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## The year of giving generously

By Sharmila Devi

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In early April, philanthropist Linda Gruber and her daughter joined Kavita Ramdas, president of the Global Fund for Women, for lunch at a little Iranian restaurant near the fund's San Francisco office. Gruber had been a generous supporter of GFW in the past and Ramdas wanted to ask her to continue her annual giving at the level she had been committed to in the fund's endowment campaign, which was drawing to a close.

Over basmati rice and yoghurt drinks, she broached the possibility of a sizeable gift. This month Gruber, a long-time supporter of women's causes, pledged \$1m over four years. Part of the impetus behind the donation was the recently launched Women Moving Millions initiative, which encourages women to give at the million-dollar level and aims to raise \$150m by next year in donations pledged to any one of the 128 members of the Women's Funding Network, such as GFW. So far it has raised \$103m.

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"Women don't give as generously as they could," says Gruber, who runs the Gruber Family Foundation with assets of just under \$50m. "I was so impressed with the Global Fund for Women and Kavita and I thought, 'why not just give them the money for work that I can't do because I'm too small'." The gift is "unrestricted support", which means GFW can deploy the money as it sees fit.

Ramdas has headed the fund, which she calls "venture capital" for women, since 1996. Assets have risen to \$21m, in large measure because of her charisma and energy. Since the fund's creation in 1987, it has given more than \$58m to 3,450 women's organisations in 166 countries, making it one of the largest grant-giving groups for women.

The fund believes that by helping women, a whole community benefits. Its definition of women's rights encompasses a range of entitlements – from education to reproductive health to peace. Grantees include the Women Initiative Group in Azerbaijan and Women of Tomorrow in Togo.

"Sometimes people say 'why do you fund lesbian rights when women are dying, being raped and have no money?'" says Ramdas. "I always say, 'there's no hierarchy of oppression'."

Ramdas has successfully tapped into the wash of money in Silicon Valley. "We've given away more money in the past five years than we gave away in the first 15 years of the global fund's existence."

She believes the group's expansion can be dated to the post-9/11 period and the increased focus on international affairs, including the US's 2001 attack on Afghanistan and 2003 invasion of Iraq. The fund also became more assertive in its fundraising to take advantage of the rising interest in global politics.

In 2003, GFW launched a \$20m "Investing in Women" campaign, which Gruber helped support. More than half was earmarked for a "Now or Never" fund for women in countries, such as Iraq, with urgent needs regarding health and fighting fundamentalism.

The campaign launched with the backing of women leaders, such as Mary Robinson, the Irish Republic's former president, Nancy Pelosi, now speaker of the US House of Representatives, and Queen Noor of Jordan.

Ramdas, who has a masters degree in public affairs and international development studies from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, has become associated with "feminist philanthropy" – a notion that she explained combines social justice with the quest for gender equality.

"When people say you just work with women's issues, I say we work on a woman's right to be involved in all issues," she says. "We've had more opportunity to make the case that if you

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didn't invest in women's wellbeing, it wasn't just a tragedy for women but it had implications far beyond that."

The fund is not a direct service-provider but gives grants averaging \$10,000 to women's groups across the world – excluding the US where it believes they are better funded. It provides for capacity-building and infrastructure as well as direct programme work. Many of the fund's donors give unrestricted donations. The list of people who have helped raise funds for GFW reads like a Who's Who of internet companies: Esther Hewlett, whose father-in-law was one of Hewlett Packard's founders, Akiko Yamazaki, wife of Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang, and Kate Greswold, daughter of Cisco chairman John Morgridge.

The group raises most of its funds in the US and, to date, has not taken government money. Since 1996, the number of individual donors has risen to more than 15,000 from about 2,000, including about seven individuals who have given \$1m or more. About 45 per cent of funds overall are raised from individuals and the rest mostly from foundations and corporations. Ramdas likes to tell stories about her donors, such as the single mother who was so upset by the 2001 bombing of Afghanistan that she raised \$700 from friends and family at a small event organised at her home. The number of corporate supporters was negligible when Ramdas joined the organisation, but now accounts for about 6 per cent. They include Johnson & Johnson, Levi-Strauss, Reebok, Amex, JPMorgan Chase and the Nike Foundation.

Ramdas is hopeful the economic downturn will not affect donations, particularly from the fund's wealthy, core group of funders.

"People who get hit by downturns in economies tend to be the ones who can afford it the least. Ironically, the extraordinarily wealthy and privileged remain so even in the most absurd situations," she says.

"I think our more diversified revenue portfolio makes us more capable of withstanding the immediate impact [of a downturn]. Of course, if a recession goes on for a long time, it will clearly have an impact on the economy as a whole."

Ramdas, who was born in India, does not shy away from politics. She recalled that one of George W. Bush's first acts as president was to impose what she called a "gag rule", whereby women's groups abroad receiving USAid funds would not be allowed to promote abortion.

"The US had been seen as a defender of women's rights in many different parts of the world but this set the stage for a turnaround," she says. "Colleagues from USAid would call me and say 'there's an incredible organisation in Kenya or Ethiopia that's going to lose all its funding because it also provides abortions or referrals for abortions, and can the Global Fund do anything?'"

The group would try to fill in gaps and help what it calls "linchpin" organisations, but could not step in to replace all the USAid grants.

In the western aid world, the notion of women's rights as an important parameter of development has become ever more prominent.

"In the past decade, the increased employment of women in developed economies has contributed more to global growth than China's rise," Ramdas wrote in an article in Foreign Policy magazine. "Not surprisingly, therefore, the education of women far outstrips most other strategies for economic development in the poorest nations."

The fund celebrated its 20th anniversary this month with a gala where the guest of honour was Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia. While Ramdas is aware of the inherent contradiction in hosting a glamorous gala while spotlighting poverty, she says these events are an inescapable part of fundraising.

"It's a little hard to reconcile the realities of kids living in Gaza or 12-year-old girls living in a shelter in Phnom Penh with the contradictions of spending a huge amount of money in a very fancy place," she says. "But I'm also very conscious of the fact that you do want to celebrate the people who make it possible to do the work."

And more generally, quantifying success can be difficult in the field of human rights.

"How do you measure success if a woman once too shy to open her mouth at a village meeting is now an elected member of an Indian village *panchayat* [council]?" she says. "Or a girl who never had the chance to go to school but then a women's organisation opens a school nearby? Or women in Pakistan who were only able recently to revoke a law that required four male witnesses to testify at a rape trial?"

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