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Philanthropy and Gender: Not Your Mother's Bake Sale

(Jan. 19, 2010) When it comes to giving money away, are there differences between men and women and their philanthropic behavior? If so, there are important implications for our clients and those in the business of encouraging gifts to nonprofit organizations. Numerous studies and countless anecdotal observations suggest that there are significant differences. Martha Keates, senior consultant at Marts & Lundy, explores just a few of these findings and reflects on experiences in the field to offer the following observations. (This article first appeared in [The Offord Group](#) report titled *Women in Philanthropy: Gender Differences in Charitable Giving*.)

Women are more generous than men

In a study conducted in 2001, economists James Andreoni and Lise Vesterlund evaluated philanthropic behaviors and found marked differences between the sexes. Specifically, the study found that women tend to exhibit preferences to share evenly and to be "more generous when altruism is expensive"; whereas, men are more generous when altruism is cheap, and "men are more likely to be either perfectly selfish or perfectly selfless." The Women's Philanthropy Institute (WPI) at Indiana University finds that single women are far more likely to give than single men; married individuals are more likely to give than single men. The WPI has also found that women who participate in donor education programs are more likely to give larger gifts, to give unrestricted gifts, to develop a long-term giving plan, and to hold leadership roles on nonprofit boards. When we remember that women make 83 percent of household consumer decisions, it fits that women will disproportionately influence how money is given for charitable causes.

For many women, volunteering and philanthropy are equal, nearly interchangeable, concepts

There is a strong history here, starting in the Civil War with nursing aid societies, and growing in significance and impact through the start of the 20th century. Some of this activity can be attributed to limitations in women's access to education and the boardroom. While their fathers and husbands wielded power in those settings, and brokered philanthropic exchanges (you give to my cause and I'll help yours), women built their own power structures in their communities and churches. Some of the most important and enduring charitable activities were conducted by women mobilizing in support of causes they felt warranted their attention, including war relief, women's access to education, healthcare, and political issues of the day regarding equal rights and suffrage.

Today, women still outnumber men in volunteer activity and are gaining financial parity as wealth-holders. The U.S. Department of Labor reported in 2004 - 2005 that 25 percent of men and 33 percent of women volunteer. There is a strong correlation between women's involvement in an organization and willingness to support it financially. Bruce McClintock, chairman of Marts & Lundy and consultant to several women's colleges, states, "Men like to be involved with the institutions they support, but women demand it." Is it that women's long history of voluntarism continues to be a familiar and effective practice that leads to philanthropic investment? Or are women wired to favor hands-on involvement, wanting to understand fully every nuance of an organization and its impact before following that with monetary gifts? Maybe both. "Giving circles" have long been the domain of philanthropic women. For example, in the late 1880s, Mary Elizabeth Garrett and a few female friends, calling themselves the "Friday Evening Group," met to discuss how they could use their wealth to effect social change. The group decided to launch a fundraising campaign to endow a medical school at Johns Hopkins University and eventually established the Women's Fund Committee across the country to meet their goal.

Even among very wealthy women, "Women's Funds" are still used for collaborative and democratic approaches to giving and making changes in communities. Conversations with our clients, and our own experiences, indicate that participation is nearly always a precursor to giving, and lengthy involvement is a predictor of even larger gifts. Collaborative or group decision making is more often seen with women than with men. It is rare for women to make spontaneous or transactional gifts; it is far more likely that they will have given small amounts, year after year, and attended events or meetings at their favorite organization, before considering a large or transformational gift.

Generational Differences

There are generational differences in the way women give, reflective of their experiences and the cultural framework in which they find themselves. Marjorie Houston, Executive Director of Development at Wheaton College in Massachusetts, has studied this issue for several years. Perhaps the most important take-away of Houston's study is that the growth in economic power parallels the trend away from the proliferation of "women's funds" in favor of increased numbers of major gifts made by individuals. Women are increasingly discovering the power of philanthropy and flexing their giving muscles through personal gifts: eight of the top 50 gifts made in 2005 were made by women (seven of whom were over age 75).

Growth in Individual Giving

- **Women in their 80s**, those born between 1919 and 1927, are less inclined to see the money as "theirs," and often give to causes their husbands supported. They are influenced by the lean years of the Depression. They are collaborative and frugal.
- **Women in their 70s** respond to conversations about their passions and interests. They are motivated less by recognition and more by being engaged with the organization. Interestingly, this decade reflects some discomfort with the notion of "volunteering," associating it negatively with the "white gloves and pearls" set.

- The women's movement is a key part of the experience of **women now in their 60s**. Depending on her relationship to those events, a 60-something donor may view philanthropy as a way to enact social change. She likely sees philanthropy as personal, and sometimes selfless, as in giving in honor or memory of others. Women in this decade are less collaborative than those in their mothers' generation.
- **Women in their 50s** have both inherited wealth and time to continue working and earning more, bringing a greater sense of independence with regard to making philanthropic decisions. They understand and are empowered by giving, and more often than prior generations make gifts with restrictions. Responsibility and accountability are associated with gifts from this cohort.

8 lessons for practitioners

This paper is not meant to suggest that gender differences alone should determine how we should work with our female prospects and donors. However, we do recommend reflecting on some historic facts and behavioral trends as you form strategies to maximize major gift activity at your institution. By 2010, women will control 60 percent of wealth in the United States.

01 Women have been leading in philanthropy for a long time. Many of the behaviors of women philanthropists established a century ago are still practiced.

02 Women tend to be entrepreneurial. They had to be, in order to find ways that were as effective as the men making change through business and education. Remember when forming strategy for particular female prospects that entrepreneurial problem-solving approaches can be very appealing. Be flexible and responsive to clues for how giving to your organization can address their interests and passions.

03 Women often work collaboratively, in groups, or they are known to seek opinions to achieve their philanthropic goals. Be inclusive of the opinions of others in your donor's orbit.

04 Volunteering is equal to giving in defining women's philanthropy. Don't differentiate between these terms. Getting your female prospects involved in your organization is one of the best strategies for cultivating toward a major commitment.

05 Volunteering leads to giving. Women like to see/ feel/experience/imagine change. The giving will follow when the outcome feels certain.

06 Do not underestimate the role women play in determining the philanthropic activity of a family. Whenever possible, include the spouse of the donor when cultivating and negotiating gifts. This goes both ways, but since women often control the "purchasing power" at the household level, it makes sense to include a male prospect's wife in the discussion. She will feel respected and included, and can likely influence the outcome of the request. If you are conducting a feasibility study, schedule the interview with both spouses.

07 Women value education, and comparisons in their philanthropic behavior among the top colleges reveal higher performance in many categories. Be fearless and unapologetic in soliciting gifts to support education for women and girls.

08 Women tend to be less transactional, more experiential in their philanthropic detail. Leave time for gestation.

To download the full report, Women and Philanthropy: Gender Differences in Charitable Giving, by The Offord Group, go to www.theoffordgroup.com.