The disparities that appear during childhood have significant implications for mental and physical health for young women as they go into their teenage and young adulthood years.

A report published in 2015 by the African American Policy Forum and the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia Law School found that black girls face disproportionate punishment in Boston schools. Using data from 2009 from the Boston Public School System, the Boston Public Health Commission found that girls are more likely than boys to face depression (36% for girls vs. 21% for boys) and experience violence in the home (19% for girls vs. 13% for boys). Additionally, the Boston Public Health Commission data showed that overall girls are more likely to be obese than boys, 19% vs. 17%, respectively. Furthermore, they exercise less than boys. These disparities are more acute for girls of color.

The need to take action towards a gender equitable society has never been more imperative. Last year’s 2015 Report on the Status of Women and Girls in Boston a digest of data on women, girls, and the trans community and in whose writing I was involved, revealed that disparities in race and class that affect young girls during the earlier stages of their life have consequences that will not only negatively affect their childhood development, but also affects the adolescent and adult stages of life.

The disparities that appear during childhood have significant implications for mental and physical health for young women as they go into their teenage and young adulthood years.

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Message from the Board of Directors

Dear Boston Women’s Fund supporters and friends,

We want to express our heartfelt gratitude for your support and generosity. Thanks to your generosity over the years, more than $6 million in grants have been awarded to hundreds of women-led organizations. What a marvelous history of altruism and activism! We thought we’d take a moment to remind you of how special and unique the Boston Women’s Fund is among funding organizations and to ask for your support to continue the battle to end the oppression of women.

“We are committed to rebuilding and rejuvenating the Boston Women’s Fund through a mission-driven approach that leans into our core values and welcomes all stakeholders to the table to determine how best to improve the lives of women and girls.”

BWF is looking forward to resuming regular grant-making cycles this year. We are committed to rebuilding and rejuvenating the Boston Women’s Fund through a mission-driven approach that leans into our core values and welcomes all stakeholders to the table to determine how best to improve the lives of women and girls. We are taking the necessary steps to sustain operations and maximize our giving in the most efficient and equitable way possible.

BWF’s story is special! Thirty-four years ago, research indicated that low-income women and women of color were experiencing increased levels of poverty and violence in the U.S. Moreover, traditional funding sources (public institutions and foundations) continually “short changed” women-led organizations. Our founders offered a unique solution to this funding gap. They created the Boston Women’s Fund to support grassroots projects designed by and for women, with the following core principles and values: (1) decisions would be made by a racially and economically diverse group of women, (2) money would be raised from a broad base of donors across all economic backgrounds, and that (3) priority would be given to grassroots organizations run by women and girls seeking to make positive change in their communities.

Despite the admirable efforts of our donors and grantee partners over the years, the need for our beloved organization remains. According to a recent Brookings report, Boston tops the list of cities with the highest income inequality across the U.S. We also know that women of color earn considerably less than white women (who in turn earn less than men). Income inequities reverberate throughout the lives of women and their families. Low-income women experience a greater likelihood of poverty, limited options for child-care, and a lack of affordable housing. These factors contribute to chronic homelessness and a system that confines poor women to low-wage undervalued and poorly regulated employment.

At a focus group in January, grantee partners emphasized the importance of BWF’s support to their success. Moreover, they discussed the challenges currently facing their organizations and their work: perverse immigration policies, deportations, and fundraising challenges amidst severe resource constraints. In a fine gesture of solidarity, each attendee offered to accompany us on donor visits. We were gratified and humbled when these courageous grantee partners volunteered to add their voices to our fundraising efforts. Prepare to be persuaded and inspired when these women have an opportunity to tell their very powerful stories!

BWF is pleased to announce that we plan to make modest grant awards in Fall 2016, after having received a generous offer from an anonymous donor to match dollar-for-dollar contributions made in December 2015. We are most grateful to our loyal donor for this gift and are working to initiate predictable grant making cycles this year.

Our board continues to expand. Recently, we have added 3 new members with valuable skills and experience working in non-profit community based organizations. Rita Lara, Executive Director of Maverick Landing Community Services in East Boston, has returned to the BWF Board after several years’ absence. Rita has extensive experience consulting with non-profit organizations in strategic planning and development. Sabine Saint-Lot has worked to improve educational and economic outcomes for Haitian immigrants. In 2010, Sabine received the Leading Women Award from the Girl Scouts of Eastern MA for her work organizing disaster relief after Haiti’s massive earthquake struck six years ago. Claudia Thompson has a long association with BWF, first as a vendor and later as a member of the Young Sisters for Justice nominating committee. Our new Board members offer BWF a wealth of experience, energy, enthusiasm and a sincere commitment to the mission and values of the Fund.

We invite you to continue this important journey with us by supporting the Boston Women’s Fund as generously as you can. We value your support and welcome your participation.

Sincerely,

Virginia Meany
Chair, Board of Directors
When Gender Meets Race

Teresa Younger, President & CEO of the Ms. Foundation Event
A Boston Women’s Fund and New England Blacks in Philanthropy Co-Sponsored Event

On March 29th the Boston Women’s Fund, New England Blacks in Philanthropy and Gail Jackson Communications co-hosted an evening with Teresa Younger, President and CEO of the Ms. Foundation. The event, open to the public was attended by 200 guests and included a networking reception, comments by Ms. Younger and a lively Q&A session.

The discussion, “When Race Meets Gender”, described findings from Ms. Younger’s national tour of local programs and communities targeting women and girls. “On my listening tour I have traveled 54,000 miles, to 43 cities, and met with 800 individuals in groups consisting of 25 people or less. And through my travels across the different regions and cities in the country it became clear that feminism is alive and well.” Ms. Younger stated.

According to Ms. Younger, feminism suffers from a branding problem. “Across the different communities of women, I kept hearing that they did not see themselves represented in the feminist movement,” Ms. Younger said. “Consequently, everyone abandoned the table.”

In explaining how feminism can move forward, she emphasized the need for the movement to become more inclusive. “Feminism needs to adopt an intersectional lens,” Ms. Younger told a diverse and multigenerational crowd. “The movement cannot be just about pay equity or abortion rights, but it must take into consideration economic, racial and social justice. On my tour I talked to people who felt they did not see their stories reflected in the stories told by the feminist movement.”

Ms. Younger also mentioned how the lack of an intersectional analysis prevents feminist from viewing current movements such as Black Lives Matter as being part of the women’s movement. “The feminists in the current wave of the movement, which might perhaps be the fourth wave, are the second generation growing up with Title IX, under Roe v Wade, and in a world where gender norms were already breaking down. They are concerned about mass incarceration. There are also women in this movement who after 30 or 40 years of leading a nonprofit cannot afford to retire because they do not have 401k benefits, have been underpaid throughout their careers and are in organizations without leadership succession plans.”

Ms. Younger proposed that a way to move forward is by making feminism an inclusive movement. “Foundations can lead the way by resetting the philanthropic table,” she said. “We need to ensure that everyone who needs to be present is at the table and to discuss power distribution. A way we can accelerate the process is by being clear on what words and values we agree on.”

Ms. Younger’s talk ended with her discussing Prosperity Together, a collaboration of multiple national philanthropic partners founded in late 2015, who have made a $100 million multi-year funding commitment to invest in innovative programs, policies and pathways to create economic opportunities for low-income women and girls.

“The discussion, “When Race Meets Gender”, described findings from Ms. Younger’s national tour of local programs and communities targeting women and girls.”
The Boston Women’s Fund’s (BWF) listening tour continues! We want to hear from everyone (grantees, donors, supporters, community leaders and activists). Board and staff want to know first hand about the issues that are happening “on the ground” and to get input about how the Boston Women’s Fund can best support future grantees.

In January, 2016, we hosted a conversation with seven community organizations previously funded by the BWF: Beantown Society, Boston Tenants Coalition, Brazilian Workers Center, Dominican Development Center, Homes For Families, My Life My Choice and Women Encouraging Empowerment. Leslie Stevenson, a graduate student intern enrolled in the Gender, Leadership and Public Policy certificate program at UMass-Boston planned and facilitated a valuable and candid conversation.

The impact of the Boston Women’s Fund on the lives of women and girls in Greater Boston was evident in the feedback we received. Several of the participants mentioned a decline of philanthropic dollars available to women- and girl-led organizations in greater Boston – a void filled by the BWF. We heard how the BWF had provided seed funding that helped organizations to galvanize the movement around a number of issues: workers’ and immigrants’ rights, the fight for the development of affordable housing in cities and communities experiencing gentrification, and the social and economic reintegration of survivors of sexual exploitation.

BWF has always committed to leveraging resources and opportunities for women and girls in the Boston working to abolish structural inequities. One participant saw the Boston Women’s Fund “as a foundation where women support each other.” Others emphasized the important role filled by the Boston Women’s Fund in supporting their organizations that are often overlooked by other foundations.

“Our relationship with BWF is great. We interface with other foundations, but sometimes they cannot see the vision. With other foundations you have to beg for the funding. We had just started the Domestic Bill of Rights campaign when we had approached the Boston Women’s Fund. BWF was very respectful. We had helpful conversations with BWF and they offered to give us more help with the vision and how we were going to get there.”

Another participant described the type of support BWF provides to its partners:

“Some funders are hands off and have lots of requirements that, but it really feels that BWF has a lot of follow-through and creates a personal relationship.’ ”

“Site visits are good. We bring people from the community to tell BWF what we are doing and what we are going through a lot of thing. We believe in change and BWF has helped to develop our leadership. For instance, sometimes you put things in the proposal, but you go to the organization and the reality is different. We learn a lot by getting BWF to hear and learn about the work we are doing.”

Grantees discussed the need for a philanthropic movement that extends beyond providing direct grants to supporting the holistic and leadership development of women and girls. One participant discussed needing extra organizational support as she was the last remaining staff member at a community organization experiencing a leadership transition. She spoke to the need for advice and counsel from an organization that fully understood her daily challenges. Participants spoke movingly about the overwhelming challenges facing the women and girls they support every day:

“Women have to confront so many issues in a day: economic, education, housing, racial and immigration. Whatever the conversation, we have to analyze the issues of race and gender and what does it mean for our communities. Everything is getting worse and harder, and there is a lot of gender discrimination.”

“You have to think about inequality and about women. We are hosting a women’s conference at the state house where we want to talk about overcoming economic inequality in Boston. How can we start organizing around it?”

“We should also think about intersectionality, especially around youth violence. How racism leads to youth violence and how to build the leadership to address these concerns. Young women of color are shut down a lot and don’t get to showcase their leadership.”

The Future of the Philanthropic Movement Will Require an Intersectional Analysis, Coalition-Building and Development of Youth.

The future of the economic and social justice grassroots movements in Boston will involve understanding the importance of having an intersectional lens. All participants talked about an increase in critical mass involvement and concerns for social issues. Also important was the need to secure the Boston Women’s Fund sustainability to ensure the long-term support of women and girls in community-based organizations.

“Grassroots communities are victims of divide and conquer so we need more understanding of racial justice.”

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Although they comprise only 28% of the student population in the Boston Public Schools, disciplinary cases involving black girls are nearly eleven times the rate of their white counterparts, 61% vs. 5%, respectively.

The Boston Public Schools data also showed that girls were more likely than boys to graduate high school. However, young women of color were significantly less likely to graduate compared to their white counterparts and male counterparts. In addition, while rates of women attending college have been increasing throughout the years, women are still significantly underrepresented in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields and areas of trade.

Lack of opportunities available to girls and adolescents continue to impact females later in their lives. Overall, full-time female workers in Boston earn an average salary that is 80.2% of what their male counterparts earn. However, this pay disparity is further exacerbated for women of color. In comparison to both white women and their male of color counterparts, women of color (black/African-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, and Native American descent) earn less. African American women earn 63% and Latinas earn 50% of what their white counterparts earn.

In addition, the wage gap is wider in occupations where female workers are heavily concentrated (i.e. retail and sales, nursing and home health, housekeeping and bookkeeping) and narrows in fields requiring high specialization. These discrepancies in pay have consequences in terms of economic opportunity and stability, especially for women heading households. Furthermore, the effects are cumulative and result in women having fewer resources to support themselves in the later stages of life.

Findings from the 2015 Report on the Status of Women and Girls are clear. Disparities in opportunity based on gender, especially for low-income and women of color, put women and communities at a disadvantage in later stages of life. We need further investment in girl and women’s initiatives in Boston, along with the development of a research agenda that reports and collects annual or biennial data on the status of women and girls in Boston across multiple indicators. Only in partnership, are we able to counteract and reverse the negative impact the lack of opportunities have on the lives of women and girls, especially in our communities of color.

All statistics referred to in this article can be found in the 2015 Report on the Status of Women and Girls at http://www.cityof-boston.gov/women/reports/.

Bernadette Lim is a graduating senior at Harvard University. She majors in Human Evolutionary Biology and minors in Global Health and Health Policy. She led the creation and publication of the 2015 Report on the Status of Women and Girls in Boston and is the Executive Director of Women SPEAK.

“The Boston Public Schools data also showed that girls were more likely than boys to graduate high school. However, young women of color were significantly less likely to graduate compared to their white counterparts and male counterparts.”
“Intersectionality of the issues and just how so many issues intersect and how the divide and conquer policies work. How further divided the city is getting through the growing wealth divide, the education gap, the increasing vulnerability of women and girls, growing homelessness, etc.”

“It is really hard for women of color. We are devalued especially if you have an accent. A huge amount of education has to happen with African Americans and immigrants of color. There is a big disconnect between both populations. I think it is that collaboration so there is not a lot of understanding and that is the greatest piece of it that makes the work really hard to know that your struggle is my struggle.”

“There is a generational thing going on. The youth, they are not being listened to and they are making themselves be heard.”

Participants emphasized the need for leadership programs targeting women of color and the need for mentoring programs that help women at all levels. The multi-year support would lessen the stress of trying to locate funding. Also desirable would be communication support that incorporates new and emerging technologies as an organizing model that allows organizations to connect with youth via social media.

“One is that we are constantly chasing after money because it is small and we are a small organizations, but we have no guarantee. Multi-year grants would lessen the stress of trying to get funding.”

The first and last question we heard from our grantees-partners was, “when will BWF resume grant-making?” Our answer was “as soon as we possible”! Board and staff are committed to making this a reality. We plan on resuming Grant making this year.

“‘How further divided the city is getting through the growing wealth divide, the education gap, the increasing vulnerability of women and girls, growing homelessness, etc.’ ”
The Boston Women’s Fund is currently working on preparing the organization’s documents from its earlier history to donate to the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University. We anticipate the formal donation of the archival collection will take place in early fall 2016 and plan to commemorate the occasion with an event in the fall. Information will be forthcoming.

We are putting a call out to the women and girls who played a role in making the Boston Women’s Fund into what it is today. If you have any materials (documents, photographs, multimedia, etc) to donate to the collection, please feel contact us. We welcome contributions you would like to make.