Middle class and elite women historically left an indelible imprint on civil society through their associations, fundraising, and gifts of money and time. However, in most countries—including the United States—far less is known about their roles as donors than as organizational entrepreneurs and volunteers.

One of the reasons for this is the fact that until fairly recently, men and women's civil society activities often paralleled each other, rather than running on the same track: while men made many of their most significant contributions through gifts of money, women were more likely to volunteer. In effect, women's philanthropy was rooted in an economy of time; men's in an economy of money.

This pattern may have been more common in England and its colonies—where the English common law doctrine of femme covert limited the ability of wives to own and alienate their own property. Ironically, it was reversed in many Islamic nations, where women were entitled to control their own estates, and had a far more significant early record as donors than as volunteers.¹

The picture becomes more complicated in the US after the passage of married women’s property acts beginning in the 1840s. By the 1880s, at least some of the daughters and wives of the country’s first major crop of multi-millionaires were beginning to control sizable fortunes in their own right. Much of this money was later siphoned into the development of research universities and foundations—most of which fostered the professional fortunes of men. Far less went into the coffers of women’s groups, despite women’s (including female donors’) personal involvement in these institutions.

This paper will examine this phenomenon through the changing fortunes of one organization: the National American Woman Suffrage Association, which was the major vehicle for promoting women’s suffrage in the United States at the cusp of the 20th century. In particular, it will look at who gave, who did not, and what happened when startled families sought to “claw back” the funds bequeathed to NAWSA by “wayward” mothers and wives.

It will also ask who gave: was it the first generation of female millionaires, or did the funds come from professional women instead? These questions have significant contemporary relevance, given that women now control an increasing share of national wealth in both the U.S. and overseas. I will also seek to set American women’s giving within a broader comparative context to introduce new research questions for other scholars.

There is virtually no secondary literature on this topic, aside from a few very recent biographies of individuals such as Mary Garrett and Olivia Sage. The theoretical models of

resource mobilization theorists such as John D. McCarthy and Mayer Zald can certainly be tested in this context. Perhaps the most relevant theoretical framework comes from feminist studies, particularly the work of Gloria Steinem, who tied the phenomenon of wealthy women giving their time to women’s causes and their money to men’s to upper class patriarchalism, which she contends significantly disempowered women of wealth.²

My preliminary research suggests that Steinem is correct, although there are gradations between old and new wealth that have not previously been explored; nor has the impact of various professional cultures in shaping the ways in which women give. Moreover, McCarthy and Zald’s hypotheses lose their relevance when applied to women’s groups, particularly the notion that “as the amount of discretionary resources of mass and elite publics increases, the absolute and relative amount of resources available to the [social movement sector] increases.”³ Clearly, we need new paradigms.

Since I am an historian, my research will be archival, including NAWSA’s records, the writings and manuscripts of key figures such as Susan B. Anthony (who was a major fundraiser for the organization), and the lives, works and words of prominent donors such as Mrs. Frank Leslie and Alva Vanderbilt Belmont.

Aside from opening a new area of inquiry, this topic also has relevance within my own discipline, counterpointing nearly four decades of historical research “from the bottom up” written from the perspective of laborers and the poor. In the process, I hope to introduce a stronger theoretical framework understanding the historical role of philanthropy both within and beyond the United States.

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³ McCarthy and Zald, 1224.