

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/white-house-answers-pushback-from-women-and-girls-of-color-with-118-million-investment>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Last week, the White House, in partnership with 20 foundations, [announced](#) that it would be investing \$118 million to improve the lives of women and girls of color. The news comes just over a year after the White House announced its \$200 million public-private partnership for young men and boys of color, My Brothers Keeper, which ignited controversy over the legitimacy of an effort to end racial injustice without including girls of color.

The new investment will infuse urgently needed capital efforts to improve the lives of women and girls of color, but it was not an inevitable accomplishment. Women and girls of color across the country were forced to push back and make their voices heard whether through protests on American streets from Ferguson to New York City, or through tireless, behind-the-scenes efforts at the highest levels of government, the nonprofit sector, academia, and the major womens foundations.

Kimberle Crenshaw led the way with an op-ed in the *New York Times* titled [The Girls Obama Forgot](#), which critiqued the then newly-launched initiative for boys of color because it excluded girls without any [evidence-based rationale](#) for doing so. She questioned whether racial justice leaders thought that perhaps the exclusion of women and girls is the price to be paid for any race-focused initiative in this era. Her criticisms were soon echoed by powerhouses of womens philanthropy, including Gloria Steinem and Pamela Shifman in an article titled [Help Boys, but Dont Shortchange Girls](#):

We are thankful for foundations that commit significant resources to address the pervasive and systemic racism in American society, but we wonder why the problems facing boys and men of color are taken more seriously than the problems facing girls and women of color. We need to invest in creating real, meaningful opportunities for our sisters as well as our brothers. You cant solve a problem by rendering half of it invisible.

As feminist leaders filled the pages of [magazines](#) and [blogs](#) around the country, young women of color, many of whom were already [driving forces within grassroots movements](#) like [#BlackLivesMatter](#), took to the streets and to Twitter and started the [#SayHerName](#) campaign to shine a spotlight on the ways that cis and trans women of color are harmed by police violence. The New York City-based [Girls for Gender Equity](#), led by [Joanne Smith](#) and an intergenerational group of young women of color activists, began [holding listening sessions](#) for girls and women of color around the country where they could tell their stories and name the discrimination they are facing stories that are often rendered invisible by a systematic failure to conduct research or analyze policy from an intersectional perspective that accounts for overlapping experiences of race, gender, and class.

Women of color leaders working in government, including many in senior positions in the White House, took young women into the halls of power, where they testified to how girls of color are systematically [pushed out of public schools](#). They explained that, although the United States is home to just five percent of the global female population, we [incarcerate](#) nearly a third of the worlds female prisoners. And even though far more men are incarcerated than women, a recent economic analysis of the offender-funded criminal justice system found that the [financial burden](#) of incarceration falls largely on the backs of women of color, who are often forced to sacrifice basic needs for themselves and their children to pay debts incurred by incarcerated family members. They lifted up the voices of transgender women of color who are murdered with startling regularity often the targets of both [hate crimes](#) and [police violence](#).

In 2015, their efforts began to pay off. First, Melissa Mark-Viverito, New York Citys first Latina speaker, launched the citys [Young Womens Initiative](#) to focus on the needs of cis and trans girls of color in the five boroughs. Next, President Obama gave a speech honoring the lives of black women and girls and calling for an end to the insidious [sexual abuse to prison pipeline](#); then, the White House began holding a series of forums on women and girls of color that culminated in last weeks announcement.

As we celebrate this new commitment of resources, it is important that we also remember and honor how we got here. The story of the countrys new \$118 million investment is both an exemplary display of inclusive and responsive governance on the part of the White House and a hard-won victory for a national movement that is committed to making the lives of women, girls, and gender non-conforming people of color central to its march toward social justice. Centuries of racialized gender oppression will not be erased overnight or with money alone. But with the continued leadership of the women and girls of color who made this investment possible, the long arc of the moral universe will surely bend that much closer to justice for all.

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