Race, Class, and Gender: An Intersectional Approach to Social and Racial Justice Work

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The Challenge

Racial and social justice funders are increasingly challenged by how best to integrate an “intersectional” approach to giving and to grantees’ work. This means going beyond a model that comprehends race and class to add other factors, like gender.

As one CEO put it, “Our staff and grantees get race and class...But what I want to know is: what happened to gender? Where is the gender analysis?” And as one senior program officer explained, “Grantees need to see gender and race together. Gender impacts every issue they work on. But grantees are not being challenged to do innovative work around gender [in a way that parallels their work on race or class concerns].”

One part of the challenge is that while boards, staff, and grantees may have an intuitive understanding of race and class, few are prepared to articulate what gender is or how it relates to grantmaking and place-based programming.

Moreover, gender is a very “overloaded” word, and fewer still may be confident explaining the differences among related phrases like gender equity, gender norms, gender identity, cisgender, and so on.

This is complicated by “intersectionality,” which asks us to not just see issues of race or gender in their own silos, but to look at intersections and borders of identity, where different kinds of oppression interact.

Looking at factors like race, class, and gender in combination—rather than one at a time in isolation—can improve the efficacy of funding, programs, and policy. An intersectional lens provides a more comprehensive view of complex, multifaceted issues while also surfacing marginalized individuals whose identities don’t fit into singular categories and might otherwise have been ignored (such as low-income Afro-Latina lesbians).

Our work with The Simmons Foundation has helped us address some hidden tensions around diversity and address them in ways that lead to a more equitable and affirming environment for all of our staff.

Alan Dettlaff, Dean
University of Houston, Graduate College of Social Work
Grantees can also be in very different places along a spectrum of understanding gender and intersectionality. Reproductive health or domestic violence organizations may instinctively understand how issues of power and equity are crucial to condom negotiation or combating abuse, but lack deeper understanding of the role played by rigid gender norms.

Meanwhile, the work of civic engagement organizations may be guided by a deep race and class analyses, but incorporate little understanding of intersectionality and how race, class, and gender interact.

Similarly, a youth shelter may have a solid understanding of all these factors, yet still wrestle with policies around transgender or nonbinary youth, or unconscious bias among its staff or board.

Some grantees respond to questions about a gender analysis with a diversity answer such as “our board is mostly women” or “we have clients who are transgender.”

Pushing such grantees for an analysis that is both race and gender responsive without offering technical support may result in grantees that only make cosmetic changes or resist new and unfunded application requirements. At the same time, funders themselves are seldom experts in gender and intersectionality, and even those who are, may lack the time and capacity to assist grantees.

The Simmons Foundation’s gender project has really helped us highlight the role gender norms play in our work making improvisational music with youth experiencing homelessness, while refining our commitment to safe spaces for their social-emotional growth.

Justin Jackson
Program Coordinator, Nameless Sound

“The powerful influence of gender norms on an individual’s actions is one of the foundations of gender inequality.”
The Simmons Foundation of Houston, Texas supports a wide array of place-based grantees performing a variety of vital social, economic, and racial justice work, such as youth organizing, policy change, immigration reform, and workforce development.

Its mission is partnering with organizations that strengthen women, youth and families while building an educated, tolerant and resilient community. The Foundation’s vision is “Freedom to Make a Change.” It envisions creating a harmonious, dynamic and informed community, where all people have the opportunity to improve their lives, particularly marginalized and vulnerable populations.

In 2017, The Simmons Foundation initiated a unique multi-year process to begin integrating gender norms through every facet of its work. Specifically, the Foundation was interested in helping its grantees adopt an intersectional approach that incorporated a gender analysis, while ensuring that the entire process was both grantee-driven and grantee-centric.

The Foundation understood that some grantees were already comfortable with the gender terms and concepts, others were still struggling to master the basics, and still others had a lot of needs when it came to having a gender-inclusive intersectional lens but lacked the capacity or expertise to move forward in a meaningful way.

Despite this diversity of expertise and capacity, what many grantees shared was a common interest in learning how to better apply a race- and gender-responsive lens in an intersectional manner. This was true even among women-led and women-serving organizations, which had the advantage of starting from a strong, feminist analysis.

To help ignite this process, The Simmons Foundation invited True-Child to help lead the initiative. This report—a part of that project—was developed specifically to help inform the field about the Foundation’s successes and challenges, to help make the broader case for more race- and gender-responsive funding, and to provide a possible roadmap to future funders interested in bringing this work to their philanthropy.
About Gender Norms

“Gender is what culture makes from sex.”

“All your life you was raised to be what? A man. So when I see another man, my train of thought is that that either you need to be doing what I’m doing, or you need to be doing something a little better.”

In this context, we mean “gender” not as the biological fact of being male or female, or even as specific traits usually associated with one sex or the other.

Rather, we mean the rules, customs, beliefs, and expectations for being a man or woman, as well as the inherent inequities of power and privilege usually associated with these practices—what are often called “gender norms.”

Traditional norms of masculinity are understood as a combination of strength, aggression, emotional toughness, dominance, and sexual prowess.

Traditional femininity is usually considered to be a combination of the “three Ds” of being desirable, deferential, and dependent.

Both of these vary in important ways among racial and ethnic groups; nonetheless, key features seem remarkably common across very different subcultures. This may be because while biological sex is a physical fact of bodies, gender norms are cultural and are learned from childhood onward.

In fact, learning how to “do” manhood or womanhood and be recognized as a masculine young man or a feminine young woman may be the central rite of passage (and developmental task) of adolescence.

This can be especially true during what some experts call the “gender intensification” years of late adolescence and early adulthood, when interest in traditional gender norms accelerates and belief in them starts to solidify.

This awareness of gender norms grows because there is an increased expectation from the young person’s environment (i.e., family, community, and society) for them to behave according to traditional gender norm standards.

As the young person moves from adolescence to early adulthood, they experience increasing pressures and expectations that they will conform to gender norms.

The “Man Box”

“We’re in this box, and in order to be in that box, you have to be strong, you have to be tough, you have to have lots of girls, you gotta have money, you have to be a player or a pimp, you gotta to be in control, you have to dominate other men, and if you are not any of those things, then people call you soft or weak or a p*ssy or a chump or a f*ggot and nobody wants to be any of those things. So everybody stays inside the box.”

—Byron Hurt
“Beyond Beats and Rhymes”
Decades of research have now established that when young men and women internalize rigid ideals for femininity and masculinity, they have markedly lower life outcomes in a cluster of related areas that include physical and mental health, intimate relationships, education, and economic empowerment.

Moreover, it is now recognized that gender norms also impact the systems serving young people—schools, health care, religious institutions, juvenile justice—because many of those in them have internalized the same rigid ideas for masculinity and femininity and tend to expect and reward specific kinds of masculinity in boys and femininity in girls.

This is not to say that gender norms explain everything—social issues are complex and multi-faceted—but rather that they would explain a great deal, if only they could be integrated into funding and programmatic priorities.

Yet despite years of research, US public policy, programming, and funding still mostly overlook gender norms, silo them as an issue only relevant for women or transgender people, or disconnect them from core concerns like race and class.

Major international donor institutions like CARE, UNFPA (United National Population Fund), UNAIDS (United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS), and WHO (World Health Organization) have all acted, implementing new initiatives that challenge rigid gender norms and the inequities they cause.

For instance, USAID (US Agency for International Development) no longer funds new programs that lack a strong gender focus. PEPFAR (US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) has made masculinity one of its top three priorities. And the World Bank has begun an extensive and highly public effort to pull gender norms through its equity work worldwide.

But in this area, US funding has tended to lag behind. The authors hope that this paper will be part of an overdue dialogue between researchers and practitioners that can begin moving an intersectional understanding of race and gender to the center of funding debates.
After considering several options, The Simmons Foundation settled on a multi-year, multi-phase approach that would address the initiative’s goals in-depth. In Phase I, the Foundation would first make sure that its own staff and board could first walk the walk before they asked grantees to engage in this work. Accordingly, they hosted a gender norms training for the staff and then for their board of directors.

In Phase 2, an online survey instrument was developed by TrueChild, approved by The Simmons Foundation, and disseminated to grantees. The survey was entirely anonymous, and while participation was encouraged, it was neither required nor tracked by The Simmons Foundation.

Selected Findings from an Initial Survey of The Simmons Foundation Grantees

A. Gender Norms

74% of grantees saw the need for a gender norms lens in their work (only 7% did not).

B. Gender Equity

Only a third (31%) of grantees felt that gender equity was integrated into their programming.

C. LGBTQ Issues

About a third (31%) said LGBTQ issues were integrated into their programming.
The Simmons Foundation believes in building the freedom and capacity make a change, and race AND gender responsive funding is central to that work.
Amanda Cloud
CEO, The Simmons Foundation

Based on the results and analysis of this data, the Foundation then hosted a half-day in-person Gender 101 workshop for grantee CEOs, followed by an online webinar for staff. Both trainings provided grantees with a basic introduction to the key terms, concepts, and research findings around gender and intersectionality.

In addition, LGBTQ issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender nonconforming were also integrated into the training. Finally, to ensure no grantee was left behind, the trainings were designed to accommodate differing levels of familiarity with the material and assumed no advance knowledge or expertise.

Grantee CEOs were encouraged to self-select according to their interest and motivation—attendance was not required nor was it tracked by the Foundation (in fact, The Simmons Foundation staff left the presentation as soon as speaker introductions were completed so as not to impede an honest exchange).

In Phase 2, CEOs were invited to opt-in to a core group interested in doing a “deeper dive” into gender and intersectionality. These organizations would receive a basic assessment to determine their needs, organizational capacity to do the work, and any specific challenges they might face. It was initially hoped that five or 10 grantees would self-select in—more than a dozen eventually did so.

In Phase 3, TrueChild began to do in-depth work with these grantees, which is still ongoing. It is hoped that as these organizations integrate a more race- and gender-informed approach into their organizational “DNA,” they will become a core of grantees that can provide thought-leadership to others, serving as an example while also providing a ready repository for guidance and advice so the work is sustainable.

The ultimate objective of this project is not just to train individuals, but also to help ignite long-term structural change in organizations so they develop gender-informed ways of fulfilling their missions.

This project is still in Phase 3, and the Foundation are still learning from our grantee partners. However, some lessons have already become clear.
Some Preliminary Findings

First, as expected, grantee organizations have very different needs when it comes to gender and intersectionality. Some need “Gender Audits” of their websites and materials. They are at the very first steps of addressing gender and see such Audits as a way to provide a “roadmap” of where they are and where they can improve.

Others are wrestling with the special challenges of LGBTQ youth, especially those who are transitioning or those who identity as non-binary. This has been a particular concern for those organizations providing homelessness services and youth development. Much of this work focuses on both updating policies and doing diversity and sensitivity training with staff.

Other grantees, especially larger institutions with extensive workforces, are grappling with fundamental issues of gender equity. How do we create inclusive workplaces that help people become more aware of the unconscious biases we all bring with us when it comes to race, class, sex, ethnicity or gender? How do we create diverse environments when staff have differing backgrounds and may have very different ideas of what constitutes a microaggression or equitable treatment of a coworker?

Second, grantees have very different areas of focus. This can dramatically shift the kind of work they see themselves wanting or needing to do around gender. It also appears that organizations in an issue area are most likely to be able to provide thought-leadership and guidance to others within the same issue area.

For instance, among the selected “deep dive” organizations are groups focused on such diverse areas as domestic violence, immigration, youth services, homelessness, and education. It is less likely that an immigration group is going to serve as an example for a group doing music therapy, or be able to provide them with guidance, than another immigration group.

Our work around gender norms has helped us develop better strategies for addressing disproportionality by ensuring we use a race/gender lens. It has helped spur an intense internal dialogue on basic gender equity.

Sarah R. Guidry
Executive Director, Earl Carl Institute for Legal & Social Policy
The Thurgood Marshall School of Law
As noted earlier, this report was developed specifically to shift the dialogue around gender and intersectionality by sharing what the Foundation knows, what the Foundation has learned, and the challenges the Foundation has faced.

The Simmons Foundation believes deeply in funders using their experiences to help inform the field, so philanthropy as a whole improves and grows. That’s why it has invested not only in developing and disseminating this white paper, but in presenting at a series of workshops at philanthropic conferences around the country.

To this end, the Foundation is very interested in hearing from other funders doing similar work or contemplating it in the near future so the Foundation can learn from them—as well as from those funders interested in collaborating to promote a more intersectional approach to race and gender in the field of philanthropy.
Seven Steps Funders Can Take

WITHIN YOUR FOUNDATION

1. Consider a Gender Audit© of the organization’s website and other communications.

2. Host a Race- & Gender-Responsive Funding 101 presentation to educate your staff and/or board.

WITH FUNDING PEERS

3. Elevate awareness by hosting a local convening on race and gender norms.

4. Organize a workshop on the impact of gender norms at a local funders conference.

WITH GRANTEES

5. Ask grantees how gender norms affect their population during site visits and meetings.

6. Fund the development of curricula that help youth think critically about gender norms.

7. Commission capacity building that helps grantees connect gender and race into their work.