

# Responsive Philanthropy

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*Girl Child Network, a GFW grantee in Zimbabwe, celebrates the creation of a new club. This photo is from Paola Gianturco's book Women Who Light the Dark. © Paola Gianturco*

## "It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it."

Imagine ordinary women coming together to take on and defy the world's most intractable problems. In Afghanistan, women defy the Taliban by running underground schools for girls. In Colombia, women displaced by decades of civil and guerrilla warfare build themselves a safe haven — "a city of women" — brick by brick. Peasant women in remote rural areas of China build the beginning of a move-

ment for organic farming by educating themselves and others about the hazardous effects of pesticides on women's health and the environment. These are not dreams — each represents the courage, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit of thousands of women worldwide. These are the grantee partners of the Global Fund for Women.

In 1987, three ordinary women in the USA dreamed about a different way to share money and resources with women, and a different way to connect people and ideas around the globe. These founders of the Global Fund for Women never imagined that someday it would be largest public foundation investing exclusively in women's rights groups globally. Since then, we've

By Kavita N. Ramdas

helped seed a global women's movement by raising more than \$70 million dollars that we've invested in thousands of women's groups in 171 countries and more than 20 women's funds on every continent.

Our founders were convinced that women's human rights and dignity were key to the advancement of any global agenda for social, economic and political change. Our grant making program was premised on the assumption that women knew best what to do about the challenges they faced in their own communities. Our founding mothers had no (continued on page 11)



challenging grantmakers  
to strengthen communities

## “It ain’t what you do...” (continued from page 1)

doubt that when women had access to resources, were healthy, and had the opportunity to contribute to their families’ well-being, they would flourish — and so would everyone around them. It always has been crystal clear that advancing women’s rights, increasing their access to technology, education, political participation and economic autonomy not only enables women to be a powerful force for change, but it is one of the most effective ways to realize a more sustainable, democratic and just future for us all.

At the Global Fund, we’ve learned that nothing yields greater benefits than putting financial resources directly into the hands of women leaders on the ground. And thankfully, our long-held commitment to investing in women’s empowerment, agency and voice has led to remarkable outcomes and borne fruit in the form of more justice and equality for women.

We now have hard data showing how investments in girls’ education and the inclusion of women in decision making at all levels reduces birth rates and child mortality, improves health and nutrition for families, stops the spread of HIV/AIDS and builds robust democracies. For every additional year of education a woman receives beyond the fourth grade, average family size drops by 20 percent, child mortality by 10 percent, and her risk of contracting HIV/AIDS by more than 50 percent. As women’s income improves, so too do child survival rates. This is 20 times higher than when men’s incomes go up because women allocate more of the household budget to education, health and nutrition instead of purchasing cigarettes and alcohol. According to Isobel Coleman in *Foreign Affairs*, research shows that “the regions that have most successfully closed gender gaps in education have also achieved the most economically and socially: eastern Asia, southeastern Asia, and Latin America.”



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*Kavita at the MIUSA conference.  
Photo by Paola Gianturco from her book  
Women Who Light the Dark.*

In 1994, at the UN Conference on Population and Development, the president of the World Bank, Lewis T. Preston, noted, “An educated woman is more likely to delay marriage, space her pregnancies, and have fewer and healthier children. She is also likely to earn more if she works and to invest more in her children’s education.” Preston made sure that the World Bank began to walk its talk; since then, more than half of all projects financed by the bank have included specific components aimed at empowering women.

Preston was among the first voices in the mainstream development community to echo the core message of the women’s movement. The Global Fund has since been honored to host the Lewis and Patsy Preston Fund for Education that was established in his memory.

### CHANGED LANDSCAPE

Today, a different reality prevails. What once was a solitary place occupied by hard-core feminists is now the hotly contested territory of journalists, academics and corporations. “Research demonstrates that investing in the education, training and leadership of women delivers high returns in terms of economic and social development, including lower infant and child mortality rates, disease prevention, higher income and productivity rates, and broader economic growth.” These words are not something in a Global Fund annual report — instead, they are to be found on the web site of ExxonMobil, one among the growing ranks of corporations, government and foundation leaders that extol



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*GFW grantee Groups of Women in Water & Agriculture Kochieng in Kenya, Africa improves women’s health, protects girls’ right to education, and boosts women’s economic status. Its activities include building sustainable wells, conducting community education about hygiene and sanitation, improving farming methods for women, and installing washing facilities and latrines in schools. This photo is by Paola Gianturco from her book Women Who Light the Dark.*

the virtues of investing in women and girls. Initiatives like Goldman Sachs' 10,000 Women campaign, which seeks to provide underserved women with a business and management education, and Exxon's Women's Economic Opportunity Initiative that has committed more than \$20 million to help women in developing countries be drivers of economic and social change. The U.S. government is not far behind: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton just announced the creation an International Fund for Women and Girls that is to be funded in part by Avon, whose CEO, Andrea Jung, was honored at a recent Women's Day event at the State Department.

What does this mean for those of us who see ourselves as politically progressive? What does this mean for philanthropy as a whole? As the rhetoric of investing in women becomes common terminology in both private and public sectors, is there, in fact, more money in philanthropy going toward women- and girl-led efforts and organizations? As more players support women's initiatives, are women's funds still needed? Is our work done? Should we hang up our hats and celebrate that we were able to leverage significant additional resources to women and girls by means of our example, and our philanthropic education and advocacy within the sector?

The answers to these questions are not straightforward; yet, I believe there remains a critical role for women's funds and social justice philanthropists to play in translating the rhetoric of investing in women into truly transformational social change.

#### WALKING THE TALK: CHALLENGES FOR PHILANTHROPY

Socially progressive funders inherently are caught in a philosophical dilemma — we raise funds or redistribute funds or do both in order to invest them in social movements and activists work-

ing to truly challenge the current status quo. That status quo, of course, includes the current form that capitalism has taken. Most progressive funders, including the Global Fund for Women, understand that achieving our vision of a more just, sustainable and equal world will require us to end the high levels of consumption, consumerism, corporate control and ecological devastation associated with modern-day free market systems. Yet, all of us, and most nation states, currently depend on that very system to generate the resources that we raise or give away in service of social justice initiatives. Even those who believe that the best form of redistribution of resources is via taxation recognize also that what nations tax is a system that is grossly dependent on fossil fuels and overconsumption of all natural resources. Our colleagues in social movements find themselves similarly torn — “if the revolution is not going to

As the popular song goes, “It ain’t what you do, it’s the way you do it.” The “way” that we did it began with active efforts to devolve power and decision making into the periphery and away from the center.

be funded,” what business do we have accepting philanthropy of any kind?” asked one ally. On the other hand, deeply pragmatic activists on the ground counter with, “there ain’t no such thing as tainted money; it just t’aint enough!”

The Global Fund knew from the beginning that our work for change was not simply about putting money into women's hands. Or as the popular song goes, “It ain’t what you do, it’s the way that you do it.” The “way” that we did it began with active efforts to devolve power and decision making into the periphery and away from the center. Thus, while we understood that as a “philanthropic organization” we were a part of the existing structures, we would do all we could to “invert” them and turn them upside down. The first example of this “how” was encouraging women's groups to write to us in their own words, in their own language, about their own analysis of problems and their own suggestions for solutions. We accept proposals in any language — from Mandarin to Russian and Arabic. Our multinational and multilingual staff travel to remote rural villages and urban barrios and listen to women in their own communities — they also communicate with them in their own language as much as possible. English may be the lingua franca of global communication, but often it also is the language of Empire — allowing women to speak in their own mother tongues is a part of giving them voice.

#### Networks/Center and Periphery

Further, the decision was made not to open offices globally but rather to rely on a broad, all-volunteer, global social network of advisors who came out of local social movements themselves and were grounded in local communities to inform and educate our staff about key issues on the ground as they

made choices about which groups to support. The way we communicate with our advisors and extended network is familiar to anyone who now uses Yelp! on her phone. We depend on our network's on-the-ground knowledge and insight about prospective grantees, which helps us ensure that we are supporting the most vital and innovative women's groups. It is the result of a deep web of relationships and partnerships built on trust and mutual respect that cannot be replicated simply by the infusion of capital.

For example, advisors based in Thailand helped us to identify the efforts of the Karen HIV/AIDS Education Working Group, founded and run entirely by women refugees from Burma. They've established HIV/AIDS information centers throughout the camps and train community members, including youth, as health educators. The health educators, in turn, work with key constituencies such as adolescents, health care workers, pregnant women and community leaders to disseminate accurate information on HIV/AIDS transmission and prevention, and to discuss openly issues such as family planning and violence against women, which has had a tremendous impact on local beliefs and practices. A subject once entirely taboo has come out into the open. Information and advice is available at the group's offices, as well as counseling and HIV testing. An international NGO, Doctors Without Borders, reported that it they could not have engaged in this refugee community without the legitimacy that the group provided and the cultural change that they slowly were able to bring about in local communities.

### **Governance**

Equally important was the commitment to inclusive governance — from the beginning, the Global Fund board of directors sought to have a majority



*Women farmers working in the maize fields in Cameroon, Africa. These women are part of the Gender Mainstreaming Networking Organization, a GFW grantee.*

of activists, advisors and grantee partners from the Global South. Our board directors are activists, scholars and leaders in the women's movement in many countries, as well as highly skilled professionals and philanthropists. They ground us in the huge diversity of women's experiences — from those who are denied equality and who experience violence and poverty every day to those who have earned their place at the decision making tables of law, government, and corporate finance. They help us make sense of the very different worlds we straddle in the work we do. They transcend differences of language, religion, class, race and nationality to ensure that all women everywhere are ensured a voice and access to real choices in their lives.

### **Money Where Your Mouth Is:**

Other important "hows" included being willing to get money to groups in ways that made the most sense for them — via a wire, a bank transfer, Western Union or in kind, when bank systems fail to extend support to women clients.

### **General Support**

All groups know that they need core operations support to do their work. The Global Fund's grants are given to groups we trust to use their funds as "they see best." We know women are able to take the small resources they receive and make alchemy happen. We trust their decision-making on how best to allocate their scarce resources. For example, when the devastating earthquake in Haiti struck in January, we immediately let our grantees know that they could use the grants they had received from us for emergency survival — for food, medicine, housing. This is not just a question of being kind — it is far more effective allowing for immediate responses to crises that can happen on the ground, rather than waiting months to negotiate agreements to have the funds be used differently.

### **Funding Controversial and Cutting-edge Work**

The Global Fund has been willing to fund groups working in remote and politically unstable parts of the world — tiny island nations in Oceania, in Gaza and the West Bank, in

Afghanistan under the Taliban, and equally willing to extend its support for groups working on controversial issues — legalizing abortion, standing up for the rights of lesbians and transgender people, or defending the rights of sex workers to be treated with dignity and respect. Because of our deep ties to the women’s movements, we often are able to infuse critical support to groups that are most invisible and marginalized, such as a group of small lesbian organizations in Mexico City. These groups organized lesbian marches for several consecutive years, and they grew in numbers each year and developed a solidarity network of indigenous people, youth and women with disabilities. Their persistent work has shifted cultural awareness and understanding so significantly that last year, Mexico City became one of the first cities in the world to legalize gay marriage.

#### **Givers and Receivers: Both Sides Now**

On the other side of the equation, we have worked to create inclusive and diverse donor communities. Our philosophy of treating everyone with fairness and openness has brought more than 23,000 individual supporters into our network, including the young girl who sends us her Bat Mitzvah check and the anonymous male donor who is passionate about the education of women and girls. We have stepped out of our comfort zone to work closely with corporate funders such as Levi Strauss and Nike Inc., banking industry giants JP Morgan Chase and health care companies like Johnson and Johnson, Inc. We are learning how our work fits into their efforts to combine corporate responsibility with business interests. We have developed a Corporate Leadership Council on both the East and West Coasts, where senior corporate leaders are available to the Global Fund to share their expertise, their learning and their commitment to

women’s rights by increasing our visibility and profile among their networks both professionally and personally. Recently, the Global Fund applied for and received funding from the Dutch government’s MDG 3 Fund. We partner with small businesses like Kepler’s Books and Organic Bouquet, as well as major social venture efforts like CREDO mobile.

We use a social investment screen on our key funding partners, but have tried to be open, flexible and non-judgmental as we explore partnerships, recognizing that the business world has much to contribute that can be of benefit to our work, just as we have insights and experience that can positively affect and shift perspectives in that world. Finally, we are humble about the fact that all of us, regardless of which sector we work in, are engaged with and a part of this economic and political system. This does not mean we should not be able to critique and challenge the system, but it does require us to stop wearing a “halo” of political correctness and intolerance in our dealings with colleagues in other foundations, the public sector or other institutions.

#### **CONCLUSION**

At a board meeting in 2008, Lydia Alpizar, the president of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) and a Global Fund board member, presented findings from a survey of 1,000 leading women’s rights groups. The combined budgets of these respondents, largely from Africa and Latin America, totaled just \$73 million a year. Two-thirds of these groups had annual budgets of less than \$50,000. But the study revealed something else that we had not realized: despite being dwarfed by large private foundations like Gates, Ford and Hewlett in terms of total assets and total amount of dollars

awarded, the Global Fund for Women remains the largest and most consistent supporter of grassroots women’s groups worldwide. These facts fill us with awe. We realize how critical our grant support is for the long-term sustainability and survival of local, community-based women’s groups in more than 170 nations from Fiji to Ecuador.

We realize that change may be incremental rather than revolutionary. Women’s funds bring a sharp and focused gender lens to issues that long have lacked any such critical review. We are challenging our colleagues in the fields of global security, food and agricultural development, environmental safety and sustainable development to include women as key players and decision makers — not simply to view them as “passive beneficiaries.” We certainly lack the financial heft of most larger players in philanthropy, but the way that we do our work has given us a chance to influence and engage with our peers in the field of philanthropy. We can help shape and define this changing landscape and use our networks, our belief in women and our bold politics to ensure that women’s issues have a significant place among strategies being developed and implemented by our peers across the board, regardless of whether they are public, private or corporate donors.

The world does have a chance to realize that now is the time to *increase* our support for women’s rights and gender equality. I am encouraged by signals from all sectors of society to advance women’s rights globally. I hope we can build a global movement that recognizes the irrefutable truth that investing in the well-being and full empowerment of women is the single most effective strategy for a more peaceful, prosperous and equitable world. ■

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