

MARCH 2026

Women and Philanthropy In Ireland

From Hidden Presence to Recognised Influence

Dr Sheila Cannon, Associate Professor

Dr Gemma Donnelly-Cox, Associate Professor

Dr Maria Gallo, Research Fellow

Lian Wang, Research Assistant

Centre for Social Innovation, Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Community
Foundation
Ireland

Contents

Foreword: Dr Linda Doyle, Provost of Trinity	4
Foreword: Denise Charlton, Chief Executive of Community Foundation Ireland	5
Acknowledgements	6
Executive Summary	8
1. Introduction: Philanthropy in Ireland and Women’s Philanthropy	10
Research Aims and Methodology Summary	10
The Research Partnership	12
2. Findings: The Landscape for Philanthropy and Women in Philanthropy	12
Women’s Philanthropy in Ireland: Setting the Scene	13
Women’s Philanthropic Giving Journeys	16
Dimensions of Giving	16
Dimension 1: Visibility – Privacy	17
Dimension 2: Collaborative - Individual Giving	18
Dimension 3: Data-driven - Personal Giving Preferences	18
Summary: Navigating the Philanthropic Landscape	20
4. Understanding the Findings: Evolution, Environment, Enablers, Engagements	21
Factor 1: Evolution	22
Factor 2: Environment	24
Factor 3: Enablers	26
Factor 4: Engagements	28
5. Policy and Practice: Learning and Implications from the Research	28
Policy Implications	30
Implications for Practice	32
6. From Hidden to Visible – Building the Future of Irish Philanthropy Research	34
Conclusion: From the End to the Beginning	36
Appendix: Detailed Research Methodology and Data Analysis	40
References	42



Foreword

Dr Linda Doyle



It is a pleasure to introduce Women & Philanthropy in Ireland: From Hidden Presence to Recognised Influence. This landmark report shines a light on the leadership, strategy and impact of women shaping philanthropy across Ireland.

The findings are clear: women's philanthropy is thoughtful, strategic and impact-driven. Women act as catalysts and long-term partners, contributing not only financial resources but also expertise, networks and sustained commitment.

Their priorities align closely with Trinity's mission as Ireland's leading university-advancing research excellence, widening access to education, and developing innovative approaches to complex social, economic and environmental challenges. It demonstrates how women's philanthropy is fundamental to enabling meaningful and sustained progress, built on shared values and partnership, and to advancing solutions that serve society as a whole.

This important study reflects Trinity's commitment to rigorous scholarship, bringing fresh insight to an under-examined field and amplifying voices driving social change. It offers compelling evidence of the influential role women are playing as philanthropic leaders, while also underscoring the need for continued research and greater visibility for their leadership - which is already vital to addressing the challenges ahead.

The research project itself reflects the power of partnership, led by Community Foundation Ireland and the Centre for Social Innovation at Trinity Business School, with the support of Trinity Development & Alumni. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the researchers and collaborating teams whose intellectual leadership and dedication brought this important study to fruition.

Their careful scholarship has made a significant and lasting contribution to our understanding of women's philanthropy in Ireland.

My final word of thanks goes to the extraordinary group of women philanthropists who made this study possible and gave generously of their time and insight. Their openness and trust have enriched this work immeasurably.

Dr Linda Doyle, Provost and President of Trinity College Dublin

Foreword

Denise Charlton



Women philanthropists drive meaningful social change through giving that is empathetic, strategic and deeply rooted in fairness and justice. A long-standing contribution which is now documented, recorded and recognised in this pioneering research.

As a philanthropic hub, Community Foundation Ireland partners with visionary women in terms of giving, to deliver for frontline services as well as policy change needed for long term solutions and benefits. Now in partnership with the Trinity Business School and Trinity College, Dublin, those experiences are reflected upon in depth to form an understanding of the personal motivations behind the giving. Participants in this study tell us their philanthropy is personal, purposeful and motivated to deliver long-term change.

We see that in terms of giving by families or individuals and also women leaders leading or guiding corporate philanthropy. This is philanthropy that strengthens communities from the ground up. Women donors supporting frontline organisations, enabling them to innovate, respond quickly and plan for the future.

The impact is real and life changing. Children and women are accessing trauma supports, places of safety and greater legal protections from gender-based violence. Education, training and work are accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds. Local and national actions are being taken to address the emergency in climate and nature. Families fleeing war have a safe place to call home.

This giving can also take a longer-term view delivering structural or policy change. Acting to lift barriers, giving single parents the opportunity of education and training. Prompting and facilitating national conversation on consent leading to the introduction of classes across all educational curricula. Confronting and combatting the modern-day online exploitation, abuse and harm.

The philanthropic journeys show personal values, personal or family experiences as well as an appetite to grow understanding and learnings are motivators which see women give much more than financial support but also their time, energy and skills. Deeply rooted and resilient, this giving can be a long-term relationship with a keenness to be an active partner, an advocate, leader or catalyst for social change.

I want to thank all who gave of their time to contribute to the findings. Each experience captured raises awareness about the role of women in philanthropy and the benefits delivered for people, place and planet.

Denise Charlton, Chief Executive of Community Foundation Ireland.

Acknowledgements

Many stakeholders have made this project and report possible, and it is our pleasure to acknowledge their contributions.

We acknowledge with gratitude the women philanthropists and philanthropy professionals who made time in their busy lives to meet with us and share their experiences and insights openly and thoughtfully. This report would not have been possible without their generosity and insight.

In 2014, Jackie Harrison completed a Master's Dissertation on Women's Philanthropy in Ireland. Her study laid the foundations and provided an impetus for further research in this area.

The collaboration between the research partners grew from a discussion in 2024 between Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity Development and Alumni, about Community Foundation Ireland's interest in celebrating and promoting philanthropy amongst women, and recommendations from Trinity's Inspiring Generations campaign for more intentional engagement with women's philanthropy. Their mutual interest grew into philanthropic support for research and collaboration throughout the project lifecycle.

We are grateful to our academic colleagues in Ireland, Europe, the United Kingdom and North America who shared their expertise in philanthropy and philanthropy research in the early stages of the project.

Trinity Business School facilitated us with the significant time and space well beyond the initially allocated plan, as well as supporting the organisation of project meetings and events.

The academic associations European Research Network on Philanthropy (ERNOP), and Association for Research for Nonprofit Organization and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA – via the EURnova meeting hosted by the Vienna University of Business and Economics) organised conferences where we received valuable feedback and input from academic colleagues and peers.

Anonymised quotes are included in the text of the report to illustrate common themes and perspectives among women donors.

“I’ve observed some remarkably quiet and powerful female philanthropists in Ireland who work hard in the background and make a great impact”



Executive Summary

Women and Philanthropy in Ireland: From Hidden Presence to Recognised Influence presents the first in-depth qualitative exploration of contemporary women's philanthropy in Ireland, addressing a critical evidence gap in national philanthropy research. Undertaken through a partnership between Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity College Dublin, the study aligns with the National Philanthropy Policy 2024–2028, which prioritises improved data, research, and inclusion within the philanthropic ecosystem.

Ireland has a long tradition of generosity rooted in community, religion, and voluntary action, yet organised philanthropy—particularly women's philanthropy—has historically remained under-researched and largely invisible. Drawing on a scoping literature review, expert consultation with international scholars and practitioners, and 38 semi-structured interviews (30 women philanthropists and eight philanthropic advisors), this study provides new insight into how women in Ireland engage with, shape, and lead philanthropy.

Across experiences, one message is clear: women in Ireland are giving in ways that are thoughtful, values-driven, personal and strategic. They contribute financial support, time, networks, advocacy, and leadership. Many aim to address systemic challenges, invest in long-term solutions, and strengthen communities locally, nationally, and globally. There is a clear giving journey, from early experiences, to building trust, engaging with organisations, and leaving a legacy.

The women who participated described navigating a series of meaningful considerations between visibility and privacy, collaborative and individual giving, evidence and personal passion, early giving journeys and seasoned leadership. Rather than choosing one or the other, they often hold these dimensions in balance, adjusting as their experiences and understanding deepen.

The study has clear implications for policy and practice. It underscores the need for gender-inclusive philanthropic strategies, sustained investment in research infrastructure, and greater visibility of women's leadership in philanthropy. For practitioners, it highlights the value of relational, trust-based approaches to donor engagement, tailored stewardship, and collaborative models of giving.

This report opens pathways for expanded and longitudinal research, cross-national comparison, and deeper analysis of women's philanthropic impact. It invites policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to collaborate in unlocking the full potential of women's philanthropy as a strategic force for positive social change in Ireland.



1. Introduction: Philanthropy in Ireland and Women's Philanthropy

Traditions of giving and a culture of generosity are deeply embedded in Ireland in religious, community and voluntary actions. However, organised philanthropy has historically received little academic and policy attention. Limited data has made it difficult to put contemporary philanthropy in Ireland into international comparative context.¹ The first *National Philanthropy Policy*² launched in 2023, signals a shift in public interest in philanthropy. This policy commits to improving data and research. The first annual update to the Policy in 2025 described research and data collection as central to strengthening the evidence base for philanthropy in Ireland.³

As a commitment to understanding and strengthening philanthropy in Ireland, women's philanthropy is emerging as a distinct area of interest. In 2010, Community Foundation Ireland established The Women's Fund. In 2014, the first academic study of women's philanthropy in Ireland was undertaken as a Master thesis. In her work, Harrison commented that women's philanthropy research focuses on historical charitable activity rather than capturing the lived experience of women philanthropists.⁴

“There's quite an Irish psychology of giving back” (Int 1-1)

Internationally, research into women's philanthropy considers how women give and to whom, addressing personal and emotional motivations in the context of broader social factors.⁵ **The research is increasingly recognising women as philanthropic leaders, with significant influence in both individual and shared giving decisions.⁶ This positions women's philanthropy as a form of strategic social investment.⁷** Recent research from the Women's Philanthropy Institute, University of Indiana states that women engaged in philanthropy focus on measurable impact, transparency and leadership signalling to more strategic and globally engaged giving. It remains challenging to develop a picture of women's philanthropy in Ireland as much of this activity takes place outside public view.⁸

-
1. Breen, O.B., et al. (2024). Philanthropy in Ireland. UCD Working Papers in Law, Criminology & Socio-Legal Studies Research Paper No. 11; Gallo, M.L. and Donnelly-Cox, G. (2017). 'Profile of Giving in Ireland.' In: Hoolwerf, L.K. and Schuyt, T.N.M. (eds.). Giving in Europe: The Current State of Research on Giving by Households, Corporations, Foundations and Charity Lotteries in Europe. Amsterdam: European Research Network on Philanthropy.
 2. Government of Ireland (2023). National Philanthropy Policy 2024 – 2028. Department of Rural and Community Development.
 3. Government of Ireland (2025) National Philanthropy Policy: Annual Update- March 2025. Department of Rural and Community Development.
 4. Harrison, J. (2014) Towards building an understanding of female philanthropists in Ireland: An exploratory study. Trinity College Dublin.
 5. Mesch, D.J. and Pactor, A., 2016. Women and philanthropy. In *The Routledge companion to philanthropy*, p. 88-101. Routledge
 6. Ibid.
 7. Dale, E.J. and O'Connor, H.A., 2021. The million dollar donor journey: Stages of development for high net worth women donors. *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 26(1), p.e1680.
 8. Mesch, D. et al, 2016. Giving to women and girls: Who gives, and why? IUPUI Women's Philanthropy Institute, Lily Family School of Philanthropy; Ackerman, J. et al. (2024) Women Give 2022 Racial Justice, Gender and Generosity. Women Philanthropy Institute.

“Women are coming out as the ones who will determine how to make a difference through philanthropy, not in a passive way but in a strategic way for the good of society” (Prof 1-3)

The origins of this project lie in the conviction of philanthropy professionals in Ireland that – as is the case internationally - women’s giving is a significant, evolving, and developing element within the Irish philanthropic landscape. Philanthropy professionals observe the giving journeys of these women, however their professional relationships with these women donors limit their ability to study this behaviour. In contrast, academic researchers with an interest in women’s philanthropy struggle to identify and gain access to women donors. To bridge these gaps, Community Foundation Ireland partnered with Trinity College Dublin to undertake a qualitative scoping study.

This study addresses a critical gap in Irish philanthropy research. While international scholarship has explored gendered patterns of giving for decades, Ireland lacked contemporary evidence on women’s philanthropic engagement. The launch of the National Philanthropy Policy (2024–2028) underscores the urgency of building a robust knowledge base to inform inclusive strategies.

Studying women’s philanthropy now is significant because:

Policy Context: Ireland’s national policy explicitly calls for diversity and inclusion in philanthropy.

Practice Imperatives: Organisations seek to engage women donors strategically yet lack evidence-based approaches.

Global Trends: Women’s giving is increasingly recognised as a driver of social change internationally; there is an opportunity for Ireland to align with this momentum.

Research Aims and Methodology Summary

This study presents the significance of women's philanthropy to contribute to the evidence base for philanthropy in Ireland. This research aims to:

- Understand patterns of engagement by women in philanthropy through exploring women's giving journeys.
- Identify key factors, motivations, and trends shaping women's giving in the Irish context, including enablers and barriers.
- Inform strategies for strengthening women's role in philanthropy in the Irish context.
- Explore implications for policy and future philanthropy research.

This research report is the first output from a partnership between Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity College Dublin.

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design comprising three interlinked elements: scoping literature review, expert consultation, and semi-structured interviews. The research project was led by a research team in the Centre for Social Innovation in the Trinity Business School and approved through the Trinity College Dublin's Research Ethics Committee. The research team conducted 30 formal interviews with women philanthropists, and eight with philanthropic advisors between June and September 2025. For details on the full methodology see the Appendix.

The Research Partnership

The Women in Philanthropy Research Project is a collaborative partnership between academic and philanthropic organisations. The **Centre for Social Innovation, Trinity Business School** is the lead partner on research design, including approach to identifying and selecting research participants, analysis and reporting. **Community Foundation Ireland** initiated the project by articulating the need for research. They provided grant funding for the study and identified research participants. **Trinity Development & Alumni** supported the project launch, and report development and design and identified research participants. Both Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity Development & Alumni continue to offer ongoing advisory input on the research.

Community Foundation Ireland initiated the project by articulating the need for the research and providing grant funding for the study. Both Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity Development & Alumni adopted intermediary 'facilitator' roles, independently identifying and contacting potential interviewees, providing project information, and inviting participation in interviews. Both organisations provided organisational support for the launch and continue to offer ongoing advisory input to the research.



2. Findings: The Landscape for Philanthropy and Women in Philanthropy

The findings provide insight into the landscape of women's philanthropy in Ireland. The sample of women engaged in philanthropy in this study shows distinctive features, characterised through three dimensions of women's giving.

“I believe philanthropy is giving your time, funds, and leveraging connections. When I think of the work I do, it's not just money, it's also who you know, which is valuable. Right now, I'm interested in systemic change... I'm interested in solutions that can solve multiple problems at once and ideally make organizations more financially sustainable... I'm much more interested in thoughtful approaches to solve underlying issues, or solutions that will help with adaptation or resolution over time” (Int2-7)

Women's Philanthropy in Ireland: Setting the Scene

Women's philanthropy as a field is emergent in Ireland, with increased focus since an inaugural Symposium on Women and Philanthropy (convened by Community Foundation Ireland and Philanthropy Ireland) in 2010 and National Philanthropy Policy in 2023. While fundraising organisations can detail the amount or causes of women's giving, there is limited understanding of the dynamics of women's giving that make it distinctive.

Women are engaged as philanthropists with hybrid roles. The findings suggest women philanthropists give significant financial resources in Ireland and abroad alongside other philanthropic activities involving their time and talent. For example, these women are also engaged in advocacy for causes and the governance of organisations. They play active roles and are interested in finding new ways to add value to the causes they support. These women philanthropists are also leaders, advocates, and influencers, shaping philanthropic priorities and governance.

Women's giving is strategic. These engaged philanthropists are thoughtful and considered in their giving and in their engagement with causes and organisations they support. They are open to sharing their practices and ideas to enhance the causes they support. The strategic intent that characterises their engagement with philanthropy defies gendered assumptions found in the literature that women's giving is informal, driven by personal interests and emotional responses, and small in scale, scope and impact. The giving journeys of women's philanthropy of Ireland further illustrate these findings that women's giving is strategic, intentional, and often large in scale and impact.

Women's Philanthropic Giving Journeys

“Our philanthropic journey is tied to our personal journey” (Int1-1)

Women's philanthropy evolves over time. Rather than their philanthropy being static and institutionalised, the journeys of women in this study show the dynamism of their philanthropy over time, with relationships, experiences, and events directing and shaping philanthropic action.

Philanthropy mirrors life. Amongst the women interviewed, philanthropic journeys often paralleled life journeys. Interviewees commonly pointed to giving patterns that mirrored their life stages, with changes in their philanthropy linked to changes in what was important in their life at the time. Within individual giving journeys, patterns of giving were resilient, with consistent giving patterns even during economic uncertainty.

Giving is over a lifetime. These women interviewees talked about a lifetime of giving, back to their formative years. Early experiences, such as of parents' giving, were highlighted as factors which influenced their own practices: *“I grew up in a household where both my parents would have actively encouraged us to be involved in giving back and community activities”* (Int2-8). Women pointed to patterns of giving as they could, early in their lives and their careers: *“I suppose I've done small things since my mid to late twenties... it was about giving back to a place where I'd had a good education”* (Int12-1) and *“I've been making donations since my first full-time paycheck... even before I really knew what philanthropy meant.”* (Int2-7)

Effective giving is a learning curve. Early phases of the giving journey included searching for opportunities for learning and engagement. Many interviewees commented on key guides or philanthropic organisations who assisted them in aligning their priorities and goals with organisations and causes: *“We looked into the possibility of setting up our own trust, but... We felt [Philanthropic Organisation] was the best route to use our success to support others in various projects. we're still learning”* (Int 2-2). These women also noted some of the limitations in the way that they gave: *“I gave at the beginning without realising the multiplier effect of one act of giving”* (Int1-7). They noted sensible starting points on which practices could be built: *“I started with giving to a charity I respected.”* (Int1-5)



Trusted relationships matter. Further on in the journey, as women philanthropists gained experience and confidence, relationships with philanthropic organisations remained important. These women also pointed to increased connection with the causes or organisations they support, and the ways in which this influences their giving: *“Once you’re engaged, you’re much more likely to give again, because the relationship is there.”* (Int1-2) They could clearly articulate their own philosophy of giving and point to the capacities they hold: *“I always felt in my philanthropy it was where I could bring knowledge and skill”* (Int 1-5) and *“Right now, I believe philanthropy is giving your time, funds, and leveraging connections. When I think of the work I do, it’s not just money, it’s also who you know, which is valuable.”* (Int 2-7)

Women are thoughtful and strategic as they continue to give. As these women continue to engage in philanthropy, they increasingly leverage their own expertise to support organisations development and change. However, these women differed in views on how best to achieve this change, with differences reflecting their own areas of expertise. For example: *“I’m interested in solutions that can solve multiple problems at once and ideally make organisations more financially sustainable.”* (Int2-7) *“I have experience. I have particular skill in organisations. It suited me to be strategic. I encourage people as much as possible.”* (Int1-5) *“I prefer to be a catalyst funder... I like to be there when it really helps, and then have others take over.”* (Int2-7) *“Right now, I’m interested in systemic change.”* (Int 2-7)





Dimensions of Giving

While the findings point to patterns in giving across interviewees, it is not possible to identify distinct types of philanthropists. This is because contrasting characteristics or practices were often evident in the same woman engaged in philanthropy. Presenting distinct types of philanthropists, according to a particular set of characteristics would misrepresent the multiple strands present in individuals. Instead, this report illustrates patterns through three ‘dimensions of giving’.

The data analysis pointed to how each of these dimensions of giving showed a paradox. Participating women described navigating a series of meaningful considerations between visibility and privacy, collaborative and individual giving, evidence-based giving and personal passion. Rather than choosing one or the other, they often hold these dimensions in balance, adjusting as their experiences and understanding deepen.

Women’s Voices – Dimension 1: Visibility-Privacy

Overall, there was a preference for discretion, but some women embraced visibility for advocacy purposes. Some women gave very privately, with a desire for anonymity, while others were keen to use their giving to support the further development and promotion of philanthropy in Ireland. Regardless of how private the donor wanted to remain, most highly valued some personal recognition and acknowledgement of the gift.

“We’ve been public about gifts. Peer-to-peer asking and leading by example works, but that’s not European psychology, especially not Irish....it’s changing, but still I wouldn’t label myself a philanthropist, but I am public about choosing to give away money. I believe that you should give if you’re in a fortunate position to be able to do it...”(Int 1-1)

“One big issue in Ireland is people don’t want to put their head above the parapet. Irish people are generous, happy to give to the poor box, to support people when things go wrong. But very few will say, I give significantly... We are unbelievably discreet.” (Int 1-5)

Women's Voices – Dimension 2: Collaborative – Individual Giving

Interviewees described a diversity of ways of giving. These included: giving via an intermediary, project-based giving with others involved, family-based decision making, and joint giving with a spouse. Individual giving included donations from lead gifts to smaller donations. The decisions on ways of giving that involved these women varied by year, request or by cause.

“There are certain women who are motivated by women’s issues or causes very specifically, a lot of the people that I deal with, if they’re in relationships, are part of a husband and wife couple, or wife and wife. They’re motivated by shared value and things they want to see, particularly in the context of what the future looks like for their children and grandchildren.” (Int 2-9)

“We’re learning all the time about the endless, bottomless pit of worthy causes. The hard piece for us is they [intermediary agency] send us options. You’d like to give to them all... so it’s really hard to just be selective about it. We try to keep themes around giving and stick to these themes.” (Int 2-2)

“I like donating money, and I do that, but for some of the projects I want to see develop, philanthropy is a necessity. The idea is to replace philanthropy in those projects with other sources so they can be financially sustainable... So I see philanthropy as a bridge or catalyst for these projects.” (Int 12-1)

Women's Voices – Dimension 3: Data-driven – Personal Giving Preferences

Emotive experiences and personal history shape giving by women, and, at the same time, evidence-based decisions also feature prominently in this research. The data suggests giving motivations balance personal drive with a desire to contribute to creating systemic change. Values alignment was important in both data-driven and personal approaches, with an emphasis on transparency and measurable impact.

“Increasingly, the sector is getting better at telling its story and demonstrating impact. If an organisation has really good people who can articulate the transformation they are achieving, that can be motivators. I know lots of donors who might love a cause or an area of work, but if the organisation cannot articulate the impact, they will not get the funding.” (Int 2-9)

“I basically have two ways of giving. One is my head, and the other is my heart... So with my head, I was involved with [Philanthropic Organisation 2]... But in general now, I probably follow my heart more. Because I have more knowledge and more understanding, and things come at me. I just tend to give to projects that mean something to me.” (Int 2-4)

Summary: Navigating the Philanthropic Landscape

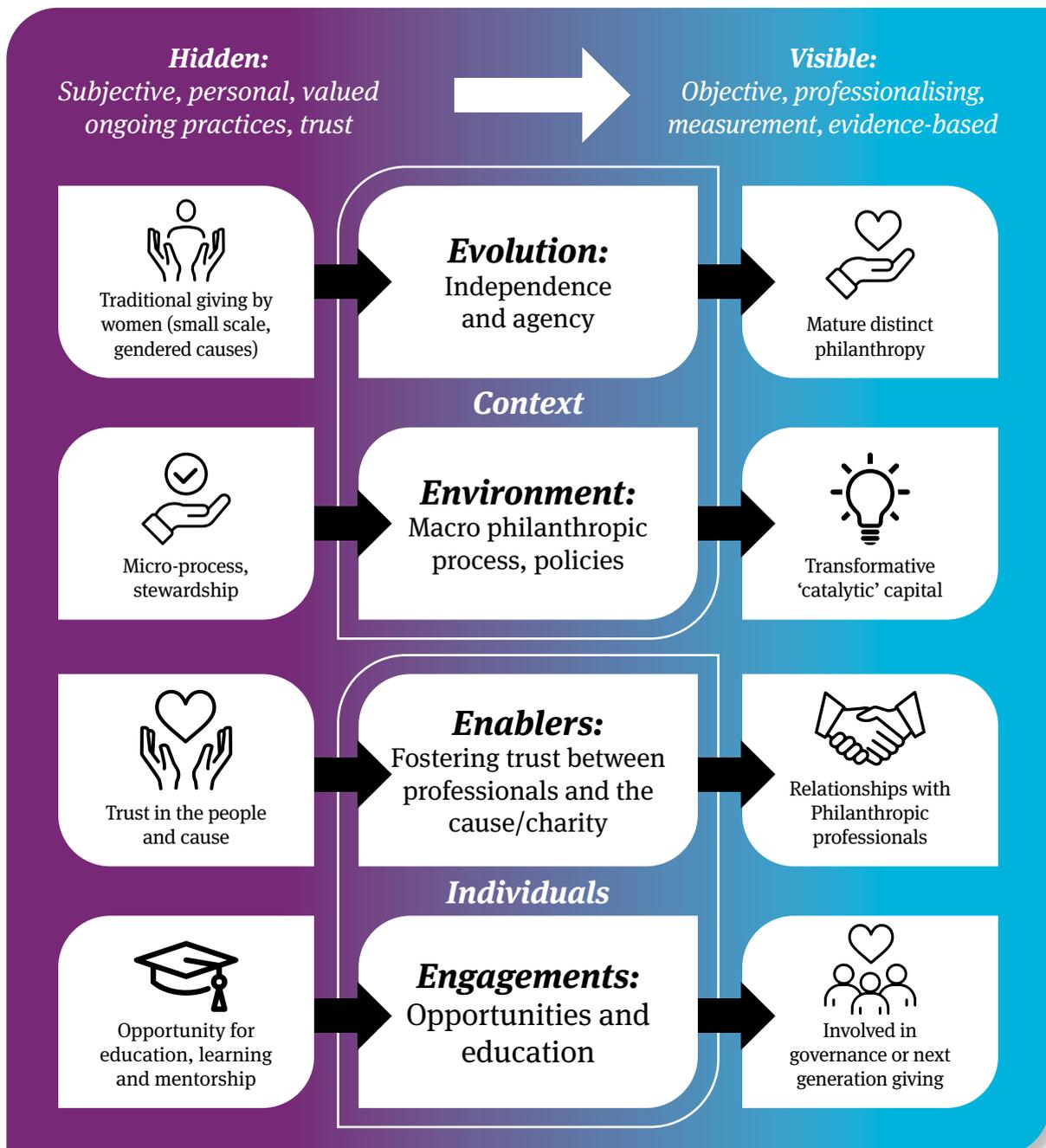
Women's philanthropy is characterised by rich philanthropic giving journeys, multiple and contrasting knowledge bases, values and beliefs concerning philanthropy. In this context, women philanthropists make considered decisions. Over time and with experience, the factors that influence an individual's giving shows an evolution. Beliefs about what is strong philanthropic practices change. These normative factors play out both at the level of the wider environment – with evolving views on what constitutes effective practice – as well as within individual women's giving journeys.

We explore the interplay between these elements in the next section.



4. Understanding the Findings: Evolution, Environment, Enablers, Engagements

The findings capture a normative landscape of women’s philanthropy in Ireland. This is presented through ‘Four Es’ to characterise the factors in this evolving landscape: (1) Evolution and (2) Environment referring to the macro context, with (3) Enablers and (4) Engagements feature the micro, individual (or collaborative) philanthropist level, illustrated below. Each of the ‘E’ factors include the ability for it to be hidden, that is, subjective practices, including trust. On the other side is the visible nature of this factor including professionalisation of philanthropy, added-value and evidence-based measurement.



Factor 1: Evolution

Many referred to changes over time in the general philanthropic context highlighting women's individual attitudes, appetite and ability for giving. That evolution includes historic developments in Ireland like changes in the role of women, but also religion, education, employment and how this affects women's philanthropic giving.

This leads on to the independence and agency that women feel they have in making philanthropic decisions.

Evolution, Hidden side:

On one side, is the perceived traditional giving patterns of women in Ireland, including giving historically with their time, at a smaller scale or to gendered causes. Women acknowledged not necessarily wanting to be recognised publicly as a philanthropist.

“Transformational gifts weren’t ever in the vocabulary. So some of it goes hand-in-hand with the fact that there are now people who have wealth, which just was not a thing. I think the philanthropic culture is lagging behind. The biggest problem is organisations just don’t ask.” (Int 1-1)

Evolution, Visible side:

On the other side was the maturity of women engaged in philanthropic giving with the agency to give to causes in ways they prefer in this professionalised philanthropic environment.

“I think people are changing why they give and what they want from it. The old model of wanting the name on a building is less appealing. There are still people who do it, but I think the next generation of people, and maybe it’s because more of them are women. I think women are maybe more interested in helping individuals and people rather than institutions.” (Int 1-1)

Factor 2: Environment

A clearly emerging theme was the importance of an environment that is conducive to philanthropic giving in Ireland and philanthropic giving for women, that includes policies and economic environment.

Environment, Hidden side:

On one side are the processes by philanthropic organisations, including the careful stewardship of women donors to foster giving. The cumbersome and frustrating tax system related to giving in Ireland was also cited as hampering the process and ease of giving by women.

“If you go into philanthropy without understanding your own capacity as a donor, it’s going to be hard to parse the opportunities that are maybe best matched for your interests and your level. Without judgment. If you’re giving €50,000 a year, or €500,000, or €5 million, or whatever it is. There is a place and space for everyone.” (Int 2-7)

“My tax number should be linked automatically to my donation. The charity can then say, we’ve had donations from the following tax numbers. Then it’s automatically credited to the organisation. It doesn’t affect my tax return, but it means the state gives more to the charity... The charity has to fight, or else the charity needs to work with the tax commission to have a system where there’s an easy opt-in, tick a box, and then it’s automatic. That’s what happens in the UK.” (Int 1-2)

“Nowadays the organisation claims the tax back. I don’t know if there’s research on it, but I wonder. If I were the minister, I’d want empirical research: does that bring in more money or not? On big donations, it does. On small donations, I don’t know... Getting it back comes across my desk. It’s another thing to sign. I frequently forget. I’ve just signed all these papers, and now they want something else. We’re committed, and whether we get it or they get, it doesn’t matter to me, but I wonder if it would encourage more people if they got their tax back.” (Int 1-5)



Environment, Visible side:

On the other side are the philanthropic processes that allow for ‘catalytic capital’ to enable organisations to do dynamic things required – identified by the beneficiary organisations, or by philanthropic professionals, to allow women to make decisions that have a transformative impact in their giving choices.

“I prefer to be a catalyst funder. Not the exact definition of catalytic capital, but as an individual, there’s a limit to how much I can give. I try to see if my commitment or donation can help catalyse other money, or if my willingness to talk to other donors. I am not shy to put my name on something, I don’t do it for self-aggrandising reasons... I more do it as a signal: ‘This is something cool, do you want to join me?’ I like to be there when it really helps, and then have others take over.” (Int 2-7)

Factor 3: Enablers

Enablers include relationships and trust between givers and causes, and with philanthropic professionals. This includes the ecosystem of different actors that support philanthropy, such as philanthropic organisations, wealth advisors, independent experts, and charities. Trust is important as an enabler to both the hidden and visible aspects of giving.

Enablers, Hidden side:

At the heart of this theme is trust, on one side creating trust between donor and the organisation or cause supported through philanthropy. Hidden trust also refers to the private relationships that donors have with the causes they support.

“If you can find grassroots, very worthy charities with people doing an incredible job, that you try to lift them in whatever way. For me, it’s their name I want to lift up, not mine.” (Int 2-5)

“We want meaningful things. Not just giving money into a black hole of charity, but something we can get stuck into.” (Int 2-6)

“Definitely engage the right person, the right company with that, and meet them, or meet a few of them, and decide which one works for you. That you have the right rapport with the organisations you are going to engage with.”(Int 2-6)

“What is it that we really care about? And who are the organisations that can really deliver? Who can partner with us strategically?” (Int 2-9)

Enablers, Visible side:

On the other side is the importance cited of the trust in the more overt relationships between women donors and the philanthropic professionals – either within the beneficiary organisations or in the intermediary organisations. These philanthropic professionals were frequently referenced as the enablers for the transformational giving by women to Irish causes.

“...I’m happy with the way what I’m hearing from them, and what we see from them, and how we communicate with them. It’s an easy route to get involved in projects that will be very difficult to source.” (Int 2-2)

“Good fundraisers are passionate about what they do and really believe in it. That’s what makes them effective. I always want to help them understand how important their work is, they’re not just raising money; they’re connecting people and causes.” (Int 1-7).

“You need the right people involved, the right advice. It’s a minefield trying to find the right projects. You need to have somebody out there who has their fingers in all the different charity pies to know what... If you were like me, just suddenly thinking, right, we want to do this, how do I start the process?” (Int 2-6)

“It’s all about communication. It’s how and what you get back, and the feedback that you get makes a huge difference. So it’s people, again.” (Int 2-10)

“They [philanthropy professionals] live philanthropy, they’re so engaged and knowledgeable, they really know the sector, what will make things tick and work.”

Factor 4: Engagements

This is the direct involvement and opportunity to engage women in the development of the philanthropic ecosystem in Ireland.

Engagements, Hidden side:

On one side are the opportunities for mentorship, education and learning to build a better understanding and knowledge base on philanthropy in Ireland. These opportunities involve women donors and philanthropic professionals as educators and mentors but also as learners and mentees. While this activity is not anonymous, it is less obvious or visible than governance roles.

“I find that the appetite to learn and understand what and how they’re giving is maybe higher for women, and maybe that’s part of a female characteristic of wanting to master something, or really understand through whatever means, storytelling or connection, human connection, and that can be really powerful for good philanthropy.” (Int 2-7)

“That notion of giving back has always been part of my life....There’s no way we’re going to spend all the money we have, or the wealth we have, and it’s important for me to share that, and also with kids, to teach them that if you’re fortunate in life, then you should share.”(Int 2-3).

“I have a slight fear that people see that it’s kind of a nice thing to do... that the son gets to run the business, and the daughter gets to run the charity. That is deeply unhelpful in terms of developing women philanthropists, women leaders, because it’s not seen as the real thing to do.” (Int 1-6)



Engagements, Visible side:

On the other side is the role of women donors in governance, such as organisational boards or philanthropic foundations along with a direct involvement in influencing philanthropy-related policy as it develops in Ireland. The research also suggests an appetite by these women to also educate and support the next generation to engage in giving, including young women, family members (e.g. their own children or grandchildren), towards shaping the future of philanthropy in Ireland.

“I’m trying to personally find a thing that I want to also be involved in, get my hands dirty and be involved, because it’s all very well giving, but I need to do that too.” (Int 2-6)

“I gave up on anonymity a long time ago... This is the time. It is important to actually get out there and give examples to inspire other people. To tell them about your journey, what makes you tick, and the satisfaction you get out of it. If you want me to talk to anybody, I will. It doesn’t bring anything to do this in the dark. We really need to get out there and tell people that it’s a wonderful thing, and we should be happy to share it.” (Int 2-4).

5. Policy and Practice: Learning and Implications from the Research

Policy Implications

“Our vision for this policy is that it will create an understanding of the philanthropy sector and underpin its importance to civic society.”

~ Minister of State Joe O’Brien, Workshop Charting a Course for the Development of an Irish National Policy on Philanthropy, 1 December 2021

National policy defines philanthropy as long term, strategic, and sustainable private giving for public benefit. This section takes each of the five policy strands to consider the implications of this research.

Policy Strand 1: Communications and Awareness:

The policy focuses on developing a national communications strategy that engages both individuals and enterprises, alongside educational initiatives that strengthen public understanding of philanthropy. This study supports this strand by increasing visibility of women’s philanthropic participation and by providing evidence-based narratives that align with the policy goal of building a broader culture of giving.

Policy Strand 2: Data and Research:

The policy prioritises establishing baseline data and philanthropy mapping, developing sustained university partnerships in the long term. Also, it aims to learn from international practice to create a specialist centre of excellence for philanthropy research. Women’s philanthropy in Ireland has long been characterised by fragmented data, with no systematic statistics on the scale of contemporary women donors or the distribution of their giving. This research provides in-depth qualitative data into attitudes, approaches, concerns, and priorities of donors and the philanthropic support services and organisations. This report does not fill the need for baseline data or mapping, which would require gathering quantitative data from statutory and third sector sources. The data presented here does provide evidence for incorporating gender sensitive indicators into future baseline measurement and mapping efforts.

Policy Strand 3: Stimulating and Incentivising Philanthropy:

The policy identifies tax incentives, match funding schemes, seed funding initiatives, and enabling systems for impact investing through programme and endowment investments. Interview evidence from our research highlights how incentives and administrative systems can shape donor behaviour in complex ways.

“They are really coming in for tax purposes and like what we do. We facilitate that. Philanthropy is becoming more complex. We can have a diversity of donors that are not necessarily value allies.” (Prof2-1)

The national policy aligns with the women philanthropists’ expectations for incentives, transparency, measurable impact, and accessible giving mechanisms.

Policy Strand 4: Government and Sectoral Partnership:

The policy focuses on collaboration across government, local government, community, and philanthropic organisations with many actions intended for short to medium term delivery. Under this strand, targeted partnership channels can bring women led philanthropic organisations into formal government collaboration. This enables those organisations to contribute to policy design and decision making, not only programme delivery, so women philanthropists’ priorities are reflected.

Policy Strand 5: Capacity Building:

The policy aims to strengthen the capabilities of not-for-profit entities and the wider ecosystem, and it is explicitly oriented toward alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including poverty reduction and climate action. This strand closely aligns with international evidence on women’s giving. Recent findings from the Women’s Philanthropy Institute highlight women’s increasing focus on measurable impact, transparency, and growing engagement with global causes such as climate action and international development. This trend shows that women’s philanthropy can serve as a practical delivery pathway for the national policy’s SDG orientation, while the policy, in turn, can support women donors through clearer impact measurement, stronger transparency, and more structured routes for strategic participation at local, national, and global levels.

Implications for Practice

Our findings offer actionable insights for practitioners across the philanthropic ecosystem who wish to engage.

Learning for Women Who May Wish to Engage in Philanthropy:

Women value impact, transparency, and causes that align with personal values.

- Provide clear reporting and opportunities for strategic engagement with beneficiaries or causes can attract new donors.
- Explore peer networks and collaborative models (e.g., giving circles) for women seeking community-driven giving.

Learning for Philanthropic Advisors Working with Women:

Women value trusted long-term relationships in the philanthropic space.

- Advisors should adopt relational approaches, emphasising trust, stewardship, and shared decision-making.
- Recognise the hybrid roles women often occupy—as donors, within their families, as advocates, and governance participants and identify potential roles that leverage these strengths.

Learning for Fundraising Professionals:

Organisations seek to engage women donors strategically yet lack evidence-based approaches.

- Move beyond transactional models; prioritise long-term relationship building.
- Tailor communication to reflect women’s motivations, including legacy and social impact.

Learning for the Irish Philanthropic Sector:

Women philanthropists and philanthropic professionals are motivated to see and participate in the progression of the Irish philanthropic landscape.

- Encourage collaboration across the sector to contribute to the building of women’s philanthropy as an emergent field in Ireland to amplify its impact and potential.
- Explore comparative research with other jurisdictions to inform best practices and innovation to be adapted for the Irish context.

9. (Mesch et al., 2020; Ackerman et al., 2024).



6. From Hidden to Visible – Building the Future of Irish Philanthropy Research

Women’s philanthropy in Ireland is diverse, dynamic, and strategic. Extended research and policy adaptation in philanthropy has the potential to foster and encourage greater women’s engagement in Irish philanthropy. This report offers a snapshot of this research, opening an initial dialogue on philanthropic giving by women in Ireland. There remain opportunities to broaden the scope of this research to other women engaged in philanthropy in Ireland or comparative research with other countries. The National Philanthropy Policy also reinforces the importance of building the philanthropy research landscape in Ireland.

This study is only the beginning, providing a foundational understanding of women’s philanthropic engagement in Ireland. There is scope to extend this research on women in philanthropy in the Irish context to include:

- **Deepening the Evidence Base:** Expand the sample to include corporate donors, family foundations, and independent philanthropists.
- **Longitudinal Research:** Track changes in women’s giving patterns over time to assess resilience, motivations, and evolving priorities.
- **Practice Partnerships:** Strengthen collaboration between academic institutions and philanthropic organisations to co-create actionable insights.

Future Research in Women’s Philanthropy in Ireland – The Potential:

There is significant potential for comparative and thematic research.

- **Cross-National Studies:** Compare Irish women’s philanthropy with patterns in the UK, Canada, and Australia to identify cultural and structural influences.
- **Intersectional Analysis:** Explore how gender intersects with wealth, age, and diaspora identity in shaping philanthropic behaviour.
- **Collaborative Giving Models:** Investigate the potential of giving circles and collective philanthropy among women in Ireland and possibly pilot models of success where applicable on the island of Ireland.

Future Research on Philanthropy in Ireland:

Beyond gender-focused studies, Ireland needs.

- **Comprehensive Philanthropy Mapping:** Develop national datasets to capture trends across sectors and demographics.
- **Policy Impact Studies:** Assess the effectiveness of the National Philanthropy Policy (2024–2028) in promoting inclusive giving.
- **Innovation in Philanthropy:** Examine emerging practices such as venture philanthropy, impact investing, and digital giving platforms.
- **A research centre:** Dedicated to philanthropy studies in the Irish context.



Conclusion: From the End to the Beginning

Women's philanthropy in Ireland is **evolving, diverse, dynamic and strategic**. It challenges traditional assumptions and offers opportunities for transformative impact. However, realising this potential for philanthropic giving for Ireland involving women requires:

- Providing strategic and trustworthy pathways for giving that reflect women's motivations and values.
- Continued research to deepen understanding.
- Policy frameworks that prioritise inclusion and incentivise giving.

To unlock philanthropy's full potential:

- **Foster innovation in practice** by developing a platform for sharing good practice and leveraging insights to engage women donors meaningfully.
- **Adapt policy to create a women's philanthropy positive environment** including embedding gender inclusion and supporting research infrastructure.
- **Extend research** with broader scope, deeper analysis, and comparative perspectives.

This report is a **starting point for dialogue and action**, inviting stakeholders across academia, policy, and practice to collaborate in shaping the future of philanthropy in Ireland.

From Hidden to Visible: Women Engaged in Philanthropy in Ireland

This research shows that women engaged in philanthropy:

Inspire others - their children, families, other women- to engage in philanthropy and are inspired by women who give.

Aspire for giving options that align with their personal experiences or offer 'catalytic capital' - giving sparks further giving and impact

Desire building the philanthropic landscape in Ireland through learning and mentorship opportunities

Require trusted relationships - with philanthropy professionals, intermediaries, beneficiaries - to enable effective giving practices

By presenting women's philanthropic voices it opens an opportunity for dialogue on the needs for philanthropy research in Ireland



“I think it’s so interesting to understand what philanthropists, particularly women, think about when it comes to leaving the world... I hear a lot of men worry about it more, but women, like, how are you passing on your values to the next generation, or what are you leaving behind? I don’t know how much female philanthropists talk about this, but I think they do want to pass on something. Whether it’s to the planet, to family, to community, or to the world in general, what do you want to be known for, remembered for, in your giving?”(Int 2-7)

Appendix: Detailed Research Methodology and Data Analysis

The methodology employed in this study comprises an innovative synergy between qualitative research, maintaining clear ethical boundaries and donor stewardship practices. The researchers noted this process and the facilitator model in research papers presented to ERNOP (European Research Network on Philanthropy) and EURnova (European meeting on Nonprofit Organisations and Voluntary Action).

Research Design:

The study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design comprising three interlinked elements: scoping literature review, expert consultation, and semi-structured interviews. This design reflects engaged research principles, ensuring collaboration between academic and practice partners while maintaining rigorous ethical standards.

Scoping Literature Review – The academic and grey literature on women’s philanthropy was reviewed in the first stage of the project.

Expert Consultation – To set the study in a current comparative context, the Centre for Social Innovation team engaged with philanthropy scholars in Europe and North America, discussing the literature, current international scholarship and practice, and their views on current key themes. They included:

- Professor Susan Philipps, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada;
- Professor Beth Breeze, author of *In Defence of Philanthropy*, Founder of the Centre for Philanthropy, University of Kent and currently Principal of Harris College, Oxford;
- Professor Peter Frumkin, Academic Director, Gradel Centre for Charity, New College Oxford;
- Professor Oonagh Breen, Professor of Law, Sutherland School of Law, University College Dublin.

Their input and insights contributed to the research design.

The scoping literature review and expert consultation informed the design and development of the protocol for interviews with women philanthropists and philanthropic advisors.

Semi-Structured Interviews – The Centre for Social Innovation team conducted 30 formal interviews with women philanthropists, and eight with philanthropic advisors/experts/practitioners. Considering the challenges to access anonymous or private donors, this is a significant number of individuals for this kind of study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Ethics Framework for Participant Selection, Participation, Data Protection:

Ethical approval was secured through Trinity Business School's Research Ethics Committee in May 2025. The application focused on design of an ethical process for identifying women philanthropists for interview, carrying out interviews, and assuring their anonymous and confidential participation in the study. This approach aligns with best practices for researching hard-to-reach populations (Ellard-Gray et al., 2015) and incorporates lessons from elite donor research (Breeze, 2023) and recruitment strategies for sensitive studies (Saunders, 2025).

Key steps included:

Criteria Setting: the research partners agreed criteria for selecting interviewees. The multiple criteria included length of engagement in philanthropy, geographic origin, giving method.

Facilitator Role and Introduction protocol: When the criteria were agreed, Community Foundation Ireland and Trinity Development & Alumni adopted intermediary 'facilitator' roles. They independently identified and contacted potential interviewees, providing project information, inviting interview participation. Only women who agreed to be interviewed were introduced via email to the Centre for Social Innovation team. Facilitators then exited the process once potential interviewees agreed to engage directly with the research.

Conflict of Interest Mitigation: Facilitators were excluded from interviews, transcription, and analysis phases of the research process with only aggregated findings shared with the facilitator organisations.

Consent Process and Data Protection: Participants received information sheets and consent forms at least seven days before interviews. After interview, data was stored securely on Trinity's OneDrive, password-protected, anonymised for reporting and analysis purposes.

Limitations of Method and Mitigation:

The potential limitations of the method were identified, and steps were taken to mitigate their effects. The key limitations identified were:

Sampling Bias: While the facilitator model addresses anonymity and confidentiality of interviewees, it does not assure that the sample of interviewees selected is unbiased. For example, facilitators may choose to exclude dissenting voices or donors with negative experiences. To reduce the risk of bias in sampling, the selection criteria required sampling from across the range of women donors with whom facilitators had relationships. Further, the interview protocol provided some level of mitigation by excluding questions about the relationship between facilitators and interviewees.

Scope: The research partnership included only two philanthropic organisations. Focus on women donors with relationships with only these organisations limits generalisability. Mitigation strategies included triangulation through expert interviews and literature review, clear acknowledgment of the boundaries of this study, and consideration of the ways in which this work can be built on in a wider study in Ireland for the potential for further analysis of similar studies in other countries (e.g. Canada, the United Kingdom).

Data Analysis:

Data analysis employed thematic analysis using NVivo through descriptive and conceptual coding, with aggregated reporting to protect anonymity. The analysis underpinning each of the findings presented was reviewed by each member of the Centre for Social Innovation team members and finalised following discussion with the full team. Findings were then the illustrative quotations are provided in the report where they add to the reporting of key themes without revealing the identity of individual interviewees.



References

- Ackerman, J.; Bergdoll, J.; Osili, U.; Skidmore, T; Sager, J. (2022) Women Give 2022 Racial Justice, Gender and Generosity. Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Women Philanthropy Institute.
- <https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/items/be2b2c1f-3a7a-416b-b40c-ecf6b0c63cc5>
- Breen, O.B., Carruthers, N., O’Sullivan, N., & Quinn, P. (2024). Philanthropy in Ireland. UCD Working Papers in Law, Criminology & Socio-Legal Studies Research Paper No. 11.
- <https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5040635>
- Breeze, B. (2023). Interviewing elite donors: gaining access, developing rapport and dealing with the dazzle. *Voluntas*, 34(1), 154–161.
- Community Foundation Ireland. (2010). The Women’s Fund. Available at: <http://uat.communityfoundation.ie/grants/types-of-grants/the-womens-fund> (Accessed: 06 January 2026).
- Dale, E. J., & O’Connor, H. A. (2021). The million dollar donor journey: Stages of development for high-net-worth women donors. *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 26(1), e1680.
- Ellard-Gray, A., Jeffrey, N. K., Choubak, M., & Crann, S. E. (2015). Finding the hidden participant: Solutions for recruiting hidden, hard-to-reach, and vulnerable populations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 14(5).
- Gallo, M.L. & Donnelly-Cox, G. (2017). Profile of Giving in Ireland. In: Hoolwerf, L.K. and Schuyt, T.N.M. (eds.). *Giving in Europe: The Current State of Research on Giving by Households, Corporations, Foundations and Charity Lotteries in Europe*. Amsterdam: European Research Network on Philanthropy.
- Government of Ireland. (2023). National Philanthropy Policy 2024–2028. Department of Rural and Community Development.
- Government of Ireland, 2025. National Philanthropy Policy: Annual Update – March 2025. Department of Rural and Community Development.
- Harrison, J. (2014). Towards building an understanding of female philanthropists in Ireland: An exploratory study. Trinity College Dublin. Thesis.
- Mesch, D. J., & Pactor, A. (2016). Women and philanthropy. In *The Routledge Companion to Philanthropy* (pp. 88–101). Routledge.
- Mesch, D.; Osili U.; Ackerman, J.; Bergdoll, J.; Skidmore, T.; Pactor, A.; Sager, J. (2020) Women give 2020: New forms of giving in a digital age: Powered by technology, creating community. Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Women Philanthropy Institute. <https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9d0f34ab-a167-4d73-b7b9-86ad79bc0a89/content>
- Mesch, D., Osili, U., Pactor, A., Ackerman, J., Bergdoll, J. et al (2016). Giving to women and girls: Who gives, and why? Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, Women Philanthropy Institute. <https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/1c928c31-b03a-4d27-8c68-446e2f2a02e9/content>
- Saunders, A., 2025. Face Value: Recruitment lessons for research interviews. *Qualitative Research* 25(1), p.147–167.



*Women's philanthropy:
A strategic force
for positive social
change in Ireland*



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

RCN: 20028626

www.tcd.ie/alumni/

**Community
Foundation
Ireland**

RCN: 20044886

www.communityfoundation.ie