. GAC membership prioritizes people who have been directly impacted by the oppressive structural systems that The New York Women’s Foundation seeks to change.

Grants Advisory Committee member roles include:

- **Reviewing** grant proposals
- **Co-crafting** funding recommendations
- **Preparing** for site visits, including developing site visit questions
- **Sharing** funding recommendations with Foundation leadership
- **Engaging** in site visits
- **Providing** feedback on participatory grantmaking practices

The New York Women’s Foundation provides stipends to compensate GAC members for their time, and to honor their expertise as community members.

GAC Values and Reflection



We ground the Grants Advisory Committee in the following values:¹¹

1. Women (cis and trans) and gender-expansive people are the **authors of their own lives**
2. **Racial justice** is crucial to securing gender and economic justice
3. Supporting **local solutions** is key to lasting and sustainable change
4. Women (cis and trans), gender-expansive people, families, and communities benefit from **holistic approaches**
5. **Long term investment** supports organizational sustainability
6. **Participatory approaches** create opportunities for local solutions
7. Grantmakers should facilitate **power-sharing**, not hierarchy
8. **Trust-based grantmaking** requires humble learners who practice active listening
9. Philanthropy must **follow people at the margins** to support transformative change



Do these values reflect your beliefs? Can you commit to upholding them? If yes, you may be a good fit for the Grants Advisory Committee!

Steps in the GAC Process

1

GAC Orientation

GAC members meet each other and learn more about The New York Women's Foundation and our grantmaking cycle.

2

Read Grant Proposals

GAC members review grant proposals using the online Fluxx system.

3

Prepare for Site Visit

GAC members attend site visit prep sessions, and craft questions for the grantseeker in collaboration with the Program Officer.

4

Site Visit

During the site visit, GAC members listen and learn about the applicant to inform their grant recommendations.

5

Inform Funding Recommendations

With the support of The Foundation's Program staff, GAC members make funding recommendations.

6

Present Funding Recommendations to the Board of Directors

GAC teams meet with The Foundation's Board of Directors to present their funding recommendations.

7

Provide feedback

GAC members provide feedback on The Foundation's participatory grantmaking practices to support our continued growth and evolution.

The Foundation's staff will support GAC participants every step of the way! Here's how:

Program staff will:

- Facilitate the orientation and provide context about The Foundation's priorities for the current grantmaking cycle
- Be available for regular check-ins to answer questions and guide GAC members through the grant cycle
- Coordinate and schedule site visits
- Provide feedback on GAC's questions for applicants before site visits; and offer space to debrief and reflect following the site visits
- Support GAC members in preparing funding recommendations and the presentation to The Foundation's Board of Directors
- Process stipend payments



Creating a Supportive Site Visit Environment



Our Approach to Site Visits

Site visits are the primary way that The New York Women's Foundation learns firsthand about applicant organizations' work and leadership. Because organizations have different capacities, the site visit is an important opportunity to ask questions and get a deeper understanding about aspects of the work that might not have been expressed in the proposal. Sometimes it is also a way to see the work in action.

GAC members represent The Foundation and our values at the site visit. The Foundation's staff will

assist GAC members in preparing for this role. For example, we recognize the funder/grantee relationship is an inherently unequal one that reinforces existing power dynamics. The Foundation seeks to decrease this dynamic by establishing and maintaining an open and welcoming tone with prospective grantee partners throughout the application and review process, especially during site visits. As part of our anti-oppressive approach, we reframe questions that often come up in a site visit to focus on an organization's strengths rather than its deficits.



Tip for Reviewing Budgets for General Operating Support:

When reviewing organizational budgets for **general operating support**, as opposed to restricted **program support**, it is helpful to focus less on individual budget lines and more on the overall story the budget tells about the organization's overall financial health. For example, what does the organization prioritize in their expense budget? What seem to be the funding gaps? How could general operating support benefit the organization's current needs and plans for growth?



<h2>Instead of a Deficit-based Question...</h2>	<h2>Try Reframing as an Anti-oppressive and Strengths-based Question</h2>
<p>✗ Your organization’s budget seems very small, how is this sustainable?</p>	<p>✓ What is your organization’s long-term vision for growing and diversifying your funding sources in the future?</p>
<p>✗ In your budget, the salary for some roles is lower than what I have seen at other organizations. Why is that?</p>	<p>✓ Could you share more about your budget so that we can better understand your programming and staffing needs?</p>
<p>✗ I also work with the low-income community but see that you do not focus on workforce development. Why not?</p>	<p>✓ I am excited to see that your organization supports low-income communities, which is something I also care about! Can you share more about the areas you decided to focus on related to economic justice?</p>
<p>✗ Your organization supports immigrants from such an interesting area of the world. I have never been there; it must be tough. What is it like?</p>	<p>✓ Tip: Refrain from asking this type of personal question. It is best practice to follow the lead of the applicant organization as they choose to share or not share details about their individual experiences.</p>
<p>✗ I know this great elected official who cares deeply about the issue your organization focuses on. Why haven’t you tried getting funding from them?</p>	<p>✓ I understand fundraising can be challenging. Is government funding something you are interested in pursuing? If so, what are some strategies you are exploring?</p>
<p>✗ How do you know that the people accessing your services really need and deserve it? Are you concerned about fraud?</p>	<p>✓ We trust you to know what your community needs best. What does outreach to community members look like? How do clients/program participants stay connected to your organization?</p>

Participatory Grantmaking Is an Ongoing Journey

We hope that this toolkit has deepened your understanding of how The New York Women’s Foundation envisions and works toward greater equity in philanthropy. In addition to being a guide for prospective Grants Advisory Committee members, we also hope that it serves to clarify and demystify philanthropic practices. We also intend it to act as a call to philanthropic institutions to consider more accessible, participatory, and equitable models of grantmaking. Whether you are a community member, a grantee partner, or a funder, we hope that this toolkit will be a reference that you can continue to reflect on and share with your community.

This toolkit, however, is not a definitive text on how to make grantmaking more racially just and liberatory, nor does it lay out a “perfect” approach. Instead, it represents The New York Women’s Foundation’s particular journey. We are thankful for what we have learned along the way from our larger community, including community partners, grantee partners, board members, movement advisors, and other grantmaking peers. We know that continuing to lean into the values outlined in this document will take more than just “checking a box.” We must continually evolve as an organization to deepen our commitment to these values, and we invite this challenge.

We know that it will take action from every corner to make New York City into the society that we collectively envision. To create a reality in which gender, racial, and economic injustices have withered away, then we must all act: community members and organizers on the frontlines, grantmakers practicing active listening and learning directly from communities, and activist philanthropists who reflect and analyze their role in this economy with intention. This toolkit is an invitation to join The New York Women’s Foundation in practicing radical generosity and creating transformative change.



Appendix

Additional Resources to Deepen Equity in Grantmaking:

1. [**Deciding Together Shifting Power And Resources Through Participatory Grantmaking**](#) from GrantCraft
2. [**The 6 Grantmaking Practices of Trust-Based Philanthropy**](#) from Trust-based Philanthropy Project
3. [**Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens**](#) from the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity
4. [**ABFE's 10 Imperatives**](#) from ABFE (A Philanthropic Partnership for Black Communities)

Endnotes

1. [Stifled Generosity: How philanthropy has fueled the accumulation and privatization of wealth](#), Justice Funders
2. Adapted from [Deciding Together](#) Grantcraft 2018 pg. 8
3. [Deciding Together](#) Grantcraft 2018 pg. 4
4. [Just Transition for Philanthropy excerpted from Resonance: A Framework for Philanthropic Transformation](#). (Justice Funders)
5. [The 6 Grantmaking Practices of Trust-Based Philanthropy](#)
6. [The 6 Grantmaking Practices of Trust-Based Philanthropy](#)
7. Adapted from [Trust-based Philanthropy Project](#)
8. [Racial Capitalism Community of Practice](#), Session 3 with Liberation in a Generation. Neighborhood Funder's Group, Funders For a Just Economy.
9. [Racial Capitalism Community of Practice](#), Session 3 with Liberation in a Generation. Neighborhood Funder's Group, Funders For a Just Economy.
10. [Stifled Generosity: How philanthropy has fueled the accumulation and privatization of wealth](#), Justice Funders
11. Thanks to members of the Brooklyn Economic Justice Project for their work which has informed GAC values

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This toolkit is a compilation of materials developed by philanthropic and nonprofit leaders and networks advancing participatory and trust-based practices, as well as materials from the evolution of The New York Women's Foundation's participatory grantmaking model. These practices and models take time, reflection and collaboration and we uplift their collective impact on the content found herein. The idea for this toolkit emerged from the participation of Foundation staff in the Neighborhood Funders Group's (NFG) Racial Capitalism learning community in 2021. The learnings from that space helped amplify the elements of racial equity that Foundation staff wanted to see embedded throughout the participatory grantmaking model. This project will serve as a foundation for our practice of participatory grantmaking but will also be a living document that can evolve as reflections, input and timely adjustments present themselves.

Content creators and curators:

Sojourner Rivers, Senior Program Officer for Reproductive Justice, Safety & Healing

Guisela Marroquín, Director, Programs

Marissa Crawford, Director of Grants Management & Operations

Copy Editing:

Lize Mogel

Design:

Devika Sen & Lulu Johnson at Partners & Partners, LLC

Branding & Strategic Communications:

Anne Sanderson, Vice-President, Strategic Communications & Marketing

Ashley Morse, Assistant Director, Communications