

Women's Fund of Mississippi invests in success for all

Seetha Srinivasan / • Guest columnist •
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In April, the Women's Fund of Mississippi will proudly mark a significant step in its development: the completion of its first, successful year as a statewide, nonprofit agency independent from the Community Foundation of Greater Jackson. Established in 2001 by a small group of women as a field-of-interest fund of the CFGJ, the WF is now a partner of the CFGJ, is governed by a board of directors, and has a staff of two persons.

The mission of the Women's Fund of Mississippi is to improve the lives of women and girls by promoting social change and economic self-sufficiency through strategic grantmaking and advocacy. The WF seeks to fulfill this mission by focusing on three specific areas: early childhood education and care, teen health, and prevention of violence against women. These emphases were selected because there is evidence that providing high-quality early childhood programs has significant short and long-term economic benefits, addressing teen pregnancy curtails its enduring negative repercussions for the individual and for society, and preventing violence against women is crucial for guaranteeing the welfare of the entire community.

Research and anecdotal accounts from the world over demonstrate that it is women who are primarily responsible for determining the economic well-being of their families, and hence their communities (and nations). A recent headline in The Clarion-Ledger ("Haiti chaos eases as food goes to women," Feb. 1) confirms, even if somewhat obliquely, the accuracy of that statement. A spokesman for the World Food Program said: "Our experience around the world is that food is more likely to be equitably shared in households if it is given to women." The success of the international micro-credit movement and the role it has played in ameliorating poverty is credited to the fact that as loans began to be made to women, their families more surely benefited, with a corresponding ripple effect.

It is this overarching belief, that in empowering women all lives are strengthened, that drove the founders of the Women's Fund of Mississippi to

establish an organization solely dedicated to improving the status of women and girls in the state.

Since its inception, the fund has received gifts in excess of \$1 million and granted over \$600,000 to such nonprofit agencies as Moore Community House in Biloxi (for reproductive health planning), Children's Justice Center at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, and the Coordinated Community Response at the Gulf Coast Women's Center for Nonviolence. The grants are intended to address immediate needs with the larger goal of bringing about changes that will benefit future generations.

In addition to giving grants, the Women's Fund of Mississippi advocates for legislation that has a particular impact on the lives of the state's women and girls. Most recently, members voiced support for three bills pertaining to domestic violence that will soon come to the House and Senate floors for a vote. Perhaps the most important of these bills is HB 657/SB 2344 that would ban insurance companies from regarding domestic violence as a pre-existing condition.

As it begins to fulfill its role of being a statewide agency, the Women's Fund is holding meetings around the state to assess challenges that a range of communities face so that it can begin to strategically assist their women and girls, as well those of women and girls in the metro Jackson area. The state's Women's Fund is a part of the global Women's Funding Network, comprising over 150

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organizations that invest \$60 million annually in women and girls worldwide.

Even in the short time it has been in existence, the Women's Fund of Mississippi has made a difference in the lives of women and girls across the state. The future of a society is only as bright and as promising as the circumstances that exist to encourage its women to realize their full potential and to allow them to flourish. Mississippi has the unfortunate reputation of being the nation's worst state for women. If this is to change, and it must, it is imperative that the Women's Fund of Mississippi get the attention and support it requires to succeed in bringing about economic self-sufficiency for women, and hence prosperity for a nation.

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