

Gibson Dunn

By Drew Tewksbury

An Innovative Women and Girls Initiative Fights the Gender Funding Deficit With the Collective Power of Big Law

It all started with a number.

At The Giving List Women Summit 2024, Katie Marquart heard a figure that stopped her cold: only 1.8% of all U.S. philanthropic dollars go to women and girls' organizations. "I found it shocking and disturbing," she recalls. "Throughout the summit, I was impressed by the amazing women and organizations represented, which made the lack of resources even more surprising."

For Marquart, Pro Bono Chair of global law firm Gibson Dunn, it was a call to institutional action. "It made me reflect on our pro bono practice and realize we could be doing more to support women and girls," Marquart says.

The summit also led Marquart to think of her own daughter, Lily. "I found myself tearing up on many, many occasions, thinking about this world that I was bringing my daughter into that was not as safe and equal and wonderful as I would like it

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to be for her." She left the summit determined to do whatever she could to make change for Lily, for girls like her everywhere, and for the women they will grow up to be.

With that spark, Katie launched Gibson Dunn's Justice for Women and Girls Initiative (she and her team refer to it internally as "Project Lily"), an ambitious initiative to have one of the world's most powerful law firms combat the inequalities that persist in part because of the gender funding gap. If dollars weren't flowing to women and girls, maybe the firm could contribute what it had in abundance: legal expertise, advocacy, and people power.

She reached out to contacts she met at the summit and set up coffee chats, office meetings, and Zoom calls to help amplify their work. Maybe Gibson Dunn could partner with the organizations to make their work stronger, more efficient, easier, and safer. "I felt it was my responsibility to try to change our approach in my corner of the world," Marquart says.

The Justice League

What emerged was something unprecedented in the world of Big Law: a coordinated, firm-wide initiative specifically designed to channel the collective power of a law firm toward advancing rights for women and girls globally. The Justice for Women and Girls Initiative brings together attorneys across the firm's global offices

to channel their pro bono efforts toward five interconnected goals: educational equity, economic empowerment, healthcare and reproductive rights, freedom from violence, and legal and social equity.

The firm's pro bono numbers speak to the scale of that undertaking. If you combined all of Gibson Dunn's pro bono clients under one umbrella, they would constitute the firm's largest client. The firm launches approximately 650 new pro bono cases annually, with Gibson Dunn attorneys donating 206,000 pro bono hours in 2024. The firm's pro bono participation reaches above 80%, with over 2,000 attorneys participating in pro bono work on a wide variety of issues that speak to each attorney's unique interests and passions. The practice is also as diverse as it is robust. One of the philosophies underpinning the practice is to foster a broad array of pro bono opportunities by encouraging attorneys to pursue cases and clients they are passionate about. The result is a practice that ranges from handling complex immigration matters, to taking on veterans' cases, to providing nonprofit advice, to representing individuals in cutting-edge civil rights litigation.

Marquart's team is small but mighty. There's Patty Herold, who made the transition from being a white collar associate to full-time pro bono work, focusing almost exclusively on immigration. She was the first to join the pro bono practice with Katie after they worked closely together in the wake of the travel ban and family separation crises, and Patty used that expertise, her unflappable nature, and her remarkable empathy to help lead the firm's work in the wake of the recent Afghan refugee crisis. Next, Ariana Sañudo's focuses on criminal justice reform and immigration law were honed from her time at an immigration nonprofit and her work as a public defender. Her boundless energy is outpaced only by her thirst for knowledge and for justice, and, among other things, Ariana has taken the lead in the firm's recently constituted Immigration Task Force. And finally, Mark Cherry's constitutional law and appellate prowess rounds out the team. Since joining the practice, Mark has taken a leading role in many of the firm's highest profile civil rights matters. But it's Mark's deeply rooted sense of right and wrong, along with his kind heart, that Katie calls out as being among his true superpowers.

The team matches firm lawyers with pro bono projects that could benefit from their legal skills, personal experiences, and passions. Charline Yim – a partner in Gibson Dunn's international arbitration group, who became one of the Justice for Women and Girls Initiative's key architects – says there's no shortage of firm members eager to jump in and help power the program. "Whether it's partners, junior associates, or staff, it's been amazing to see how many people are coming together across our different offices to volunteer their time to support this initiative," she says.



Pro Bono Powerhouse

What makes the Justice for Women and Girls Initiative particularly powerful is its recognition that women's rights issues don't fit neatly into discrete categories. While its pillars are defined – educational equity, economic empowerment, healthcare access, safety from violence, legal and social equity – these seemingly distinct concepts are inextricably interconnected.

"We tried to create distinct buckets of work, but quickly realized everything is related," Marquart explains. "Economic empowerment, education, safety: these are complex issues that rise and fall together."

This reality is exemplified in Yim's work with the Clooney Foundation for Justice to end child marriage globally. "Child marriage is just one example where all of these issues intersect: the lack of education, the lack of economic

opportunities, is also itself the cause of child marriage,” Yim says. “It’s a self-perpetuating vicious cycle. When girls, young children, are married off at an early age, it cuts off access to education, health care, they lose economic opportunities, they can be subject to further incidences of violence.”

The firm assembled a cross-border team spanning multiple offices to support the Clooney Foundation’s “Waging Justice for Women” program, which provides free legal aid to women around the world and mentors the next generation of women’s rights leaders.

Stepping into the Void

To fight for girls and women, the team looked at the firm’s past work. The ethos of the project was shaped by the firm’s years of crisis response: fighting the 2017 travel ban prohibiting U.S. entry by individuals from Muslim-majority countries, reuniting families separated at the Mexico border in 2018, and helping Afghan women at risk of Taliban reprisals in 2021 resettle abroad.

The lesson learned from these crises was simple. “Don’t be afraid of what you don’t know,” says Marquart. “These crises often create situations where no one person or organization is equipped to do the work; that’s why they are crises. Stepping into that void and just being smart and interested in helping is often all you can do, and that’s enough.”

Yim says those experiences revealed the importance of thinking on multiple levels at once. She points to the family separation cases in particular: the firm not only reunited parents and children through individual petitions but also exposed systemic, structural failures.

“That early work showed us how important it is to take a multi-faceted approach,” Yim reflects. “We can provide direct services to women experiencing abuse, and at the same time fight laws, like Wyoming’s anti-abortion legislation, that threaten rights on a much broader scale.”

That dual strategy, immediate relief plus structural change, has become the DNA of the Justice for Women and Girls project. And it is working. In November 2024, Gibson Dunn successfully challenged Wyoming’s anti-abortion legislation, including a first-of-its-kind ban on abortion medications, with the Wyoming District Court granting summary judgment and entering a permanent injunction preventing the legislation from taking effect.

Attacking the Root Causes

The Justice for Women and Girls Initiative doesn’t simply write blank checks to women’s organizations; it attacks the root causes of the issues that make those organizations necessary.

Take educational equity, where Gibson Dunn partners with the Schools Consent Project, sending lawyers into schools across the U.K. and New York to teach young people about consent and sexual violence prevention. Research suggests that sexual assault leads to poor school performance, mental health problems, and increased dropout rates among girls. Preventing violence through education itself directly improves educational and safety outcomes.

The firm also goes beyond prevention to protection. In 2024, Gibson Dunn secured a complete victory for New Village Charter School in Los Angeles, which serves extremely high-needs students, many facing homelessness, poverty, teen pregnancy, abuse, trauma, or justice system involvement. When California wrongly deemed the school ineligible for funding, Gibson Dunn fought back and secured over \$255,000 in desperately needed resources.

Planting Economic Seeds

While systemic battles are vital, many victories come in smaller forms, like helping women launch or sustain small businesses. The firm partners with nonprofits to support women- and immigrant-owned businesses in the New York area, including Start Small, Think Big, which supports budding businesses. Yim says they’ve collaborated



on “everything from drafting template contracts, drafting website terms and privacy policies, to advising on corporate governance issues.” The firm also works with Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts, which provides legal aid to New York-based artists and cultural organizations, including providing pro bono legal services to women artists with disputes or who need advice on contract negotiations.

Freedom From Violence

With over 40% of women reporting intimate partner violence or stalking during their lifetimes, according to the CDC, the project’s violence prevention efforts represent some of the most immediate life-saving work. The firm partners with New York’s Sanctuary for Families to secure final orders of protection against abusers. Gibson Dunn is also a founding member of the U.K.’s Domestic Abuse Response Alliance (DARA), representing survivors ineligible for legal aid.

The Firm’s immigrant clients who are immigrant women face distinct challenges. “Many of the people who come to the United States are fleeing some kind of violence, whether or not that’s targeted violence, gang violence, or domestic violence,” says Yim. “A lot of the refugees and asylum seekers we work with are women and that goes hand in hand with our goals of ensuring that women have a safe place to live their lives and have access to all of the opportunities that they’re entitled to.”

The Road Ahead

The current political climate has intensified the urgency of their work. Immigration cases now require complex risk assessments as families navigate changing policies. Marquart describes two Honduran mothers who were deported with their U.S. citizen children despite having American fathers ready to care for the kids. One child was receiving cancer treatment and now struggles to access medical care in Honduras. “Those are just two of our clients who are undergoing really horrific situations,”

Marquart says. “I think a similar dynamic persists in a lot of the work that we’re doing in the women and girls space: Women often are the caregivers of their kids and when they are facing these life situations, they’re not only facing it on behalf of themselves, but on behalf of their kids, too.”

Yim anticipates that reproductive rights will become an even larger focus, particularly as federal funding for international programs becomes more restricted. “It’s a very challenging time for these organizations to obtain funding from our federal government in particular,” she observes. “So, I think it’s more imperative than ever that when people are thinking about donating to a cause and supporting a cause financially, that this is really the time.”

“What makes me most proud and hopeful is the incredible outpouring of support and enthusiasm I see from my colleagues across the firm,” Yim reflects. “To experience this energy and dedication to supporting this cause has been really special, and gives me a lot of hope for the future.”

The Justice for Women and Girls Initiative represents more than just expanded pro bono work; it’s a model for how major institutions can leverage their unique capabilities for social impact. By organizing around a unifying mission while maintaining the diversity of individual lawyer interests, Gibson Dunn has created what Marquart calls “the most powerful” version of their pro bono practice.



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