# WOMEN IN NONPROFIT EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

DATA BRIEF FOR THE BAY AREA
April 2026

# LEADERS IN TRANSITION

## Women in Nonprofit Executive Leadership

*Data Brief for the Bay Area*

*Prepared in Support of the GLB Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice*
Leaders in Transition (LIT) Program | April 2026

## Executive Summary

Women constitute the backbone of the American nonprofit workforce, yet they remain systematically underrepresented in executive leadership, particularly in well-resourced organizations. Women of color face this disparity in its most acute and compounded form, confronting the intersecting forces of race, gender, and economic inequity that limit their advancement, compress their compensation, and accelerate their departure from the sector.

This data brief synthesizes national and California-specific research on women in nonprofit executive roles to inform the GLB Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice's Leaders in Transition (LIT) Program. Key findings include:

- Women make up 73–75% of the nonprofit workforce nationally but lead only 22% of organizations with budgets above $1 million and just 17% of those with budgets above $50 million.
- Women of color are concentrated in the smallest organizations and face compounding wage gaps: Black women in California earn 60 cents for every dollar earned by white men; Latinas earn even less.
- Women executives report burnout at significantly higher rates than men (43% vs. 31%), driven by structural inequities rather than individual failure.
- Bay Area-specific, gender-disaggregated data on nonprofit executive leadership does not exist as a formal, public dataset; this is a gap the LIT program is uniquely positioned to begin addressing.

## Section I: Women in Nonprofit Executive Roles, The National Picture

### A. The Workforce Paradox

The nonprofit sector presents one of the most striking gender paradoxes in American professional life. Nationally, women constitute approximately 73–75% of the sector's total workforce (Nonprofit Quarterly; Grant Writing and Funding, 2025). By any conventional measure, this should translate into proportional representation in leadership. It does not.

> *“Women make up three-quarters of the nonprofit workforce. Among the largest nonprofits in the country, they lead just 17% of organizations.”*
> **Financial Diet / Nonprofit Quarterly, 2020**

According to Candid’s 2024 analysis of 59,550 public charities sharing demographic data between 2019 and 2024, the gender breakdown in nonprofit leadership breaks sharply by organizational budget size:

- Women lead approximately 62% of nonprofits with annual expenses under $50,000.
- That figure drops to 46% for organizations with expenses above $25 million.
- Among organizations with budgets of $1 million or more, only 22% of executive directors are women (Brooklyn Org, 2024).
- Among the largest U.S. nonprofits, those with annual budgets of $50 million or more, only 17% have a female CEO (Nonprofit Quarterly / Financial Diet, 2020).

The pattern is unambiguous: the larger and more powerful the organization, the less likely it is to be led by a woman. This is not a function of ambition or qualification. It is a function of structural barriers that filter women out at every rung of the leadership ladder.

### B. The Glass Escalator

Harvard Business Review (2024) documents the “glass escalator” effect: men in female-dominated occupations experience a faster and smoother rise to upper levels of leadership than women, a pattern driven by systemic power dynamics and gender stereotypes that persist even in fields with an abundance of qualified women candidates. The nonprofit sector is a textbook case of this phenomenon.

A 2025 peer-reviewed study examining two decades of IRS Form 990 compensation data (Grasse et al., Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory) found that while there has been an overall increase in the number of women holding nonprofit executive positions, large cross-sectional pay and power gaps persist, driven specifically by the over-representation of male executives in the largest nonprofits and in subsectors with the highest executive pay.

### BIPOC Women: Underrepresented Within an Already Underrepresented Group

The “woman” category in nonprofit executive leadership is dominated by white women, which masks the far more severe underrepresentation of women of color. Candid’s 2024 sector-wide data shows:

- 45% of nonprofits in their dataset are led by white women.
- Only 18% are led by BIPOC women, and that share decreases with organizational size.
- BIPOC women lead 28% of the smallest nonprofits and 14% of the largest.

Candid researchers note that more BIPOC women may lead the smallest organizations not because they are hired into those roles, but because they are founding their own organizations, a response to being excluded from established institutions.

## Section II: Bay Area Context, What the Data Shows (and Doesn't)

### A. What We Know

Bay Area-specific, gender-disaggregated data on nonprofit executive leadership is not systematically collected or publicly reported as a standalone regional dataset. What is available comes primarily from the programmatic investments and convening records of major regional philanthropies, and their documented concerns are telling.

The San Francisco Foundation operates a dedicated program, Women of Color, Women of Power, explicitly designed to place women of color into leadership positions in local public offices and influential nonprofit organizations. The program's very existence reflects the Foundation's recognition that the Bay Area's nonprofit leadership does not reflect the region's population.

At a March 2023 consultative session with nearly 50 Bay Area grantee partners, the San Francisco Foundation documented that one of the most consistent themes from the field was the need for "supporting leadership development for women of color and others who have been farthest from opportunity." This is practitioner-level confirmation of the gap, even in the absence of formal demographic counts.

On the compensation side, California's Bureau of Labor Statistics data (2023) shows that the state has the highest women-to-men earnings ratio among all 50 states at 89.9 cents on the dollar — but this reflects the overall economy, not nonprofit leadership specifically. Within the highest-paying roles, the California Civil Rights Department's 2024 analysis found that workers in the highest pay range ($144,560+) were nearly twice as likely to be men, and most senior managers and executives were also men.

### B. The Absence of Regional Data: A Finding in Itself

**DATA GAP ALERT: The Bay Area Lacks Formal Gender-Disaggregated Data on Nonprofit Executive Leadership**

There is no publicly available, systematically collected dataset that tracks the gender and racial demographics of nonprofit executive directors and CEOs specifically within the San Francisco Bay Area. Major regional data sources, including the San Francisco Foundation, East Bay Community Foundation, and the Northern California Grantmakers, document funding patterns and programmatic priorities, but do not publish formal ED/CEO demographic counts by gender and race.

This is not a peripheral limitation. The Bay Area is home to one of the highest concentrations of nonprofit organizations in the United States, with particular density in health equity, housing, immigration, and social justice sectors. The communities these organizations serve are among the most racially and ethnically diverse in the country. The fact that no regional body is tracking who leads these organizations, by gender, race, or their intersection, reflects a broader sector failure to treat leadership equity as a measurable, accountable outcome.

National-level data from Candid, Building Movement Project, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation provide the most reliable proxies for regional patterns, but they cannot capture the Bay Area's specific dynamics, including the particular intersection of tech-philanthropic wealth, racial diversity, housing cost pressures on executive compensation, and a highly competitive talent market.

### C. The LIT Program's Contribution to Closing This Data Gap

The GLB Institute's Leaders in Transition program is positioned to make a meaningful contribution to the field's understanding of women in Bay Area nonprofit leadership, not only by supporting leaders through transitions, but by generating the kind of documented, participant-level data that currently does not exist at the regional level.

Specifically, LIT's pilot cohort, focused on Executive Directors and CEOs of color in the San Francisco Bay Area, will generate primary data on:

- The demographic profile of Bay Area nonprofit executives of color, disaggregated by gender, age, organizational budget size, and sector.
- The transition timeline and decision-making process of senior leaders of color, including the factors that accelerate or delay departure.
- The financial planning needs and post-transition aspirations of women leaders specifically, a dimension that national studies gesture toward but rarely document at a granular level.
- The support structures that women executives of color identify as most valuable, and the gaps in what is currently available regionally.

As GLB Institute documents, evaluates, and publishes the learnings from the LIT pilot, this data will serve a dual purpose: informing the program's own refinement and contributing to the regional knowledge base that funders, policymakers, and peer organizations urgently need. The absence of this data is a call to action, and the LIT program is a direct response.

## Section III: Unique Challenges Faced by Women in Nonprofit Executive Roles

### A. The Glass Cliff

Research consistently shows that women, and particularly women of color, are disproportionately appointed to executive roles during times of organizational crisis or instability, a phenomenon known as the "glass cliff." A foundational study of Fortune 500 companies found that 42% of women appointed CEO were named to the role when the firm was in crisis, compared to 22% of men (ScienceDirect, 2015). This pattern is well-documented in the nonprofit sector as well, where leaders of color are frequently recruited to "right the ship" without adequate resources, board support, or transition preparation.

**Research finding:** *Women and women of color are set up to succeed in theory and to fail in practice, appointed to lead broken systems with insufficient tools and then held accountable for outcomes they did not create.*

### B. The Gender Pay Gap in Nonprofit Executive Compensation

The gender pay gap in nonprofit leadership operates on two levels: the gap between women executives and men executives at the same type of organization, and the larger structural gap created by women's concentration in smaller, lower-resourced organizations.

Nationally, women earn an estimated 80 cents for every dollar a man earns across the economy (County Health Rankings, 2026). Over a lifetime, the average female worker loses more than $530,000 to the gender wage gap; college-educated women face losses approaching $800,000. At the executive level specifically:

- Women CEOs earn 76 cents for every dollar a male CEO earns (Narrow the Gap, 2020).
- Women executives overall earn 73 cents per dollar compared to men in the same rank (Payscale, 2022).
- The 2025 nonprofit-specific study (Grasse et al.) found that even when controlling for organization type and budget size, a discriminatory pay component, compensation differences not explained by any job-relevant factor, persists for women executive directors.

In California, the state's Civil Rights Department confirmed in 2024 that the gender pay gap persists in every major industry in the state, and is even greater for women of color.

### C. Board Dynamics and Trust Deficits

Research from Building Movement Project's Race to Lead series and Nonprofit Quarterly's 2024 reporting on women of color executives documents a consistent pattern of eroded board trust that disproportionately affects women in leadership:

- White executives who succeed other white leaders report 93% board trust; executives of color report only 77%.
- Women of color specifically describe boards that question more, approve requests less, and expect more power to be ceded, a dynamic rooted in the intersection of patriarchy and racism that creates the "know your place" phenomenon in governance.
- Nonprofit Quarterly's spring 2024 issue documented an alarming number of women of color in nonprofit and philanthropic leadership who were fired, forced out, or pushed into "voluntary" departures due to hostile board dynamics in just the preceding two years.

### D. Burnout: Higher Rates, Structural Causes

McKinsey & Company's 2023 Women in the Workplace report found that women leaders are burned out at a rate of 43%, compared to 31% for men in equivalent roles, a 12-percentage-point gap that reflects the additional labor demanded of women executives. These demands include:

- Outsized responsibility for DEI work, culture transformation, and staff wellbeing, above and beyond standard executive functions.
- The emotional labor of "proof burden": the need to constantly demonstrate competence in environments where their authority is not automatically extended.
- Community representation expectations: women of color executives are often called upon to speak for, advocate on behalf of, and embody the aspirations of their entire communities — a burden with no equivalent for white male leaders.

In the Building Movement Project's data, 41% of BIPOC leaders who are in the process of transitioning out of their roles cite burnout as their top reason for leaving, compared to 31% of white leaders. This 10-percentage-point gap exists even within a sector where burnout is endemic across race.

### E. Psychological Toll: Impostor Syndrome, Hypervisibility, and Isolation

The research documents a distinctive psychological burden borne by women of color in executive roles, arising from the convergence of multiple systemic pressures:

- Impostor syndrome: Intensified by environments where authority is granted unevenly and accomplishments are credited to others. Research shows that women leaders are twice as likely as men to have a colleague receive credit for their ideas (McKinsey, 2023).

- Hypervisibility and invisibility: Women of color in executive roles describe being simultaneously under a spotlight, with every decision scrutinized and every misstep amplified, and structurally invisible, excluded from informal networks, mentorship, and the funder relationships that determine organizational success.
- Isolation: Women of color executives are the least likely group to have received mentoring on the job and are less likely to have access to peer networks of people with shared experiences. The Building Movement Project's 2022 report found that Black leaders receive peer support outside their organizations at a rate 10 percentage points lower than white leaders.

## Section IV: Women of Color: Compounded at Every Level

### A. The Intersectionality Framework

The concept of intersectionality, first theorized by legal scholar Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and applied extensively to nonprofit sector research by Building Movement Project, holds that the combination of identities, race and gender in particular, produces a compounding effect on experience. Women of color in nonprofit executive roles do not face racism plus sexism as additive burdens; they face gendered racism, a qualitatively distinct form of discrimination that white women and men of color do not experience in the same way.

The Building Movement Project's Women of Color in the Nonprofit Sector report (2019) identified three intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women of color: racism from white staff of all genders; sexism from men, including men of color; and gendered racism from multiple directions simultaneously. This triple burden operates in the same workspace, often without organizational acknowledgment or remedy.

### B. The Wage Gap: Three Layers Deep

The gender pay gap becomes dramatically more severe when race is introduced as a variable. In California specifically, 2022 earnings data analyzed by the California Budget & Policy Center reveals a hierarchy of wage gaps:

- Asian women: $20,558 less annually than white men.
- White women: $23,250 less annually than white men.
- Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander women: $33,803 less.
- Black women: $32,806 less annually, representing approximately 60 cents per dollar earned by white men.
- Latina women: $44,041 less, the largest gap among all groups measured.
- Black single mothers: 56 cents per dollar earned by white men, the deepest gap documented.

Within the nonprofit sector specifically, research has found that Black women in similar organizational roles earn 86% of what white women earn, while Latina women earn approximately 72% of what white women earn (Key et al., 2012, cited in CalState Scholarly Works). The combination of gender pay inequity and racial pay inequity creates a cumulative financial disadvantage that directly affects women of color executives' ability to absorb the financial risk of leadership transition.

**Critical implication for LIT:** *The financial precarity many women of color executives face at transition is not an individual circumstance. It is the accumulated result of decades of compounded wage inequity. Financial planning support must be designed with this reality at its center.*

### C. The Promotion Pipeline: Where Women of Color Are Lost

McKinsey's 2023 research on the managerial pipeline, the feeder pool for executive leadership, reveals where the gap compounds at its earliest stages. For every 100 men promoted to manager:

- 87 women are promoted.
- 76 Latinas are promoted.
- Only 54 Black women are promoted.

Black women in California are being promoted to the first managerial rung at roughly half the rate of men. Every rung up the ladder that feeds the executive pipeline is a site of attrition for women of color, such that by the time executive searches are conducted, the pool of women of color candidates has been dramatically and artificially narrowed by structural exclusion at every prior stage.

### D. Credential Penalties and the Training "Solution" That Isn't

One of the most consistent findings across the race and gender equity literature is that education and training do not function as equalizers for women of color the way they do for other groups. Building Movement Project's research found that among those with a master's degree and above, women of color were most likely to be placed in line or administrative staff roles and least likely to be in senior management — despite outpacing white women in some educational attainment categories.

This finding has a direct implication for program design: the LIT program's emphasis on structural support, financial planning, peer community, and advocacy is grounded in research showing that more training is not the answer. The barriers are systemic, not individual.

### E. The Hollow Prize and Post-Transition Precarity

Women of color who do reach executive roles frequently inherit what scholar Chanda Causer (SSIR, 2024) calls a "hollow prize": a prestigious title attached to an underfunded, crisis-ridden organization, without the funder relationships or board infrastructure that would give them a real chance to succeed. When they depart, whether by choice or by force, they often do so without the portable social capital (funder networks, board connections, professional allies) that white departing executives carry with them into lucrative post-transition consulting or philanthropic roles.

The result is a post-transition landscape that is significantly more financially and professionally precarious for women of color than for their counterparts. This is the precise gap the LIT program is designed to address: by building the financial planning foundation, the peer network, and the post-transition roadmap before the departure decision is made, not after.

## Section V: Summary Data Table

The following table synthesizes key data points from national research, California-specific sources, and Bay Area practitioner documentation. Where Bay Area-specific data does not exist, national or California figures are noted as the best available proxy.

| Metric | National | California / Bay Area |
|---|---|---|
| **Women as % of nonprofit workforce** | 73–75% | Consistent with national |
| **Women as % of all nonprofit CEOs/EDs** | ~62% | No formal Bay Area data; pattern consistent |
| **Women as % of CEOs at orgs with $1M+ budgets** | 22% | Likely similar or lower |
| **Women as % of CEOs at orgs with $50M+ budgets** | 17% | Likely similar or lower |
| **BIPOC women leading smallest nonprofits** | 28% | Pattern consistent regionally |
| **BIPOC women leading largest nonprofits** | 14% | Pattern consistent regionally |
| **Black women's earnings vs. white men** | ~60–66 cents | 60 cents (CA, 2022) |
| **Latina women's earnings vs. white men** | ~58 cents | $44,041 annual gap (CA, 2023) |
| **Burnout: women leaders vs. men** | 43% vs. 31% | No disaggregated Bay Area data |
| **BIPOC EDs citing burnout as top reason for leaving** | 41% (vs. 31% white) | No Bay Area-specific data |
| **Board trust: executives of color vs. white** | 77% vs. 93% | No Bay Area-specific data |
| **Promotion rate: Black women vs. men (to manager)** | 54 per 100 men | CA data consistent with national |

*Note: Where this table indicates "no Bay Area-specific data," this reflects a genuine and documented gap in regional knowledge infrastructure, not a gap in the problem itself.*

## Section VI: The Regional Data Gap, Implications and LIT's Role

### A. Why the Absence of Regional Data Matters

The absence of Bay Area-specific, gender-disaggregated nonprofit leadership data is not a minor research limitation. It has practical consequences for the organizations, funders, and leaders who need this information to make decisions:

- Funders cannot target investments in women of color leadership without knowing where the gaps are, how severe they are, or whether prior investments are producing change.
- Boards cannot benchmark their own gender and racial equity practices against regional peers without regional data.
- Women executives of color cannot see themselves reflected in aggregate statistics that might validate their experiences and support their advocacy.

- Policymakers and advocacy organizations cannot make the case for systemic reform without the quantitative foundation that regional data would provide.

The San Francisco Bay Area is one of the most philanthropically rich regions in the world, and one of the most racially diverse. The mismatch between who holds philanthropic and organizational power in the region and who lives in it is widely acknowledged. Yet the data infrastructure to measure, monitor, and respond to that mismatch in the nonprofit sector has not been built.

### B. What the LIT Program Can Contribute

The GLB Institute's Leaders in Transition pilot cohort is not primarily a research program, but by virtue of serving a population that has not been documented at the regional level, it is positioned to generate knowledge that the field urgently needs. Over the course of its pilot phase, LIT can contribute to the regional knowledge base in the following specific ways:

- Baseline demographic documentation: By systematically collecting and reporting (with appropriate consent) the demographic profile of cohort participants, including gender, race/ethnicity, age, organizational budget size, sector, and years in role, LIT will create one of the few Bay Area-specific datasets on nonprofit executives of color, disaggregated by gender.
- Transition decision data: By documenting participants' pre-transition concerns, timelines, and decision-making factors, including the role of financial considerations, personal wellbeing, and organizational circumstances, LIT will illuminate the pre-contemplation stage of transition in ways that national studies have not captured at a regional level.
- Post-transition outcome tracking: If designed with longitudinal follow-up, LIT can track where participants go after their executive tenure: what careers or roles they pursue, whether financial planning support influenced their trajectory, and whether the cohort experience affected their continued engagement with the sector.
- Gender-specific findings: By explicitly analyzing cohort data by gender, including the experiences of women of color as a distinct subgroup, LIT can produce the kind of intersectional, Bay Area-specific data that currently does not exist anywhere in the literature.

The LIT program's documentation, evaluation, and publication of these findings, following its pilot phase, will serve as a direct contribution to the regional data infrastructure and to the national conversation about how to support women of color through leadership transitions with dignity, financial security, and a clear path forward.

> *"The absence of regional-level disaggregated data is itself a finding, and the LIT program is a direct, actionable response."*
> **GLB Institute for Health Equity and Social Justice, 2026**

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