"GIVING CIRCLES: A ROUND"

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Giving Circles: A Round
By Jessica Hoffmann and Irina Contreras

Giving circles have existed across cultures and throughout history, under various names and in various forms—from extended-family and neighborhood mutual-support organizations to formalized groups of individuals who pool resources to share with others. In the eighteenth century, hundreds of organizations and individuals pooled resources to create and support the Underground Railroad. In the 1960s and '70s, community business networks encouraged “buying Black.” And then, of course, there are resource-sharing projects like community gardens and informal money pots through which friends and family support one another in times of need.

Giving circles in general are more participatory, more collective-minded, and more accessible than traditional philanthropy, which is centered around wealthy individuals’ “charitable” giving. Today, more than half of the U.S.-based groups that call themselves giving circles are majority-women. Many grow out of long-standing community traditions, and some emerge to offer community-based support in communities long ignored by mainstream philanthropy. Of course, not everyone uses the term giving circle to describe their collective sharing of resources. Here, we offer glimpses of a few models of group giving.

Circle of Vision

A circle, says Sylvia Drew Ivie, “removes hierarchy, celebrates peer relationships, moves together in consensus, and creates a kind of family feeling.” A circle of people may start out doing one thing—“sending flowers for people who died,” she offers. “Then it turns out those people all died because they were subjected to some environmental thing, so the cycle evolves,” now taking action on environmental issues. “Women do what’s in front of them to do,” says Ivie. “And when there’s an injustice that becomes apparent, in a very organic way they move to that and use their power to address it.” The circle, she believes, is an ideal form for social-justice work—including social-justice work involving money.

A few years ago, Ivie, who spent years running a nonprofit health-care facility in South Los Angeles, participated in a women’s financial-literacy circle. From there, another circle formed: the Women of Color Giving Circle, a visionary California-based group.

When the financial-literacy circle formed, Ivie says, “We were scared of money and felt it was wrong to be interested in it.” Carmen Morgan, another member, expands: “Our fear of money has been used against us—‘us’ being social justice-minded people, activists. For a long time, we’ve said, ‘That’s not us. Money—bad; wealth—bad.’ We haven’t had a more complicated analysis.” Members of the financial-literacy and giving circles have learned together how to engage with money in ways that reflect their values. In Morgan’s words, “We can have resources to take care of ourselves, and we can give back to our communities in ways that are empowering to us and our communities.”

The Women of Color Giving Circle formed in 2006. The initial call to participate didn’t reach out specifically to women of color—“that’s who showed up,” members say. The eleven-member group includes African American, Asian American, Latina, and Latina/African American women ranging in age from thirty to sixty-five. Each member contributes $1,000 and several hours a year to the project. (Two silent partners give money but not time, and thus do not participate in decision making.) None of them identify as having financial wealth, though most consider themselves to make a living wage. (They all work in nonprofit organizations.)

Having experienced traditional philanthropy from the asking
side, the members of this circle set out to do things differently. “The existing criteria missed the mark for how you give money to people who are doing good work,” Ivy says. “We know it because we’ve experienced it, and we want to use what we’ve learned to support other people.” As Morgan describes it, “We are giving funding to folks who are ‘unfundable’—often overlooked and not valued. And these organizations look like us—they’re women of color, they’re immigrant folks, they’re folks that struggle with language-access issues . . . .” The group is “intentional about supporting the kinds of efforts we ourselves have been a part of, and things we know have less access than others,” says member Lisa Paredes.

The circle funds groups that are women and/or girl of color-led; whose missions focus on women’s rights, economic justice, financial literacy, and immigrants’ rights; and who have annual budgets under $500,000. The groups needn’t be formally incorporated as 501(c)(3)s, and they are funded for good work already done, not for a proposed new project that funders can claim credit for. “We like the work that you’ve done, and we want to continue to support the work,” says member Cindy Trinh.

So far, the circle has given a total of $10,500 to three organizations: Black Women for Wellness, a group committed to healing, educating, inspiring, and supporting Black women; the Girls Today Women Tomorrow Leadership Mentoring Program; and Khmer Girls in Action, a youth-led social-justice group of Southeast Asian women and girls.

The circle is intentional about avoiding typical grantee/ grantor dynamic. “Some of us have experienced those dynamics—how high do we have to jump for the foundation?” says Morgan. So the group carefully created a grant-making process that is not burdensome for grantees, and instead puts the burden of work on the grant makers. Members of the circle research organizations and nominate them to another, drawing from group members’ connections to the communities they aim to support. “But we also don’t want to pretend that there are no power dynamics at play . . . . We don’t want it to be this one-sided kind of relationship,” says Morgan, “but we’re still trying to figure out how to do that on a practical level.”

Another part of the group’s work is expanding notions of what philanthropy is and who can participate in it. Morgan notes, “We’re not giving that much away. We’ve got $12,000 that we give away every year, which is not gonna change an organization’s bottom line. But I think we can begin to support . . . .” Trinh puts it this way: “I’m not wealthy. I work in a nonprofit; I have all kinds of other financial obligations with family and life in general. How do I have a role in influencing organized philanthropy? Here’s this group of women who have this wealth of experiences . . . . how can I learn from them, and then try to figure out a way to get these nonprofits that we’re giving money to to question the traditional role of philanthropy? One hope of ours is that we will create this community where we start thinking about philanthropy and giving and how nonprofits get their money in a different way—[a way] that’s more empowering, that’s connected to the communities . . . . getting people to think about creative ways to tap into wealth, beyond just money—wealth of connections, wealth of ideas, wealth of enthusiasm and inspiration.”

Those broader definitions of wealth and community infuse the group’s entire process. It’s a process that’s “not cumbersome to those given to or to ourselves. It must be sustainable,” Morgan says. And that means being patient and forgiving with one another—because sometimes someone is sick, or needs to care for a kid, and can’t make a meeting. “Life issues will come up, and we need to acknowledge our humanity . . . . if that’s not there, we’re just emulating the structures that already exist.” The circle’s last annual meeting was about five hours long. Approximately forty-five minutes of that time was spent on group business; the other four-plus hours were devoted to “relationship building, breaking bread, catching up on what’s going on in our lives, locating ourselves with each other. And that,” Morgan says, “feels right.”

Communities Supporting Youth to Make Change

Quean’s collective of queer and trans youth of color in Los Angeles, funds itself to engage in radical-queer political work. Most of the group’s funding comes from individual donors, many of whom are current Quean members or members of the collective’s Community Advisory Board, which is composed of past members who are now over age twenty-six. Community members support the group’s work in general and also via specific efforts. For example, Quean’s Gwen Project (named for Gwen Araujo) offers young queer education and training to take part in a legacy of a radical-queer political work specifically by and for marginalized queers and trans people of color. Supportive community members (“most likely it is other queer people of color that are marginalized in a variety of ways,” says member Ned del Callejo) sponsor attendees for sixty dollars each.

The Association of Raza Educators—which works to counteract the racism, poverty, ICE and police brutality, and educational oppression of people native to what is now the U.S. Southwest—offers a scholarship fund for undocumented students under attack by U.S. immigration policy. For 2007, A.R.E raised $10,000 for the scholarship fund via grassroots methods such as passing a hat at events and fundraising banquets. They are close to doubling that amount for 2008.

Emerging Asian American Giving Circles

There’s been a blossoming of localized giving circles in Asian American communities recently, says Sandy Kojiyama of Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy. In Minneapolis, a group initiated by young Hmong women pools about $15,000 a year to support women and girls in their community. A New York–based circle pools $75,000 to $100,000 a year to support social justice–oriented arts projects by Asian Americans. “Less than 1 percent of philanthropic dollars goes to the Asian American Pacific Islander community,” says AAPAIP board member Rini Banerjee. Drawing on long traditions of community giving, these community-based groups are doing it for themselves. “We’re not waiting for philanthropy to fulfill the needs of the community,” says Kojiyama. “We’re not gonna sit by and buy into this deficit model, like, ‘We’re so poor, please help us.’ It’s more of an empowerment model.”

She notes that giving circles can be “really accessible, not scary—you can just ask your mom and your friends to participate at $250 or $500 a year. You don’t have to be a millionaire . . . . [Giving] should be a habit for everyone—time or money or expertise—if that becomes more of a cultural belief, or something that’s built in to the way you are, that’s part of social change.”

Illustrations by Jaleh Afshar