



# CARRYING THE WEIGHT, LEADING THE CHANGE



*How Women of Color  
Grassroots Leaders  
Navigate Inequities While  
Driving Solutions.*



UMass  
Boston



Center for Women in  
Politics and Public Policy



BOSTON **WOMEN'S** FUND

## WRITTEN BY:

**Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson**  
**Jessica Martin**  
**Christa Kelleher**  
**Amrith Fernandes Prabhu**  
**Adanna Kalejaye**  
**Sneha Gantla**  
**Aisha Woodruff**

## IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

### **Boston Women's Fund**

Boston Women's Fund (BWF) invests in women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals leading grassroots organizations working toward racial, economic, social, and gender justice. Founded in 1984 by progressive women, BWF was the first women's foundation in Massachusetts and is one of the oldest nonprofit women's foundations in the nation. Through forward-thinking grantmaking practices, BWF predominantly supports Black and Brown leaders from communities persistently excluded from philanthropy, including LGBTQIA+, people of color, immigrant, refugee, disabled, low-income, and elderly communities. To date, BWF has granted more than \$8.4 million in over 420 grant awards. Learn more at [www.bostonwomensfund.org](http://www.bostonwomensfund.org).

### **Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, UMass Boston**

The Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy (CWPPP), based at the McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston aims to promote diverse women's leadership to achieve more just, equitable, and responsive public and institutional policies and meaningful inclusion. It does this through its Gender, Leadership, and Public Policy (GLPP) graduate certificate and MPA-GLPP track programs; summer leadership academy; applied research on electoral representation and intersectional public policy analysis, relating to the economic, health and social well-being of women and families; and public convenings and fellowship programs that mobilize community and women's political participation. In all its work, CWPPP's approach is anti-racist as the center seeks to tackle critical issues affecting women's lives through an intersectional lens of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and other identities.

### **Jessica Martin, Research Consultant**

Jessica Martin is an independent research consultant who partners with foundations and nonprofit organizations to use data, storytelling, and community-centered research to inform more equitable decision-making. Her work bridges quantitative analysis and qualitative insight, translating complex information into narratives that help organizations better understand the communities they live in and serve. She brings professional experience across government, philanthropy, and think tanks, where she has led projects in policy analysis, data management, and strategic operations.

*This report was made possible  
with generous support from*

**Boston Women's Fund and an Anonymous Donor**

Boston Women's Fund commissioned quantitative research by Jessica Martin and qualitative research by the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston (CWPPP). We hold endless gratitude for Jessica Martin and CWPPP for their research and collaboration.

The authors express sincere appreciation to all who so kindly and generously offered their valuable time, organizational and leadership expertise, and candid insights as focus group and interview participants. This report would not be possible without them.

We would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions to this report:

BWF PROJECT COMMITTEE:

**Natanja Craig Oquendo, Aditi Dholakia, Aisha Woodruff,  
and Sneha Gantla**

FOCUS ON FUNDERS SUPPORT:

**Debbie Stenoien**

REPORT DESIGN:

**Chris Antonellis, Antonellis Design**

REVIEW:

**Sheryl Seller**

**We dedicate *Carrying the Weight, Leading the Change* to the countless grassroots leaders who carry their communities with courage, care, and conviction, often without recognition, and too often without resources.**

They are visionaries, organizers, healers, and builders. They are the reason our communities survive and the reason they thrive.

**This report is offered in service of deeper understanding, stronger collaboration, and lasting change.**

It is both a reflection and a call to fund differently, to listen more deeply, and to walk alongside those who are already leading the way.

## A JOINT LETTER FROM THE BOSTON WOMEN'S FUND AND UMASS BOSTON'S CENTER FOR WOMEN IN POLITICS & PUBLIC POLICY

In early 2024, we launched *Carrying the Weight, Leading the Change* with clarity, purpose, and resolve. This collaborative report is rooted in an intersectional, anti-racist approach to understanding Greater Boston's grassroots ecosystem — particularly for BIPOC women and gender-expansive leaders who have long sustained their communities with limited resources and limitless resilience.

As 2025 unfolded amid regressive federal policies and deepening inequities, our communities once again faced, and continue to face today, harm from decisions made without their input. These are not isolated shocks; they are the ongoing effects of systems designed to exclude. What is new is how we choose to respond, together.

We created this project not just to listen, but to amplify. Not just to name challenges, but to fuel solutions. Some called the COVID-19 pandemic a turning point. It exposed how fragile our systems were for communities already bearing inequities, and it forced philanthropy to act at scale. Others saw the racial reckoning following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many others as another critical moment. In those times, philanthropy moved quickly and spoke boldly. But as the headlines faded, so did the funding — and with it, the collective action our communities deserved. That retreat is exactly why this project exists.

At the Boston Women's Fund, we've heard and felt these truths time and again, carried by grassroots leaders whose lived experience is expertise. At the Center for Women in Politics & Public Policy, we knew these insights needed to be captured as formal, rigorous, undeniable evidence. Lived realities are not anecdotes; they are facts. And facts must drive the policies and investments that shape our futures.

*Carrying the Weight, Leading the Change* brings these commitments together. It demonstrates that the people closest to inequity are also closest to the solutions, and it offers philanthropy a roadmap for showing up differently: staying when the spotlight fades, funding leadership that already exists, building trust, and resourcing change that lasts.

This report is not just a reflection — it is an invitation. We call on philanthropy, institutions, and all allies to join us in partnership, accountability, and sustained action so that every community in Greater Boston can thrive.

With urgency and hope,

**Natanja Craig Oquendo**  
*CEO, Boston Women's Fund*

**Dr. Laurie Nsiah-Jefferson**  
*Director, Center for Women in Politics & Public Policy, UMass Boston*

**6 | OVERVIEW**

**12 | A SNAPSHOT OF GREATER BOSTON'S WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**14 | VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE**

**15 Inherited Injustices**

**19 Scarce Resources, Unmet Needs, Invisible Impact**

**25 Leadership Expectations & Consequences**

**31 Organizational Capacity, Growth, and Gaps**

**34 | FOCUS ON FUNDERS**

**36 | RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOLD, EQUITABLE FUNDING**

# OVERVIEW



**At the heart of this report is a simple truth: women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color are holding communities together. They are visionaries, healers, and organizers. They are the ones who show up first in moments of crisis, who stretch scarce resources to meet urgent needs, and who carry their communities with love and resilience.**

And yet, these same leaders are too often overlooked, undervalued, and underfunded. Their organizations often work with less and give the most. Their wisdom and lived experience rarely shape the decisions that most affect their communities.

Boston Women's Fund aims to shift that narrative through this report. *Carrying the Weight, Leading the Change* offers both the numbers and stories behind the numbers to name the inequities, to honor the brilliance of these leaders, and to call funders, policymakers, and partners into a different way of resourcing community power.

## How We Did This Work

Our starting point was data: assessing the current state of well-being for women, girls, and gender-expansive people of color and the organizations led by and for them. But we knew the existing data would only tell part of the story. Small, grassroots organizations and the populations they serve are frequently invisible in large datasets.

To address this, Boston Women’s Fund (BWF) partnered with the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston (CWPPP). Researchers conducted focus groups and interviews with 25 women and gender-expansive grassroots organization leaders, the vast majority of whom are BIPOC, between August 2024 and January 2025. These conversations gave us insight into unmet community needs, the growth and change organizations have experienced since 2020, the personal and professional well-being of the leaders, their relationships with funders, and the systemic challenges that shape their work. Study participants also shared the burnout and challenges they’ve faced as a result of prolonged inequities and what sustains them in their work as they navigate these persistent challenges. Throughout the report, for simplicity, we use the terms “grassroots leaders,” “leaders,” and “study participants” interchangeably to represent leaders of grassroots organizations.

Alongside this work, BWF also partnered with local funders who offered candid perspectives on current philanthropic practices. Their input helped us better understand how philanthropy is showing up, and where it continues to fall short, in supporting grassroots leadership.

### NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

We use the term **BIPOC** to mean *Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/e, AAPI, and other communities of color who have been historically and persistently excluded from social, political, and economic power.*

We use the term **GENDER-EXPANSIVE** to mean *gender-nonconforming, genderfluid, nonbinary, genderqueer, transfeminine, agender, and all trans-identified people.*

## What Defines a Grassroots Organization?

Grassroots organizations are not defined by strict criteria but by how they work and whom they serve. In general, they are:

- **Constituency-led and community-driven:** Founded and led by people directly affected by the issues they address.
- **Systems-focused:** Work to advance social justice through advocacy, organizing, and direct services.
- **Locally-focused and multi-service:** Serve specific neighborhoods or identity-based communities, and often address intersecting needs as opposed to a single issue.
- **Smaller-scale:** Operate with limited staff and budgets — often under \$500K, though up to \$1 million — and rely heavily on volunteers.

Because there is no standard definition, measuring grassroots organizations’ scale and impact is challenging. For simplicity, **this report defines grassroots organizations as those with annual budgets under \$1 million.**

*For more information, please see our Technical Appendix at [www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight](http://www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight)*

## What We Found

The picture of Greater Boston that emerged from our work is stark and untenable. Our data demonstrates how entrenched inequities, sector barriers, and thin resources come together to hamper grassroots efforts for systemic change. Our qualitative data shows how grassroots organizations' sustainability is closely enmeshed with leaders' well-being, and that a lack of investment in one area creates inequities in the other.

Key findings:

- **Very few nonprofits explicitly serve women and girls of color.** Less than half of one percent of Greater Boston nonprofits focus on women and girls of color — these organizations also receive an even smaller share of the funding pie.
- **Philanthropic funding is uneven and highly concentrated.** More than 60% of philanthropic support for women and girls in Greater Boston flows to just five organizations — none of which explicitly serve women of color. Additionally, organizations led by and primarily serving women and girls of color operate with less revenue than other nonprofit organizations.
- **Grassroots organizations meet vital community needs.** Where larger institutions fall short, grassroots organizations are able to provide culturally relevant care including essential services, translation, healthcare, and safe spaces. Yet, these organizations operate with budgets under \$1 million, small staffs, and limited access to major funders and institutions.
- **Philanthropic practices hamper grassroots organizations.** Funding decisions are often driven by exclusive networks and rigid metrics that do not capture the incremental, long-term systems change that these leaders are advancing. These practices strain grassroots organizations as they are excluded from resources and the complex impacts of their work are unrecognized.
- **Grassroots organizations' leaders incur physical, mental, and relational costs.** To navigate persistent underfunding and continued community needs, these leaders step up to fill in the gaps. Many experience burnout as their physical and mental health suffers, personal relationships are affected, and professional capacities are depleted.
- **Grassroots organizations and leaders' sustainability is tenuous.** Though grassroots organizations' leaders spoke of coping through individual strategies and deep ties to community, they called out the need for structural changes to systems and organizational policies, as well as culturally reimagining leadership within the nonprofit sector.

These findings point to an uncomfortable reality — without explicit and sustained commitment to racial and gender justice, philanthropic practices recreate inequities that the sector claims to solve. Greater Boston's grassroots organizations and their leaders of color are hanging on by tattered threads. While leaders find ways to cope, relying on them to continue doing so without purposeful investments from funders is unjust and untenable.

## An Invitation

This report is not the conclusion of our work, but the beginning of a broader conversation. We invite you, foundations, donors, and allies alike, to see this as both a mirror and a call to action: a mirror reflecting the realities facing women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color, and a call to act together in support of solutions. Imagine what could be if we truly valued, supported, and trusted the leadership of BIPOC women and gender-expansive people at the grassroots level.



### OUR CORE PRINCIPLES GUIDE US:

- **We are who we serve.** BWF's and CWPPP's staff, identities, and experiences reflect the inequities and trends named in this report.
  - **Funders must organize with one another.** Funders and institutions must not only center grassroots leaders in their practices but also commit to collective accountability and grassroots support.
  - **Funders must listen to leaders.** At the end of this report, we offer funders a set of recommendations rooted in the voices of grassroots leaders.
  - **We all must center love and humanity.** A framework of radical love and healing is essential for building systems that truly sustain leaders and their communities.
-

## Our Research Approach: Intersectional & Anti-Racist

This report takes an intersectional, anti-racist approach<sup>1</sup> to understanding the systems and structures that shape the experiences of grassroots leaders, their organizations, and the communities they serve. Grounded in mixed methods, the study connects statistics with narratives of lived experiences to center the perspectives of women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color.

### NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

**INTERSECTIONALITY** is the concept that multiple identities (such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, ability, socioeconomic status) interact with one another within a context of connected systems and structures of power (like laws, policies, and social norms), creating unique experiences of inequity and discrimination. These experiences are not simply the sum of each identity but a result of their specific intersection.<sup>2</sup>

### Qualitative Research: Leaders' Lived Experiences

The qualitative component focused on hearing directly from grassroots leaders about the conditions shaping their work, communities, and personal well-being. The women of color-led research team from UMass Boston's CWPPP conducted interviews and four focus groups with 25 women and gender-expansive individuals, the vast majority of whom are BIPOC, leading grassroots organizations across Greater Boston between August 2024 and January 2025. These conversations explored unmet community needs, organizational health, leader well-being, and relationships with philanthropy. In this report, for simplicity, we use the terms "grassroots leaders," "leaders," and "study participants" interchangeably to represent leaders of grassroots organizations.

The team aimed to include study participants leading organizations in Greater Boston and considered several organizational traits to identify potential leaders of women-led, BIPOC-led, and/or LGBTQ-led organizations, including: annual operating budgets, self-identified priority causes and populations, organizational focus, and/or emphasis on addressing the needs of female and gender-expansive populations. Most participants were persons of color leading small and medium sized organizations in the Greater Boston area (see [Technical Appendix](#) for more information).

Sessions were held in person and virtually to ensure accessibility. Because of the sensitive nature of these conversations, they were not recorded; instead, detailed notes were taken, including direct quotes and observations of group dynamics. The research team shared preliminary findings with participants to ensure their voices were represented accurately and authentically. The study was approved by UMass Boston's Institutional Review Board, and no identifying information is included in this report.

## Quantitative Analysis: Greater Boston by the Numbers

Quantitative analysis complements the qualitative research by situating leaders' experiences within broader regional and sectoral trends. To examine inequities affecting women, girls, and gender-expansive people of color in Greater Boston, the report draws on publicly available data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and existing research. It also analyzes Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data on charitable organizations to assess the landscape of nonprofits led by and serving these populations, adapting methodologies from The Women & Girls Index and Demographics via Candid.

## Limitations

Information on transgender women of color and gender-expansive people of color is limited in both the qualitative and quantitative data. Available datasets rarely capture the full diversity within racial and ethnic categories or provide intersectional measures of race, ethnicity, and gender identity.

In the nonprofit data, fiscally sponsored organizations and those filing tax form 990-N (as opposed to form 990 or 990-EZ) with annual revenue under \$50,000 are not included, leaving gaps in understanding many grassroots groups operating closest to community need.

For comprehensive documentation of all data sources, methodological procedures, and analytical frameworks, please see the Technical Appendix at [www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight](http://www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight).





Before delving into the unique challenges facing women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders in Greater Boston, it's vital to understand who they are and who they serve. The following snapshot offers a brief look at key demographics of Greater Boston's and the City of Boston's women and girls by age, race and ethnicity, place of birth, and gender identity.

This data is based primarily on original analysis, conducted by BWF's research consultant, of the American Community Survey datasets. We reference reports from other institutions in cases where our data sources could not capture particular populations.

The Greater Boston area, including Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk counties, is home to nearly 2.3 million women and girls, including nearly 345,000 who live in the City of Boston. The total population of Greater Boston and the City of Boston remained relatively steady from 2018-2023, with a one percent decline in Greater Boston and two percent increase in the City of Boston.<sup>3</sup>

# A Snapshot of Greater Boston's Women & Girls

**AGE:** More than half of Greater Boston's women are of prime working age, between 25 and 64 years old, but the fastest-growing population is women 65 years and older. Compared to the Greater Boston region, the City of Boston's population of girls and young women is declining at a faster rate.

FIGURE 1: Greater Boston's women & girls by age group, 2018-2023

	Share of Total Population	Change since 2018
Under 18 years	19%	-1.5%
18 to 24 years	10%	-1%
25 to 44 years	28%	+3%
45 to 64 years	26%	-3%
65 years and older	18%	+10.5%

FIGURE 2: Change in population of women under 35 years in the City of Boston, 2018-2023



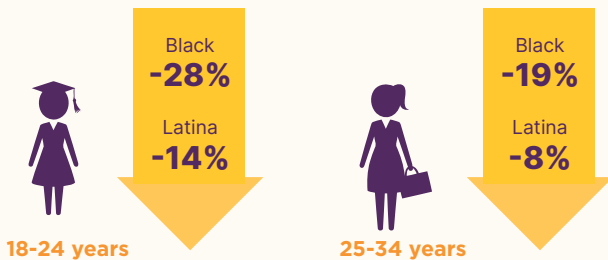
**RACE/ETHNICITY:** Women of color comprise nearly half of Greater Boston’s female population, and racial/ethnic diversity is increasing, led by growth among multiracial women and Alaska Native & Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander women. Compared to the Greater Boston region, the City of Boston’s population of Black women and Latinas is shrinking at a faster rate.

FIGURE 3: **Greater Boston’s women & girls by race/ ethnicity, 2018-2023**

	Share of Total Population	Change 2018-2023
White, non-Latina	55%	+12%
Latina	22%	-5%
<b>Black/ African American</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>-7%</b>
<b>Asian</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>+11%</b>
Multiracial	4%	+194%
Another Race*	18%	+32%

Source: \*Includes American Indian or Alaska Native & Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

FIGURE 4: **Change in population of Black women & Latinas under 35 years in the City of Boston, 2018-2023**



**CULTURAL DIVERSITY:** Asian women and Latinas are often lumped into a single demographic category, which obscures each group’s vast cultural and linguistic diversity.

FIGURE 5: **Cultural ancestry of Greater Boston’s Latinas, 2023**

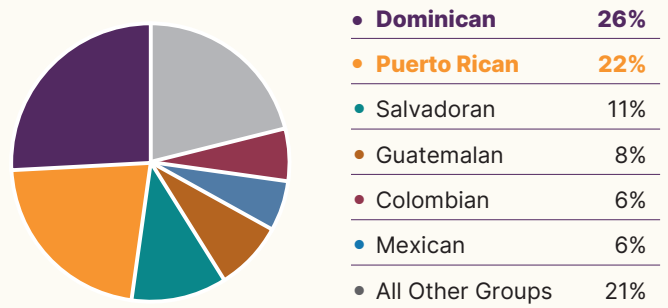
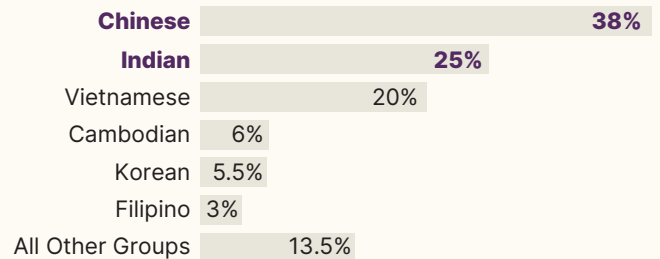


FIGURE 6: **Cultural ancestry of Greater Boston’s Asian women, 2023**



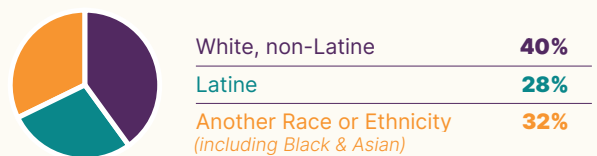
**TRANSGENDER & GENDER-EXPANSIVE PEOPLE:** While data for Greater Boston are limited, statewide, more than 62,000 adults (1% of the population) and 14,000 13- to 17-year-olds (3.3% of the population) identify as transgender, gender-expansive, or nonbinary.<sup>5</sup> Within the City of Boston, less than 1% of the adult population are transgender, and 60% of transgender people identify as BIPOC.<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 8: **Massachusetts’ gender-expansive adults by gender identity, 2022**



Source: The Williams Institute. (2022). How many adults and youth identify as transgender in the United States?

FIGURE 9: **City of Boston’s transgender population by race/ethnicity, 2019**



Source: Mather et al. (2019). Demographic characteristics and social determinants of health among Boston’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adult residents, 2010-2017.



# VOICES FROM

# THE FRONTLINE

## NOTE ON DATA SOURCES

Unless otherwise cited, all statistics presented in visuals or text form are derived from original analysis of publicly available datasets.

Statistics presented in *Inherited Injustice* primarily refer to conditions in Greater Boston, though in some cases data are only available at the statewide level or for the City of Boston.

In this analysis, we have made every effort to include data that represent the full and diverse population of our region. However, inequities in data collection and reporting mean that the experiences of many communities of color, including Indigenous people and Asian Americans, are undercounted or misrepresented—an omission that mirrors broader systemic inequities.

Finally, voices of leaders shared herein reflect only the experiences of grassroots organizations' women and gender-expansive leaders of color that participated in our focus groups and interviews.

## UNDERFUNDED, OVERBURDENED, AND TENUOUSLY SUSTAINED

To capture the state of grassroots organizations and leaders serving Greater Boston's women, girls, and gender-expansive people, we weave together statistics about the nonprofit sector with voices and experiences of women and gender-expansive individuals of color leading grassroots organizations. Read together, they show how systemic injustices and sector-level trends shape the challenges that women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color navigate while driving change at the frontlines of their communities.

In our conversations with study participants, it was clear that their lived experiences as women and gender-expansive people of color, and as leaders of grassroots organizations, are more than just individual anecdotes. Their experiences reflect crucial evidence of issues and challenges that are rarely reflected in sector-level data.

**Grassroots leaders' stories highlight what many of us already know — women and gender-expansive leaders of color carry a triple burden:** they live the daily realities of racial and gender inequities, lead work to address those inequities, and do so with far fewer resources than their white and male peers. Their lack of visibility, and exclusion from traditional philanthropic models, create additional inequities and reinforce power dynamics.

In turn, we see grassroots leaders, particularly BIPOC women and gender-expansive people, left with more than their fair share of work and fewer resources to meet community needs. Many face chronic overwork and burnout, while trying to sustain their organizations and fully serve their communities.

Addressing these inequities is not optional — it is essential for building a more just and resilient Greater Boston.



*“As leaders, we often find ourselves dealing with problems that systems and individuals created long before we were even born.”*

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

# INHERITED INJUSTICES

▶ Grassroots organizations that serve women, girls, and gender-expansive people of color are proximate witnesses and responders to a variety of systemic inequities. In Greater Boston, these include housing and childcare affordability, employment and earnings gaps, as well as mental and physical health challenges.

The inequities highlighted in this section are the outcomes of ongoing systemic injustices and should be viewed through the lens of systemic oppression.<sup>7</sup>

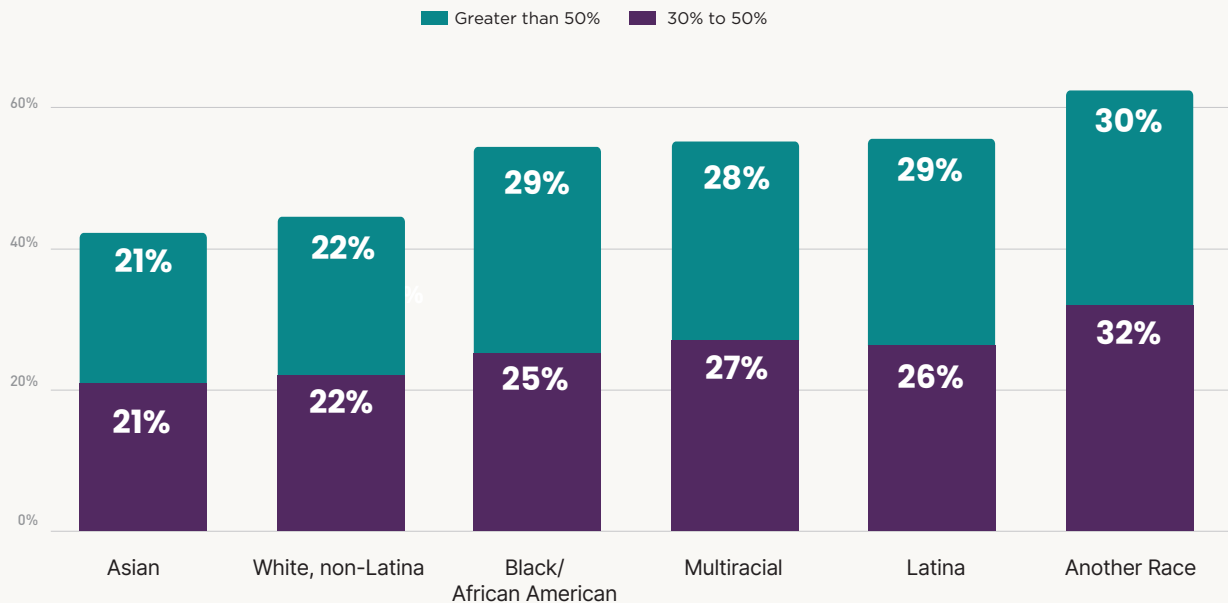


## Childcare, Housing, and Cost of Living

Greater Boston's high cost of living, while universally shared, disproportionately burdens women of color and their families.

- Child care costs in the region are the nation's highest<sup>8</sup> — up to \$30,000 annually — and can consume more than half the income of a single mother with children<sup>9</sup> and is nearly equal to the median earnings of Black women and Latinas (Figure 12).<sup>10</sup>
- Housing costs are prohibitively expensive. A household has to earn at least \$127K annually to afford the average rent in Metro Boston.<sup>11</sup> By extension, nearly one-in-three Black, Latina, and multiracial women spend more than half their income on rent (Figure 10). Alarming, homelessness is rising fastest among Greater Boston's women, up 28 percent from 2022 to 2023.<sup>12</sup>
- High and rising food and energy costs,<sup>13</sup> coupled with cuts to SNAP food assistance,<sup>14</sup> are having nationwide impacts across many communities. While there are more white individuals receiving SNAP assistance, the impact of the program's cuts are disproportionately felt by single mothers of color. In Greater Boston, as of 2023, more than half of Asian single mothers, nearly 60% of Black single mothers, and 65% of Latina single mothers rely on SNAP assistance for their families compared to 34% of white single mothers.<sup>15</sup>

FIGURE 10: **Rent consumes more than half of household income for many women of color**  
Share of Greater Boston women paying more than 30% of income toward rent by race/ethnicity, 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Sample (ACS PUMS), 2019–2023 5-year Estimates.

## Education, Employment, and Earnings

Gaps in educational access and achievement persist, while inequitable employment opportunities lead to greater economic fragility for Greater Boston’s women of color.

- One result of high early education and child care costs is inequitable access to early childhood education: just 45% of Latina 3- and 4-year-old girls are enrolled in nursery school, pre-school, or pre-K compared to 67% of white 3- and 4-year-old girls.<sup>16</sup>
- Punitive school discipline policies disproportionately target girls of color.<sup>17</sup> Based on statewide disciplinary incidents involving girls in grades 6 through 12, although Black girls make up just 10% of the female student population, they account for 23% of all removals and expulsions. Latina girls represent 25% of female students but 47% of removals. By contrast, white girls comprise 52% of female students and 23% of removals.<sup>18</sup>
- Just one-in-three Black women and one-in-five Latina women have a Bachelor’s degree or higher compared to more than half of white women.<sup>19</sup>
- Women of color are disproportionately employed in low-paying occupations (Figure 11),<sup>20</sup> driving an earnings gap where Black and Latina women earn roughly half as much as white women (Figure 12).
- Financial stability in Greater Boston is out-of-reach for the majority of Black and Latina women. Sixty percent of Black and Latina women are economically insecure, compared to 37% of white, non-Latina women. While these women earn more than poverty wages, their pay is not enough to achieve economic security in Greater Boston.<sup>21</sup>

FIGURE 11: **Women of color disproportionately hold lower-paying jobs**

Women of color as a share of workforce & median earnings by occupation, Greater Boston, 2023



### Healthcare Support

**64%** of Workforce

**\$28K** Median Earnings



### Personal Care & Services

**44%** of Workforce

**\$25K** Median Earnings



### Building & Grounds Cleaning & Maintenance

**39%** of workforce

**\$22K** Median Earnings



### Management & Business

**12%** of Workforce

**\$99K** Median Earnings



### Computer, Science & Engineering

**14%** of Workforce

**\$95K** Median Earnings

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019–2023 5-year estimates.

FIGURE 12: **The median earnings for most women of color is roughly half that for white women**

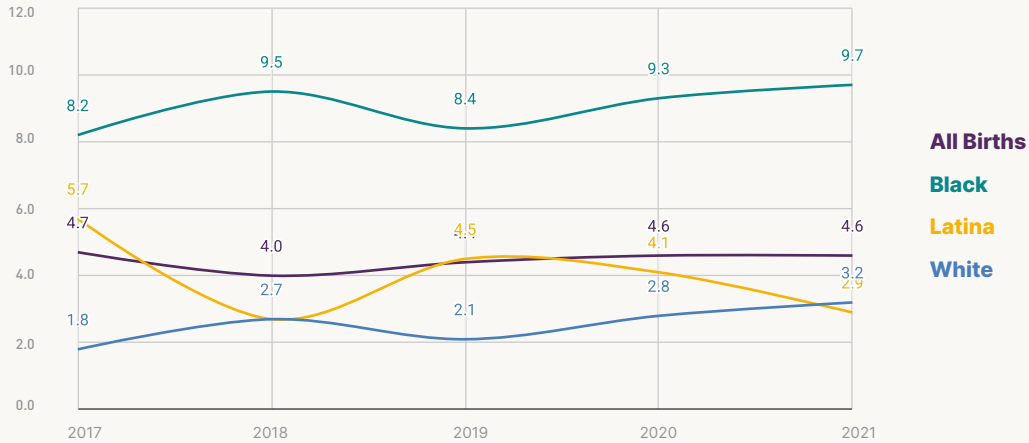
Women’s median earnings by race/ethnicity, Greater Boston, 2023



Source: US Census Bureau American Community Survey 2019–2023 5-year PUMS

**FIGURE 13: The infant mortality rate for babies born to Boston’s Black birthing people is twice the rate of all other births**

Infant mortality rate by birthing person race/ethnicity (deaths per 1,000 live births) City of Boston, 2017-2021



Source: Boston Public Health Commission

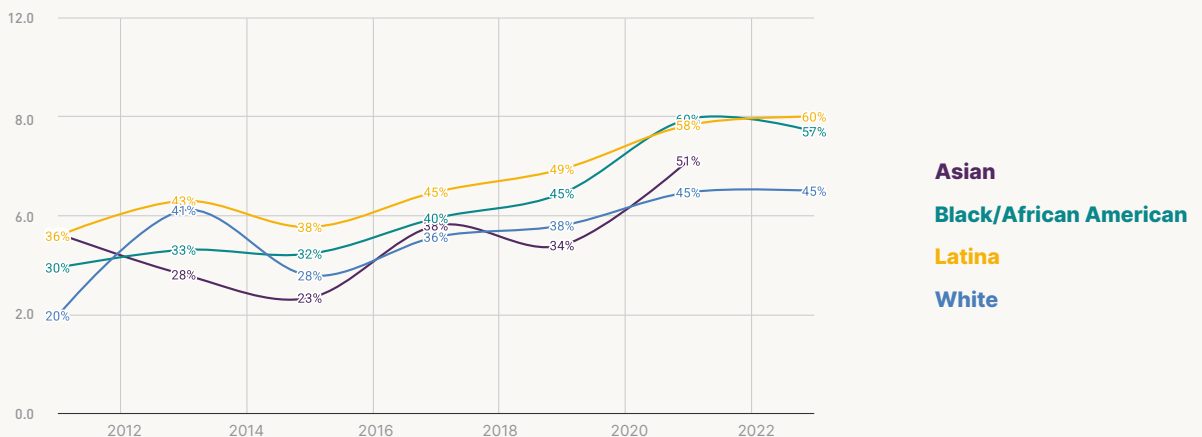
## Birth Outcomes, Mental Health, and Longevity

Women and girls of color bear the burden of systemic health inequities in the form of compromised physical and mental health and well-being.

- The City of Boston’s Black birthing people are most likely to give birth to low-birthweight babies, and the infant mortality rate of Black infants is more than double the citywide average (Figure 13).<sup>22</sup>
- Mental health plummeted for all teens in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, but especially for Boston’s Black and Latina girls who report the highest rates of persistent sadness, self-harm, and emergency mental health treatment (Figure 14).<sup>23</sup>
- These mental health trends are mirrored in the adult population, with Black and Latina adults reporting the highest rates of persistent sadness, and more than one-in-five women of color saying they lack an emotional support network.<sup>24</sup>
- While COVID-19 increased mortality across the board, Boston’s Black women consistently have the highest rates of premature death, nearly 1.5 times the citywide average for all women.<sup>25</sup>

**FIGURE 14: Mental health has worsened for Boston’s teen girls, especially Black and Latina girls**

Share of Boston high school girls reporting persistent sadness by race/ethnicity, 2012-2023



Source: Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Youth Risk Factor Surveillance System. No data were reported for Asian females in 2023.



*"We are attempting to create solutions within a system that was never designed for us to work in, while still operating within that very system."*

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

## VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

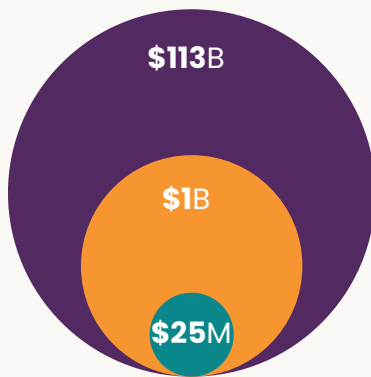
# SCARCE RESOURCES, UNMET NEEDS, INVISIBLE IMPACT

▶ While home to a vast network of well-funded nonprofits, Greater Boston has few organizations explicitly dedicated to meeting the needs of BIPOC women, girls, and gender-expansive people. Grassroots organizations led by BIPOC women and gender-expansive people play a vital role in addressing this gap, yet they remain undersupported by philanthropy. Burdened by a lack of resources, many needs go unmet as BIPOC grassroots leaders work to address the very inequities that also hold them back.



**FIGURE 15: Organizations serving women and girls of color received just \$25M of more than \$112B going to Greater Boston nonprofits**

*Aggregate revenue of Greater Boston nonprofit organizations, 2023*



*Source: Author's analysis of IRS tax filing data, Women & Girls Index 2024*

## Funding Inequities in Greater Boston

Our analysis of the nonprofit sector in Greater Boston shows clear funding inequities for grassroots organizations serving women, girls, and gender-expansive people, and more pronounced for organizations serving BIPOC women, girls, and gender-expansive people. As a result, women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color deal with chronic underfunding while the community's needs outpace the flow of money. As one grassroots leader from our study explained, "there's a lot to do and there's the issue of financial restraint which impacts the program and expansion."

Funding inequities for organizations that serve women, girls, and gender-expansive folks are stark in Greater Boston. The inequities are further magnified for organizations led by, and/or specifically focused on, women, girls, and gender-expansive people of color.

- Of Greater Boston's \$112 billion in total nonprofit revenue, only \$1 billion went toward women- and girls-serving organizations. Meanwhile, just \$25 million reached groups specifically focused on women and girls of color (Figure 15).<sup>30</sup>

## How did we identify organizations as led by or serving women & girls of color?

Our analysis of the nonprofit sector is based on charitable organizations listed in the IRS Business Master File located in Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth, and Suffolk counties with tax data filed within the calendar years of 2018 through 2023.

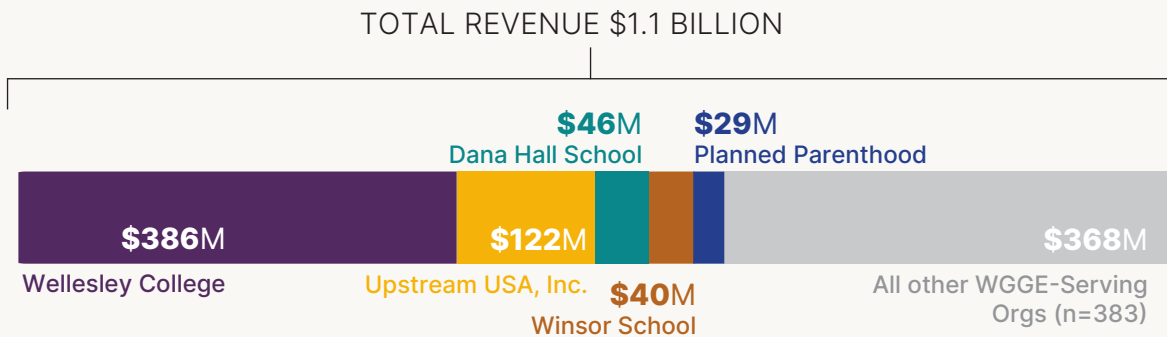
Organizations were then classified as women- and girls-serving or gender-focused based on classification defined in the Women & Girls Index<sup>27</sup> and the LGBTQ+ Index<sup>28</sup> developed by Indiana University.

Nonprofit leader demographics are based on self-reported data from Demographics via Candid.<sup>29</sup> In addition, we cross-referenced the initial list against specific IRS NTEE activity codes and conducted keyword searches of organization names, missions, and program documentation in 990 forms related to women, girls, and specific racial/ethnic groups.

***For more information on our methodology, please see our online Technical Appendix available at [www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight](http://www.bostonwomensfund.org/carryingtheweight)***

**FIGURE 16: Five organizations account for more than 60% of revenue to women and girls-serving organizations**

*Top five Greater Boston women & girls-serving organizations by revenue, 2023*

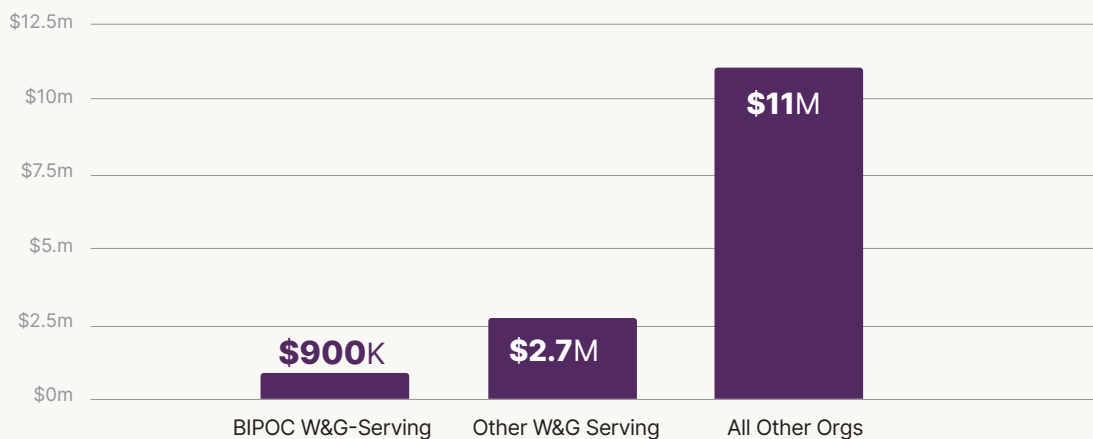


Source: Author's analysis of IRS tax filing data, Women & Girls Index 2024

- Five large institutions, Wellesley College, Upstream USA, Dana Hall School, Winsor School, and Planned Parenthood, account for more than 60% of total aggregate revenue for all women and girls serving organizations and absorb nearly half of donations (Figure 16).
- Organizations serving women and girls of color have annual revenues of less than \$1 million, compared to \$2.7 million for other women's and girls' groups (Figure 17).
- Among grassroots organizations with less than \$1 million in annual revenues, those led by women of color had the lowest average revenue, just over \$300,000.

**FIGURE 17: Organizations serving women and girls of color operate with a fraction of the revenue of other organizations**

*Per capita annual revenue of Greater Boston nonprofits by population served, 2023*



Source: Author's analysis of IRS tax filing data, Women & Girls Index 2024

## Pressing Unmet Needs

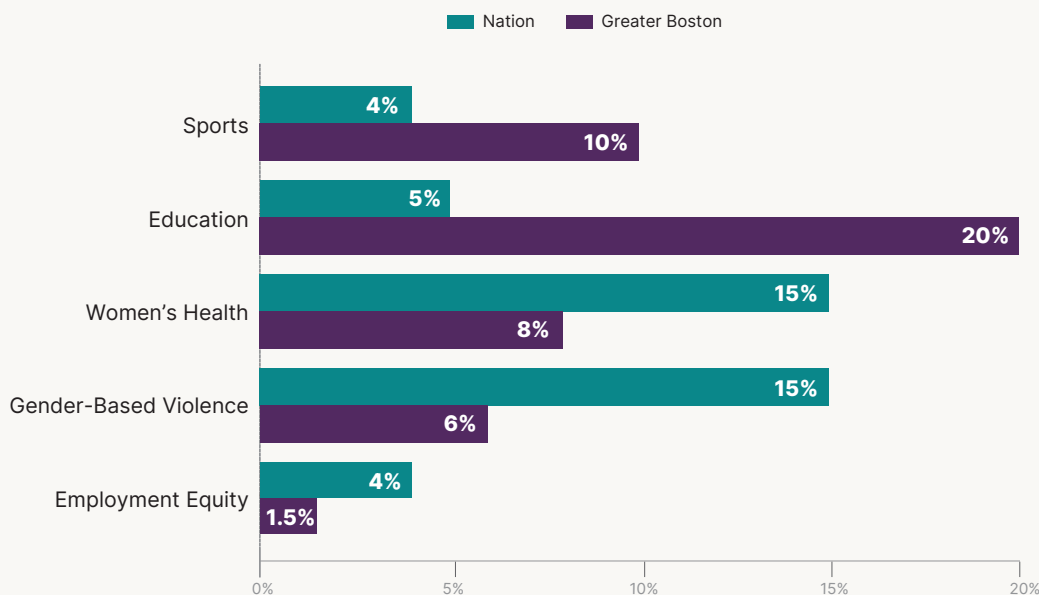
Despite women and girls of color making up nearly 20% of the total population, only 0.2% of Greater Boston’s nonprofits explicitly serve them.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, funding areas that receive support are mismatched with the needs that women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color see in their communities. Compared nationally, more of Greater Boston’s nonprofits serving women and girls are concentrated in single-sex education and girls’ sports, while fewer are addressing women’s health care needs, gender-based employment equity, or support for survivors of violence (Figure 18).

In our focus groups and interviews with women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color, a wide range of topics surfaced when they described their communities’ unmet needs:

- Affordable housing
- Mental health services
- Reproductive health care
- Housing support for survivors of domestic violence/sexual assault.
- Domestic violence prevention
- Financial literacy
- Representative leadership
- Culturally and linguistically competent services (especially in Latine and Asian communities)

As one leader serving the Latine community explained, “This community is the fastest growing in the U.S., but faces significant challenges because services are predominantly provided in English.” Others noted how translation gaps left them personally accompanying clients as they accessed services.

FIGURE 18: **Greater Boston’s nonprofit ecosystem is misaligned to the needs of women and girls of color**  
*Women- & girls-serving organizations by select over- & under-represented sector, Greater Boston vs U.S., 2023*



Source: Author's analysis of IRS tax filing data, Women & Girls Index 2024

## Invisible Impact & The Burden of Proof in Philanthropy

Standard philanthropic practices often fail to align with the realities of grassroots work, namely, funders' heavy reliance on quantitative data. Our focus groups and interviews with women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color illuminated the following:

**The detailed information foundations often require from grassroots organizations tends to examine characteristics that don't capture grassroots organizations' full impact in their communities.** Yet meeting such requirements takes significant time and effort for small teams.

**Single-cycle or short-term funding and the timeframe of requested data are often misaligned with the long-term, incremental progress that defines transformational grassroots change.** The change grassroots leaders are advancing — building belonging, shifting culture, restoring dignity — takes years, not months. As one leader put it: “The system was never designed for us.”

One leader described the frustration of seeing requested data tell one story while lived experience tells another: “There is some contrast between what is reported and what is actually happening...like youth receive assistance like housing, and then they are back living outside again.” In this case, a funder report may show positive impact of assistance, but the full picture of people's experiences is not captured.

Grassroots leaders are not failing to measure their impact — philanthropy is failing to recognize it. As one leader explained, “They [grassroots organizations] make a lot of impact, but funders want it measured in ways that don't match the reality.” Leaders generally agreed that measurement practices need to be more flexible and accept anecdotal evidence and lived experiences as proof of success.

**Entire populations and countless organizations are invisible to funders and policymakers because they are not included in most mainstream data collection.** Some grassroots leaders linked their communities' unmet needs to the lack of valuable data. Many marginalized individuals, from transgender women, to undocumented women, to entire Asian-American communities, remain uncounted and/or are harmed when the broad cultural diversity within their communities is simplified to a single box.



*“It's essential for funders to respect anecdotal evidence and acknowledge lived experiences as equally valid.”*

– STUDY PARTICIPANT



***“Who gets the relationship with the funder gets the funds...with the network comes everything.”***

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

## **Inclusive Language, Exclusive Practices**

BIPOC women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders’ experiences show that, for many, gaining philanthropic funding is less about impact and more about whom you know. As one leader put it, “who gets the relationship with the funder gets the funds.”

Several leaders described feeling excluded from networks that prioritize established organizations. One reflected on the “difficulty of getting support for new initiatives due to [philanthropy’s] cliquish nature, making it hard to gain traction without established connections.” Others noted how this exclusion perpetuates inequity, leaving smaller, community-rooted organizations led by women of color at a disadvantage.

Grassroots leaders with several decades of experience in the sector also talk about difficulties with getting through to funders. One leader explained, “funders will not answer their calls unless you know someone on the inside...” Another added, “Unfortunately, it often feels like you won’t get a response from local and big funders unless you have connections, despite my decades of experience in this field.”

Philanthropy’s rhetoric of inclusion is not always matched by tangible support. Reliance on relationships reinforces the very power dynamics and inequities grassroots leaders are working to dismantle. A lack of transparency in funding practices compounds the leaders’ challenges, with unclear expectations sometimes making it difficult for smaller organizations to align proposals with funder priorities.

Grassroots leaders also pointed directly to the role of racism in shaping access to resources. As one explained, “Racism exists still. Interestingly, because donors say ‘we need more people of color,’ but when it comes to giving us the opportunity, they do not want to give us resources...[grassroots leaders] are having a hard time getting [donors] to open up their pockets, and it has nothing to do with [BIPOC] leadership.”



*"We don't receive the same grace that others do when trying to do this work. I've been working hard to address a lot of hurt and harm."*

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

## VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

# LEADERSHIP EXPECTATIONS & CONSEQUENCES

▶ Data from our focus groups and interviews highlighted how inequities in the sector crystallize in the everyday lives of women and gender-expansive leaders of color. Their experiences highlight how philanthropy further exploits these leaders by failing to invest in their organizations upfront, upholding or setting unrealistic expectations, and neglecting their well-being.





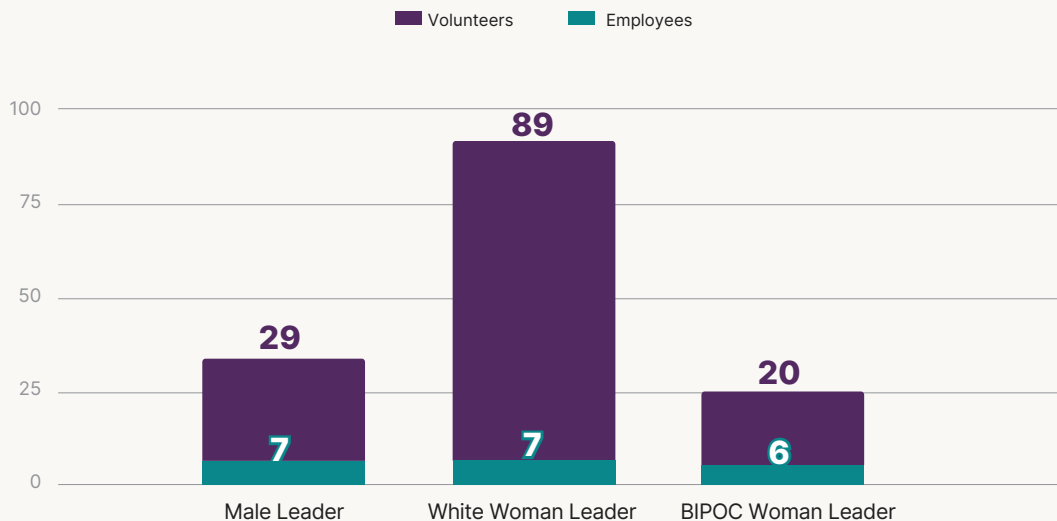
**“The expectation is...that nonprofit leadership should do all the work, wear all the hats. But they need work-life balance.”**

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

### Specifically,

- Insufficient funding, combined with unrealistic expectations in the sector, force many women and gender-expansive leaders of color to overextend themselves to fill gaps and meet their community’s needs.
- In the process, they incur steep costs to their well-being in the form of burnout, a distinct phenomenon with complex physical and mental impacts. Experience of burnout strains leaders’ relationships, sense of confidence, and ability to work.
- Though individual coping strategies, such as mindfulness and boundary-setting, help with recovery, women and gender-expansive leaders of color note that systemic changes are crucial.
- Institutional support is necessary to make structural changes within organizations, such as workload division, vacation policies, and co-leadership models.
- Leadership needs to be culturally reimaged to resist patriarchal, capitalist, and Eurocentric norms.

**FIGURE 19: Grassroots organizations led by women of color operate with fewer staff and human resources**  
Average staff size, organizations with <\$1m in revenue by leader demographics, 2023



Source: Author’s analysis of IRS tax filing data, Demographics via Candid

## Unrealistic Expectations and Burnout

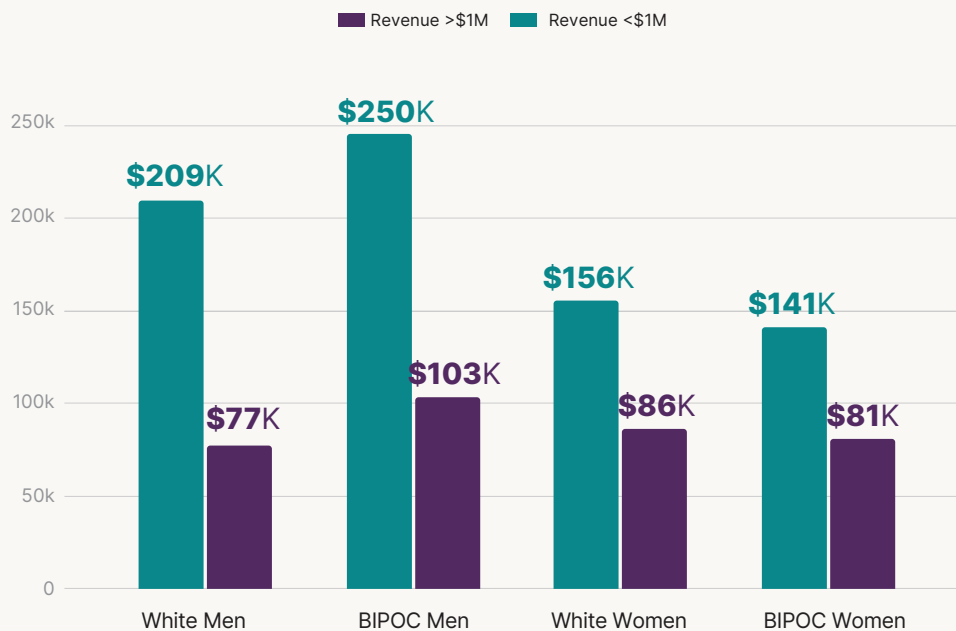
Funding inequities in the sector limit grassroots organizations’ ability to meet operational and community needs. Those that are led by women of color<sup>32</sup> are more constrained as they have fewer staff and volunteer resources than white women- or male-led organizations (Figure 19). Women and gender-expansive leaders of color in our study discussed how these conditions leave them with a painful choice — let the organization suffer or overextend themselves to fill the gaps.

Several leaders in the study noted that a lack of financial support contributes to limited staff and greater demands on them. They described feeling forced to “figure it out” without sufficient resources or support. One leader said, “The expectation is that...nonprofit leadership should do all the work, wear all the hats.”

Recognizing the role of racial inequity and exclusionary practices, one leader observed that “so many Black organizational leaders are doing so many things and wearing so many multiple roles.” She connected this trend to such organizations and leaders being “deprioritized and excluded from higher leadership and funding spaces...and [consequently] it means that we are strapped for time and resources.”

Many of our study participants shared that they stretched themselves to fill gaps or sustain their organizations. One leader described how she “took on every role, prioritized the organization above all else,” while another described working at the organization “more than required...so it didn’t suffer.” Yet, across the sector, women of color leaders are paid less than their male or white counterparts (Figure 20).

**FIGURE 20: Women of color leaders have the lowest median compensation**  
 Median leader compensation by race/ethnicity & organization revenue, 2023



Source: Author’s analysis of IRS tax filing data, Demographics via Candid

## Burnout

Leaders in the study described how neglecting their well-being to meet organizational demands often resulted in physical and emotional exhaustion, or burnout. Most leaders emphasized the complex nature of burnout, noting that it rarely shows up in just one way. Their collective experiences of burnout highlight physical and mental health impacts as well as strain on relationships and confidence.

**When it comes to physical health, several leaders recounted that chronic overwork has contributed to illness, sleeplessness, irregular eating, weight gain, and more.** One leader remarked, “I get sick. When I work so hard and intellectually, I can’t slow down so my body says sit your ass down. Then I’m out for a week.”

**Leaders also recalled experiences of emotional fatigue, which manifested as “forgetfulness,” “shut down,” “anxiety, coughing, and gagging,” “emotional mess,” and “crying.”** One leader shared that they “broke down badly and had to be hospitalized.”

**The impact of burnout on leaders’ personal relationships is notable.** Some leaders noted the toll on their families and children, with one reflecting that burnout meant “working really late... and staying away from my family.”

**Leaders explained that burnout also undermines their professional confidence and capacity.** They shared that they “cannot think,” “can’t do the work,” “could not give advice,” and experienced “brain junk.” One participant described feeling “replaceable” and unable to balance professional responsibilities with personal health.

**Leaders’ voices highlight how limited resources and unrealistic expectations force them to do more with less, often beyond what is sustainable.** Their accounts reveal that burnout is not simply about exhaustion — it is about deep, systemic harm to health, relationships, and the ability to lead effectively.



## Responding to Burnout & Reimagining Leadership

When faced with burnout, leaders in the study described how they respond to their own needs through personal practices like mindfulness and boundary-setting. Broadly, however, they emphasized the pressing need for structural changes within their organizations, as well as culturally reimagining leadership in the sector.

Mindfulness practices like prayer, introspection, and art help individuals nurture their needs in the moment and identify early signs of burnout. As one leader noted, “when I start acting snappy and testy, I know it is time to take time off work.”

Being part of supportive shared spaces gives women and gender-expansive leaders opportunities for expressing their vulnerability and needs, connecting across shared struggles, and finding ways to respond.

Leaders wish to make structural changes and foster greater transparency to combat burnout culture within their organizations. They identified vacation policies and workload distribution as critical, alongside “honest conversations about bandwidth and capacity.”

Beyond resources, leaders also pointed to the need for culturally reimagining leadership in ways that resist patriarchal, capitalist, and Eurocentric norms. One leader described their resistance to capitalist models, affirming that “It is okay to prioritize family. I am not less. I am not in competition with...I have to be myself.”

Women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color carry the compounded weight of racial, gender, and social inequities — not only in the communities they serve, but also within the nonprofit sector that’s meant to support them. Limited access to financial resources and institutional backing takes a heavy toll on their personal well-being and constrains how their organizations can respond to rising community needs. While growth is often necessary, expanding without adequate funding, staffing, and culturally grounded infrastructure can deepen strain rather than build sustainability, leaving leaders to shoulder even more of the burden.



***“As a Black woman, we should know how to delegate or receive support. We need reminders that we can’t do it all.”***

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

## What Keeps Leaders Going

When things get tough, here's what leaders in the study said helps to keep them going.

### VISION FOR THE FUTURE AND LASTING LEGACY

"I want to be in community and want to stay in community; [I] also want to be sustainable and have longevity in this world. I do not think we always know the pathway to get that support to do that."

### FULFILLING A UNIQUE ROLE AND TELLING UNTOLD STORIES

"Our organization can tell stories that are not told...they fill a niche."

### COMMUNITY AS DAILY INSPIRATION

"My community...they give me motivation."

"Seeing where the community has come from and, personally, the people around me and who I surround myself with."

### SENSE OF PURPOSE

"There are those who work for themselves and there are those who work for others. True happiness comes with purpose. And even in those days when things are insane and I think about going back to private, there is nothing as satisfying as knowing you are working with purpose."

"It has been helpful to see people's lives impacted."

### STAFF AND COLLEAGUES AS ENCOURAGEMENT

"I'm a product of opportunity and the communities I care about. I chose this job. And when I get tired and don't have a heart for the work, a staff person will encourage [me] and say, 'I see your vision, you're doing the right thing.'"

### INSPIRATION FROM PEERS AND WOMEN LEADERS

"The inspiration comes from working with experienced and community women leaders that are community driven and create an inspirational environment."



*“Growth is so interdependent on the support you can get to have the job done...”*

– STUDY PARTICIPANT

## VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE

# ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY, GROWTH & GAPS

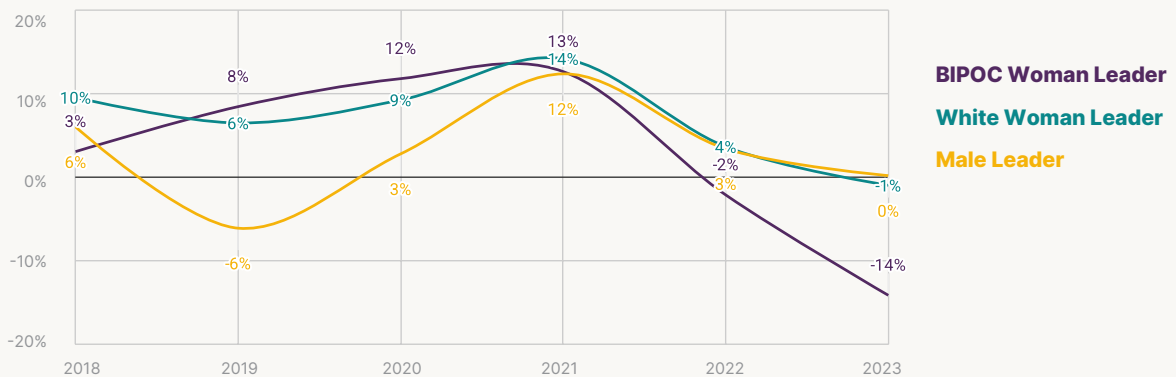
▶ Whether driven by increasing community needs or newfound organizational capacity, leaders in the study highlighted the opportunities that organizational growth provides but also the significant challenges of sustaining staff, funding, and operations without losing sight of their mission.



## Infrastructure and Support Gaps

Several leaders highlighted the lack of support systems to sustain organizational growth and the pitfalls of rapid expansion, which frequently outpaced infrastructure and human resources. Some leaders described scrambling to retrofit organizational structures after expanding too quickly: “We grew too quickly, which necessitated the implementation of policies and infrastructure, which for many years we didn’t have because it was just me and one other person.”

FIGURE 21: **Collectively, grassroots organizations led by women of color have become more fiscally fragile**  
Aggregate profit margin, all Greater Boston organizations with revenue <\$1m by leader demographics, 2018-2023



Source: Author's analysis of IRS tax filing data, Demographics via Candid

Others noted how funding restrictions and short-term grants created bottlenecks, forcing them to do more with limited capacity. One leader explained: “There’s a lot to do and there’s the issue of financial restraint which impacts the program and expansion.” For organizations without sufficient systems and leaders who were stretched thin, growth carried personal risks, too: “This growth came at a great personal cost. I took on every role, prioritized the organization above all else, and neglected myself completely.”

Leaders shared that while advocacy work can drive organizational growth, it’s not often funded by philanthropy: “Policy [and the act of] advocacy doesn’t get funded...because they are considered proof of concept.”

In short, philanthropy was seen as a potential partner in healthy growth when offering not only dollars but also technical assistance and capacity-building resources. “Growth is so interdependent on the support you can get to have the job done...” one leader shared.

## Staff and Board's Role in Growth

Leaders in the study repeatedly linked organizational health to the strength of their staff and board of directors. Staffing was both a major enabler of growth and a persistent challenge due to limited resources, retention issues, and funder restrictions on personnel costs. As one leader noted: "We need people who can write grants, manage projects, and engage communities, but most applicants don't have experience across all these areas." Grassroots organizations with and without full-time staff described volunteers as essential and benefited from their diverse skills, perspectives, and community engagement. Staff capacity, however, is still necessary to train and manage volunteers.

While boards' core role is to provide governance, study participants' accounts highlight that boards' involvement varies, presenting both opportunities and challenges for the leaders. In some cases, boards carried essential responsibilities in volunteer-run organizations. In other organizations, leaders described a lack of board engagement or direction. One leader raised critical questions about effectively incorporating board support into the organization, including delegating responsibilities and defining co-chair roles. They added, "Bandwidth is an issue...how do you invite hands-on support collectively and consistently...?" When functioning well, staff and boards were cited as sources of encouragement, resilience, and critical capacity for scaling operations.

## Centering Cultural Competency

Several leaders in the study noted the importance of maintaining alignment with the organization's values and community needs amid growth. Leaders emphasized that staff diversity is important, as is ensuring that people in leadership and decision-making roles reflect the identities of the communities served.

As one leader explained, they "made a commitment to make people close to the pain lead the change..." but it has been challenging for them. Other participants reported they have had progress in diversifying their staff. One leader shared that they had a staff that was all white and now a majority of staff are people of color. Leaders see staff diversity as part of building culturally competent teams and central to sustaining growth, strengthening trust, and delivering equitable impact. When an organization's staff reflects the community served, the organization is better equipped to understand and address the unique challenges and solutions experienced in a particular community, especially those that have been marginalized and historically underfunded.

# FOCUS ON FUNDERS

**As a part of an additional initiative, we interviewed 12 funders and nonprofit capacity builders across Greater Boston to understand how philanthropy is integrating racial and gender equity into grantmaking, supporting grassroots leaders, and adapting practices since the 2020 racial reckoning.** Participants were selected for their explicit focus on racial equity, gender equity, and grassroots leadership and reflected a cross-section of philanthropic and intermediary organizations. Their contributions to this study offer insight into both the promise and limitations of current funding practices.



## FINDINGS

### **Interviews revealed a philanthropic sector that is increasingly self-aware yet still struggling to operationalize intersectional equity.**

Many funders recognize persistent gaps in support for women of color and the organizations that serve them. While some prioritize gender equity, racial justice, or grassroots organizing, few center the intersection of these identities, leaving women-of-color-led organizations at the margins of all three. Several also noted a disconnect between post-2020 racial justice commitments and the smaller share of pledged funds that have been disbursed, underscoring that intent isn't a surefire path to sustained investment.<sup>33</sup>

### **Grassroots organizations face structural barriers within this system.**

Their community-led work often spans multiple issues, including housing, health, education, and justice. One funder noted that this work often “fits in all the boxes or in none,” making grassroots organizations difficult to fund within siloed philanthropic categories. Funders acknowledged this mismatch, noting that institutional priorities and reporting requirements often limit investment in such holistic approaches.

### **Many funders cited capacity constraints as a growing challenge.**

Awareness of equity-focused funding and community need has surged since 2020, but philanthropic resources have not kept pace. Several funders, especially those who once led nonprofits, expressed frustration that they share many of the same obstacles as grantees: limited staff, competing priorities, and structural barriers to sustainability.

### **Translating equity values into practice remains an ongoing struggle.**

Funders are experimenting with new frameworks and strategic plans, but measuring equity and embedding lived experience into decision-making remain difficult. When boards and executives lack proximity to affected communities, traditional metrics of “impact” often prevail over deeper, systemic investments.

### **Funders also recognize the personal toll inequities take on nonprofit leadership.**

They see that burnout and attrition among women-of-color leaders are widespread, yet, leadership supports, such as mentorships, sabbaticals, or transition planning, remain rare. Several raised concerns about a looming generational shift: many longtime women-of-color leaders are nearing retirement, while younger leaders hesitate to inherit under-resourced institutions, a challenge for the sector in both Greater Boston and nationwide.<sup>34</sup> Sustained investment in leadership well-being and succession is urgently needed.

### **Transparency and coordination remain**

**limited.** Even equity-focused funders often lack a clear view of who else is supporting similar work. Donor-advised funds (DAFs), private foundations, and family foundations, which hold substantial resources, are especially opaque, making it difficult to understand the full landscape or connect grantees with aligned opportunities. The absence of a clear “philanthropic map” continues to frustrate both funders and nonprofit leaders seeking collaboration.

### **Still, the sector is evolving.**

Since 2020, many of the funders we spoke with have adopted more trust-based practices, including multi-year, unrestricted grants; simplified reporting; and relationship-centered accountability.<sup>35</sup> A growing number are experimenting with participatory grantmaking, community review panels, and intersectional evaluation frameworks. Others are piloting sabbatical and transition funds focused on sustainability rather than short-term productivity. These innovations remain uneven but signal a promising shift toward a more equitable, transparent, and collaborative philanthropic culture.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BOLD, EQUITABLE FUNDING



We didn't assume. We asked. We listened to the leaders closest to the work. They told us what challenges they're facing, what's broken, and what needs to change now, not later. These recommendations are grounded in lived experience, hard-won insight, and collective vision.

This is not a wishlist. It's a mandate from grassroots leaders of color to philanthropic funders. These ideas are not theoretical. They are already working, just underfunded, overlooked, or hindered by systems built without input from the people most impacted.

Boston Women's Fund and the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy at UMass Boston fully endorse these recommendations, and call on funders, institutions, and policymakers to move with urgency and accountability.

## Recommit to Women and Gender-Expansive Grassroots Leaders of Color

Grassroots organizations led by women and gender-expansive leaders of color address issues largely overlooked by the region's nonprofit ecosystem, yet they receive less funding than their white and male counterparts (see Figure 19). It's time to close the gap. Recommitting to funding more women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color creates a stronger Greater Boston. Set inclusive funding goals for BIPOC-led, women-led, and gender-expansive-led organizations, and redesign processes to improve equity. Then, evaluate progress and take action toward improvement.

## Reduce Barriers to Funding

Access goes hand in hand with equity and justice. Remove barriers in your practices that make it difficult for smaller organizations to gain funding. Start by keeping grant applications simple, or engaging in participatory philanthropy.<sup>36</sup> Remember that reporting should inform your team, not exhaust your grantees. Rightsize your reports to be brief, or go a step further and reimagine reporting entirely. Consider engaging in regular check-in conversations with grantees instead. This approach is less burdensome for small grassroots teams, fosters relationship building with grantees, and offers more opportunities to understand the full picture of the change they're making than a traditional report. In either approach, remember that stories and community feedback count as data. Accept voice notes, short videos, and community references as valid indicators of impact. Language justice is essential here. Provide translators for applicants who primarily communicate in a language other than English.

Additionally, open up your networks. Block off time and outreach specifically for meetings with women and gender-expansive leaders of color. And if there's a marginalized community you can't reach, partner with intermediary foundations that have proximity to diverse communities. Intermediaries can often be more nimble and quickly fund critical and emerging issues in the communities they serve.

## Fund for the Long Term

Grassroots leaders are tackling problems that will not be resolved in a single grant cycle. If you're committed to lasting change, fund for the long term. Commit to three to ten years of support with flexible, primarily unrestricted, funding. Fund the full cost of grassroots work, too, including living wages and benefits for staff, rent, technology, insurance, measurement, and evaluation. Provide multi-year grants with predictable payment schedules — and cost-of-living adjustments. Women and gender-expansive people of color in Greater Boston are disproportionately impacted by increasing housing costs (see Figure 10). Funding for lasting change means better equipping leaders to weather the economic changes of today and tomorrow.

Further, advocacy and organizing are vital components in the long work toward justice. Fund them as core grantmaking strategies, not optional line items.

## Build Capacity That Lasts

A strong back-of-house makes for stronger grassroots effectiveness. Offer guidance and hands-on support for grantees' finance, compliance, human resources (HR), fundraising systems, and digital security. Additionally, supporting the cultivation of strong boards that reflect racial, gender, and class diversity, and hold lived-experience that aligns with the community being served, is especially critical for leaders managing growth with limited staff or infrastructure. For small organizations, collaborate with trusted intermediaries<sup>37</sup> to provide pooled support and vendor vouchers for grantees' bookkeeping, payroll, HR, technology, etc., so leaders can spend money on people, not paperwork.

Well-supported leaders make stronger decisions. Invest in leadership growth and care by funding coaching, sabbaticals, and wellness stipends for women and gender-expansive leaders of color without setting restrictions. Trust that your grantees know what portion of their grant would be best spent on supporting their team. Grassroots leaders are not just running organizations; they are holding entire communities together. Healthy leadership stabilizes whole ecosystems.

## Share Power

Weaving the community into your decision-making procedures produces a grantee portfolio that's in closer alignment with community needs and can thus create more effective outcomes. Share your power. Within your organization, include grassroots leaders and young people on boards and advisory committees with real decision-making and voting power and stipends.

When searching for new grantees, invite community members to nominate organizations rather than issuing open RFPs. You'll surface overlooked brilliance and diversify applicants. Then, engage in participatory grantmaking. Gather a committee of paid decision-makers from the community to collect information from candidates via interviews, discuss what they've learned, and select recipients. Be sure to include youth. This allows communities to have a say in how philanthropic dollars impact their neighborhoods.




## Call to Action

These recommendations come directly from women and gender-expansive grassroots leaders of color. They are innovating daily, often with too little support and too much at stake. If the philanthropic sector is truly committed to equity, the moment to act is not someday, it's now.

At Boston Women's Fund, we are continuing to shift away from extractive, transactional norms and move toward practices rooted in mutual care, shared power, and sustained partnership. We are reimagining what's possible when foundations center relationships with grassroots leaders, who are often excluded from traditional philanthropic models. We are flowing resources with intention, guided by the wisdom, leadership, and lived experience of our community leaders.

You can make a change toward greater equity today. Share this report. Amplify the data and the stories within it. Take a serious look at your portfolios, and assess your giving. If you don't know where to start, [lean on us](#). Boston Women's Fund is here to support your recommitment to resourcing women, girls, and gender-expansive leaders of color.



**Join the movement to make Boston the first city where 20% of philanthropic dollars flow directly to those building power at the margins.**

**The invitation is open. Join us.**

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy (2020, May). Using an Anti-Racist Intersectional Frame at CSSP. CSSP. Retrieved from <https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Antiracist-Intersectional-Frame.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> Hankivsky, O. (2014, April). Intersectionality 101. The Institute for Intersectionality Research & Policy, SFU. Retrieved from: [https://www.sfu.ca/iirp/documents/resources/101\\_Final.pdf](https://www.sfu.ca/iirp/documents/resources/101_Final.pdf)
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Sex by Age. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B01001.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>
- <sup>5</sup> Herman, J.L., Flores, A. R. (2025, August). How many adults and youth identify as transgender in the United States? The Williams Institute. Retrieved from <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-adults-united-states/>
- <sup>6</sup> Mather, D. E., Mehta, A., Wada, R., Ayanian, S. H., Manukyan, M., & Dooley, D. (2019, August). Demographic characteristics and social determinants of health among Boston’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender adult residents, 2010–2017. Boston Public Health Commission, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2021/03/Data%20Brief%20-%20LGBT%20Population%20in%20Boston%20Part%201%20of%202.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> National Equity Project. (n.d.). The Lens of Systemic Oppression [PDF]. Retrieved from: <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression>
- <sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau. (2022). Childcare prices by age of children and care setting. U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from: <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/topics/childcare/price-by-age-care-setting-2022>
- <sup>9</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2023, June 14). How the high cost of child care hurts families, workers and the economy. Retrieved from: <https://www.aecf.org/blog/how-the-high-cost-of-child-care-hurts-families-workers-economy>
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>
- <sup>11</sup> Zillow. (2025, May 12). Number of markets where renters need to earn \$100K to afford rent has doubled since 2020. [Press release]. Retrieved from: <https://zillow.mediaroom.com/2025-05-12-Number-of-markets-where-renters-need-to-earn-100K-to-afford-rent-has-doubled-since-2020>

- <sup>12</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2025). State of homelessness dashboards: Massachusetts. Retrieved from <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-dashboards?State=Massachusetts#population-and-subpopulation-data>
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Northeast Information Office. (2025, July). Consumer Price Index, Boston-Cambridge-Newton — July 2025 [News release]. Retrieved from [https://www.bls.gov/regions/northeast/news-release/consumerpriceindex\\_boston.htm](https://www.bls.gov/regions/northeast/news-release/consumerpriceindex_boston.htm)
- <sup>14</sup> Ciurczak, P. (2025, September 2). Meeting The Moment: Snap Cuts And The Local Fallout. Boston Indicators. Retrieved from: <https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2025/september/mtm-snap>
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>
- <sup>16</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>
- <sup>17</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024). K–12 education: Nationally, Black girls receive more frequent and more severe discipline in school than other girls (GAO-24-106787). Retrieved from: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106787.pdf>
- <sup>18</sup> Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2024). School safety and discipline report, school year 2023–2024. Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Retrieved from: <https://www.doe.mass.edu/infoservices/research/default.aspx?id=D691CC160D0610E919E481F2FD47C7D0893A6665>.
- <sup>19</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>
- <sup>20</sup> Mason, J. Robbins, K.G. (2023, March). Women’s Work is Undervalued, and It’s Costing Us Billions. National Partnership for Women & Families. Retrieved from <https://nationalpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/womens-work-is-undervalued.pdf>
- <sup>21</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Public Use Microdata Sample (2023). Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/app/mdat/ACSPUMS5Y2023>. Note: in this analysis, economic insecurity is defined as living in households with income greater than 100% and less than 500% Federal Poverty Level.
- <sup>22</sup> Boston Public Health Commission. (2023). Health of Boston 2023: The maternal and infant health report (Boston, Massachusetts 2023). Retrieved from [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/10/HOB\\_2023\\_Maternal\\_Infant\\_Final\\_Oct3.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2023/10/HOB_2023_Maternal_Infant_Final_Oct3.pdf)

- <sup>23</sup> Boston Public Health Commission. (2024). Health of Boston 2024: The mental health report. Boston, Massachusetts, (2024). Retrieved from [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB\\_MentalHealth\\_2024.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB_MentalHealth_2024.pdf)
- <sup>24</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) Data. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/brfss/>
- <sup>25</sup> Boston Public Health Commission. (2023). Health of Boston 2023: The provisional mortality and life expectancy report (Boston, Massachusetts 2023). Retrieved from [https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB\\_Mortality\\_LE\\_2023\\_FINAL\\_Corr\\_032524.pdf](https://www.boston.gov/sites/default/files/file/2024/03/HOB_Mortality_LE_2023_FINAL_Corr_032524.pdf)
- <sup>27</sup> Women’s Philanthropy Institute. (2024). The Women & Girls Index. Indiana University. Retrieved from <https://www.womenandgirlsindex.org>
- <sup>28</sup> Equitable Giving Lab. (2024). The LGBTQ+ Index. Indiana University. Retrieved from <https://www.lgbtqindex.org/>
- <sup>29</sup> Candid. (n.d.). Demographics via Candid. Retrieved [June 2025], from <https://demographics.candid.org>
- <sup>30</sup> United States, Internal Revenue Service. (2024). Exempt Organizations Business Master File (EO BMF) extract.. U.S. Department of the Treasury. Retrieved from <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organizations-business-master-file-extract-eo-bmf>.
- <sup>31</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (n.d.). Sex by Age. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B01001. Retrieved from: [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov/); United States, Internal Revenue Service. (2024). Exempt Organizations Business Master File (EO BMF) extract.. U.S. Department of the Treasury. Retrieved from <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organizations-business-master-file-extract-eo-bmf>.
- <sup>32</sup> United States, Internal Revenue Service. (2024). Exempt Organizations Business Master File (EO BMF) extract.. U.S. Department of the Treasury. Retrieved from <https://www.irs.gov/charities-non-profits/exempt-organizations-business-master-file-extract-eo-bmf>. Candid. (n.d.). Demographics via Candid. Retrieved [June 2025], from <https://demographics.candid.org>
- <sup>33</sup> Ponce, K. (2023, March 2). Black funding denied: Where are we two years later? National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. <https://ncrp.org/2023/03/black-funding-denied-where-are-we-two-years-later/>
- <sup>34</sup> Kunreuther, F., Thomas-Breitfeld, S., & Constantine, T. (2024, January). The Push and Pull: Declining interest in nonprofit leadership (Report). Building Movement Project. [https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/BMP\\_The-Push-and-Pull-Report\\_Final.pdf](https://buildingmovement.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/BMP_The-Push-and-Pull-Report_Final.pdf)
- <sup>35</sup> Trust-Based Philanthropy Project. (n.d.). Six practices of trust-based grantmaking. Retrieved from <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/practices/>
- <sup>36</sup> McQuarters, C. (2024, June). Shifting Power: The Social Innovation Forum’s Participatory Philanthropy Pilot. Social Innovation Forum. Retrieved from: [https://socialinnovationforum.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/SIF\\_Participatory\\_Philanthropy\\_Pilot.pdf](https://socialinnovationforum.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/SIF_Participatory_Philanthropy_Pilot.pdf)
- <sup>37</sup> Batey, K. (2017, October 9). An introduction to intermediaries. PEAK Grantmaking. Retrieved from: <https://www.peakgrantmaking.org/insights/an-introduction-to-intermediaries/peakgrantmaking.org>





Center for Women in  
Politics and Public Policy

