

Equipping Women for Leadership

Dynamic Gloria Perez leverages foundation assets to boost the economic status of women and amplify their voices.

By [Sarah Lutman](#)

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The Women's Foundation of Minnesota (WFM) makes grants, invests in research, creates cross-sector partnerships, and advocates for policies that seek to advance the status of women and girls, particularly females of color. WFM made grants of about \$3.1 million in the year ending March 31, 2019, focusing on economic opportunity, leadership development, and personal and community safety for women and girls.

Gloria Perez, the organization's new president and CEO, began work in mid-February. No sooner did she start her job than the Covid-19 pandemic began to unfold in Minnesota, and schools, businesses, and civic institutions were shuttered. The result: an even more urgent case for supporting vulnerable women and girls and their families. The pandemic is disproportionately affecting women's employment and income and resulting in increased domestic violence. Further, coronavirus death rates are higher for people of color than for white Americans.



Gloria Perez

The Women's Foundation responded immediately, allocating \$500,000 for emergency grants to organizations that support women and girls experiencing gender-based violence, older women, and women and girls with short-term financial needs to pay for childcare, elder care, food, housing, transportation, and health and wellness.

"The coronavirus is making longstanding inequities starkly visible, and at the Women's Foundation we are doubling down on our mission to invest in innovation to drive gender and racial equity," Perez says. The foundation created a Covid-19 response fund for women and girls

who are particularly affected by the pandemic; service workers, caregivers, and older women are twice as likely to be living in poverty already, Perez says.

In the first round of grants, WFM invested more than \$230,000 in 27 organizations and initiatives throughout the state, most of which are led by women of color and indigenous women. Through the grantmaking process, she says, WFM learned that the leading need is short-term financial support.

Perez came to her new position as an experienced advocate for women's opportunity. She led the Jeremiah Program for 20 years, supporting low-income single mothers and their children by using education as a platform. For Perez this was a very personal mission. "I was raised by a single mom, because my dad died when I was young," she says. "Both of my parents, and everybody within the Latino community in San Antonio [Texas], where I grew up, talked about education as the key lever out of poverty."

She moved to Minnesota and graduated from Macalester College, volunteering as an undergraduate at Casa de Esperanza, a St. Paul-based Latina organization working to end domestic violence. Before she entered the nonprofit sector as an employee, Perez was a small business owner. "I was given the opportunity to buy a franchise of a diner," she says. "It was a risk for both the owner of the business as well as for me. I thought, 'I'm young enough. And if I fail, I'll learn a lot.'" At 24, she scraped together a business plan and the money to buy the diner on a contract for deed.

As a small-business owner, she was invited to forums to sit at the table for a business association or the neighborhood economic development organization, and she realized the power and opportunity that came from being a business owner. During a market downturn, Perez sold the business at a loss, then she was recruited to the executive director position at Casa de Esperanza, where she once volunteered.

Three years later, Perez was hired to lead the Jeremiah Program. "It was a nonprofit that was going to operate differently. It wasn't going to be government funded. It wasn't an entitlement program where any single mother and her children could attend, but rather the ones who had the motivation to focus on their own personal development through education." She built Jeremiah from the ground up; it's now active in six cities across the United States and by 2018 had an annual operating budget of nearly \$10 million.

Asked about potential themes in her work at WFM, Perez says, "Today, the voices of people of color are being heard. We're being given voice. My leadership at the foundation will continue to lean in, by my own expression of what I see and what I think needs to happen, as we partner with organizations and communities across the state of Minnesota. But also, narratives really matter. Women must take ownership of the narratives that we tell ourselves, because they're powerful. And I'd like for that to be an emphasis."

The foundation also is equipping young women for leadership roles. By making those investments, she says, WFM is "helping them to lead change, helping young women and girls

see themselves as part of the corporate leadership in the future, or government leadership, or philanthropic leadership in the future.”

She’s inspired by organizations that are focusing on advocacy, training women to vote, to run, to lead. “It is a matter of persistence,” she says. And persistence is a subject Perez knows well. She models it in her own life and in her leadership.

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