



**Mary's Pence**  
Funding Women. Changing Lives.

# Giving Circles: Mary's Pence Background Info

## About Mary's Pence

### How long has Mary's Pence been in existence?

Mary's Pence was founded in 1987. We've given almost 2 million in small grants to over 500 women's projects throughout the Americas since our founding 25 years ago.

### How did Mary's Pence get started?

Founded in 1987, Mary's Pence evolved after the Chicago archdiocese turned down a request for money from a group of Chicago women who had been doing volunteer prison ministry for about seven years. Meanwhile, the archdiocese gave \$250,000 to a priest to start a gang ministry program. The name reflects the annual Peter's Pence collection by the Church, and provides money for women's ministry.

### How do potential grantees find out about Mary's Pence?

Many find us through donors and past grantees. Mary's Pence also has a wide network of women religious who have either donated or received a grant. Lately, we've noticed that many people are hearing about us on the internet when searching for grants.

### Who are Mary's Pence supporters?

For 25 years Catholics have given to Mary's Pence, mostly by writing small checks. The majority of our funding comes from individuals; over 7000 have given. Much of this comes in increments of \$15 to \$100. A portion comes from churches and women's religious organizations. Periodically we receive a grant for a specific project. Many of our donors are regular givers, or *Compañeras*, giving 4 to 12 times a year. Approximately 30% of our funds come from this source. We are currently seeking to diversify our funding base to include more congregations, foundations and individual donors, especially young Catholics.

### What percentage of your money goes to grants?

Our annual audit shows that 84% of our budget goes for program. Program includes expenses that go to support our grants and grantees. This includes the salary of our Latin American liaison, travel to oversee the grants, and technical support for grantees. It also includes education and outreach on our programs and issues of women and poverty.

## About Our Grants

### What kinds of grants do you give?

**The first type of grant is the ministry grant**, these grants invest resources in small projects developed by local women in response to needs in their own communities. Ministry

grants can be used for study by women taking on a leadership role in change efforts in their community. **In 2008 we began the ESPERA Funds.** These are grants of larger amounts that are provided to women's networks to start community lending pools.

### **Why do you only do grants in the Americas?**

Restricting granting to the Americas makes it possible to build deeper relationships with our grantees. Having a staff person in Mexico means we can stay in touch, partnering with grantees and learning from them. Mexico and Latin America and the Caribbean have a history that is very linked to the United States. The actions of our country have had negative impacts on the poorer and indigenous peoples. In the U.S. we are impacted by the immigration caused by poverty, people leaving their homes seeking work to feed their families. We, as Mary's Pence, wish to have a positive impact on our neighbors and sisters.

### **Do you partner with other organizations that work in the region?**

We have always partnered and worked with local connections. Our broad network of donors, board members and grantees means we can connect with someone who works in the country or region to select and support grantees. Over the last two years we have partnered with International Partners in Mission in networking and development conferences in Nicaragua.

### **What additional support does Mary's Pence give to grantees to ensure success?**

This is a very important question. Especially with ESPERA Funds we find that the training and administrative support is as important as the 'lending pool money'. Because we work locally, we tailor support to the individual groups. Some typical requests include computer skills, marketing help and technical tools.

### **Do you do grants in the U.S.?**

Yes, our grants are open to people in North, South and Central America. For example, some of our grantees in this current year include:

#### Common Law, Inc., Bronx, NY

Common Law provides free legal representation to low-income Latina food vendors at hearings. In 2007 Latina women food vendors formed VAMOS Unidos to advocate for fairer vending regulations. The goal is to defend against vending violations, attract vendors to VAMOS Unidos, and to educate court personnel about the low cap on permits.

#### Reflect and Strengthen – Sisters Rising, Boston Area, MA

This is a grassroots collective of working class women from the neighborhoods of Boston who take a holistic approach to creating personal and social transformation. Sisters Rising is a leadership development program that aims to:

- Create strong consensus-based processes that shares while developing leadership potential in all members, especially those most marginalized.
- Highly develop the skills of lead organizers by attending local, national, and international trainings and conferences
- Create opportunities to practice principles of self-determination and equity in organizing work across Boston.

#### Still Point Theater Collective, Chicago, IL

Still Point Theatre Collective in Chicago provides part-time creative work for formerly incarcerated women, and uses theater to educate the community about issues faced by these women.

### **What criteria are used to evaluate grant requests?**

We work with women's organizations who are working for long term change for women (voice and economic self sufficiency). Organizations need to have similar values, values of participation, mutuality, sustainability, integration and stewardship. Grant recipients do not need to be Catholic. Organizations need to have a budget less than \$150,000. Grants are up to \$4,000. ESPERA Funds are up to \$20,000.

### **Mary's Pence Used to do Study Grants? Are those still available?**

While study grants are less of a focus than in the past they are still available. This year we gave study grants to women studying Theology and Social Work, in preparation for work with those in need. We also granted to a woman in Brazil studying for a Masters in Administration of Environmental Policy.

## **Working in Latin America and the Caribbean**

### **Does the turmoil in some of these countries overshadow the benefit of the grants (i.e. does corruption and violence make this futile)?**

The countries we work in have great poverty, corruption and violence. But they are not at war. Providing access to skills or funds can make the difference between getting ahead or falling behind. In these countries (as in the U.S.) an accident or health issue can wipe out progress unless a woman has access to a buffer.

### **Have women suffered retaliation when they have begun to use the voice in the community?**

Because we work with multiple women in a community there is mutual support. This has not been an issue.

### **Why is working in Latin America and the Caribbean so important?**

The poverty rate in some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean is very high. Families are often separated as family members immigrate to other countries to seek work. Because our countries are so closely linked, geographically and politically, we focus on supporting our sisters in these region of the world.

## **ESPERA Fund – Community Lending Pools**

### **What are ESPERA Funds?**

ESPERA Funds provide seed money to women-led collaborative networks to create community lending programs. Women own and manage the funds, and benefit from their use and growth

### **Why was the name ESPERA Fund chosen?**

ESPERA Fund stands for Economic Systems Providing Equitable Resources for All. 'Espera' means 'she hopes' in Spanish.

### **How are ESPERA Funds different from micro-lending?**

We grant the women funds, funds remain in the network, they do not come back to Mary's Pence in the form of a repayment.

The women own the funds, as a group, and can lend them out and earn interest,

The women determine the criteria and interest rate for loans.

This process encourages a long lasting relationship and support between the women.

We offer support and technical assistance as the women set up their fund.

### **Why did Mary's Pence develop ESPERA Funds?**

ESPERA Funds is a result of strategic planning by the staff and board. The group reviewed past grants, noticing what made projects successful. They wished to leverage the best of what worked in the past. We found women are strongest when they work and learn together. That's why ESPERA Funds work with women's networks. We also observed that projects were most successful when they met a local need, defined by local women. And we wanted to provide a resource that would be available into the future. Loans provide this opportunity. In addition, lending pools to grow as funds are paid back with interest.

### **How does Mary's Pence find or form networks of women to work with?**

Our goal is to work with existing groups, not to form groups simply to make loans available. We want to work with groups that have a relationship and a reason to get together. Each ESPERA Fund is different.

- Concertacion de Mujeres de Suchitoto in El Salvador is a group that had been working on human rights issues for years.
- Red de Mujeres Morelenses por un Economia Solidaria in Mexico is a group that has a variety of interests including savings.
- Red de Mujeres Nicaraguenses in Nicaragua formed recently to share experiences related to starting small businesses.
- Association de Mujeres Sembradoras de Esperanza in Guatemala was formed by a Sister to work on empowerment issues.

### **What interest rate is charged on the loans?**

The women in each network determine the interest rate that they wish to charge. Since the money is a resource that belongs to the women they never pay back any money or interest to Mary's Pence. In Nicaragua the network began with a 4% annual interest rate. They have since raised it to 10% annual so they have money to cover the costs of administering the fund and supporting the network. In El Salvador they are charging 12 percent. This is an amount that Mary's Pence has encouraged funds to consider. A group in Mexico has charged as high as 5% per month, and it is important to remember the alternative for these women is a source that charges 15% per month, *and* the women set the rate.

### **Does Mary's Pence do ESPERA Funds in the U.S?**

We are interested in doing ESPERA Funds in the U.S., and are open to discussion with interested groups.

## **Microlending – Is it an issue?**

### **What issues have come up related to micro-lending programs?**

Many micro-lending organizations are doing a fine job and are benefiting the poor. But as micro-lending has become popular some issues have arisen with some organizations and in some communities. We believe ESPERA Funds avoid these pitfalls.

- Commercial banks are entering the field and making a profit off of the poor.
- Some nonprofits charge the borrower a higher interest rate than is paid to the investor, some between 30 and 50% (Wikipedia/ Kiva). Mary's Pence ESPERA Funds set their own interest rate. Currently interest rates are between 4 and 12 percent.
- Some groups outsource the collection of loans and lose control of abuses that happen.
- In counties that have an abundance of micro-lenders women will take out a series of loans to pay the earlier ones back.
- Family members may pressure women to take out loans because women more frequently have access.
- In counties where there are abuses by lenders, women may avoid borrowing for fear of negative consequences.

### **I've seen Kiva in the news. What is the issue?**

Kiva is a nonprofit that raises money and funnels it to microlending institutions. It has come under criticism for misleading donors into believing that they were selecting individuals on their website to receive the actual loan (though the individuals pictured do receive loans the donor isn't selecting who their loans go to).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/09/business/global/09kiva.html>