



TAYLOR GALLERY FOR THE CHRONICLE

BIG PHILANTHROPISTS

Melinda French Gates Is Just Getting Started

The billionaire philanthropist talks to the Chronicle about her time at the Gates Foundation, the importance of learning from the people you want to help, and why being a public advocate is central to her approach to giving.

By JIM RENDON

Melinda French Gates is experimenting with creative ways to support women — and she’s encouraging more of them to give.

NEARLY TWO DECADES AGO, Melinda French Gates had an epiphany. After fielding questions at a press conference announcing Warren Buffett’s decision to give much of his fortune to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, she realized that she and Bill — up until then the one more associated with the foundation — needed to be equal partners in philanthropy. And to do that, she needed to transform herself into a public advocate.

The shift was as much personal as professional. She was traveling the world, sometimes living with families for days to learn about the lives of some of the world’s poorest women — a powerful juxtaposition of wealth and poverty and, for French Gates, an opportunity to learn from that difference. At the same time, she had three children at home. She wanted to show them the importance of standing up and doing the right thing.

“I was in and out of low-income countries at least three times a year. Families were talking to me deeply about what they were up against — women in particular sharing these stories, these heartbreaking stories. And here I am, also a mother at home at the same time, and I’m telling my children to use their voice,” French Gates told the *Chronicle* in a recent interview. “I realized I had something to give voice to from all these stories in the developing world. And I started to realize that by being a woman, I could give voice to them in a different way than perhaps a man could.”

It’s been a long road. Bill and Melinda argued over whether French Gates could co-author the foundation’s annual letter — the answer was no when she first tried in 2012. Three years later, in 2015, they published their first letter together. That same year, she struck out on her own, starting Pivotal Ventures, a limited-liability company she uses to make grants, for-profit investments, and political contributions to help improve the lives of women and girls in the United States.

To put the spotlight on issues she cares about, French Gates — who *Forbes* estimates is worth \$30.2 billion — has given TED Talks, appeared on national TV shows, and done interview after interview. Her first book, *Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World*, which came out in 2019, was a bestseller; her second, *The Next Day: Transitions, Change, and Moving Forward*, came out in April.

She made headlines last year when she announced she was leaving the Gates Foundation three years after her 2021 divorce and again when she announced her plan to give \$1 billion over two years to advance women’s power and influence globally — capping her transformation into one of the most watched and influential philanthropists today.

That influence has spread beyond her own work. She co-founded the Giving Pledge, which asks wealthy people to give away the majority of their wealth, and the Maverick Collective, which helps

women engage in giving. She has also inspired legions of women philanthropists, says Elizabeth Barajas-Román, CEO of the Women’s Funding Network, which receives support from Pivotal. Last year, the network’s members gave \$4 billion.

“She’s out there talking about it. She’s writing her book. She’s writing her newsletter pieces. Her influence has only grown,” says Barajas-Román. “Very high-net-worth women donors are thinking differently about what their legacy means in terms of not just their giving, but how they show up in the community. Their influence isn’t just money, but it is also their voice.”

‘She Can’t Look Away’

French Gates’s formative experience in philanthropy was at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which was formed in 2000. The pair has given nearly \$60 billion to the foundation, and Warren Buffett has given nearly \$40 billion, making it an unrivaled force in global health. Through field visits, talking to experts, and studying the literature, French Gates started learning how important involving women and girls could be to the success of public-health and development programs. But it took years of hard work to get the Gates Foundation to place women at the center of much of its work.

It’s tempting to think that when your name is on the building, what you say goes. But French Gates never saw things that way. For starters, the

Gates Foundation is staffed by experts recruited from top universities and international agencies. Neither French Gates nor the experts at her foundation were predisposed to change course quickly. “They don’t do anything on a whim. It takes a lot of intention to stand up a new program, to resource it, and to identify what the foundation’s role is,” says Haven Ley, who worked at the Gates Foundation for seven years before leaving to help start Pivotal in 2015. She is now Pivotal’s chief strategy officer. “And you had Melinda herself, who’s a deeply serious, very curious learner who also doesn’t leap to conclusions quickly.”

In her field visits to impoverished communities in African countries, India, and elsewhere, French Gates heard, firsthand, women’s desire to be able to choose when to have children and how many. Those choices lead to important improvements in the women’s own lives — and the lives of their children, families, and communities.

“It was like coming to a recognition,” French Gates says. “I knew I just wasn’t ready until I started to actually see it and understand it and learn it. So my own internal process didn’t pivot on a dime.”

French Gates was never dictatorial, says Gary Darmstadt, former senior fellow in the global development program at the Gates Foundation, where he helped spread gender-equity efforts across the foundation’s various programs. At the foundation, the staff cared about what the

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THE TOP LINE

- Melinda French Gates has become a public advocate to put a spotlight on the issues she cares about, especially empowering women and girls.
- She has inspired other women to become philanthropists, be more vocal, and better engage with the people they’re trying to help.
- French Gates works through Pivotal Ventures, a limited-liability company that allows her to make charitable gifts, political donations, and investments in for-profit companies.



MANSI MIDHA

LISTENING TO LEARN
Melinda French Gates talks with women who attended a 2022 meeting on financial inclusion, organized by India Post Payments Bank in New Delhi.

French Gates used more carrots than sticks when she integrated women's empowerment across the Gates Foundation's many programs.

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founders thought. "You understood that it was fundamentally their foundation and their call," he says. "But Melinda never made you feel that way."

While many big donors conduct site visits with the groups they fund, French Gates tried to go deeper, sometimes living with families for days, helping with chores and daily life. She wanted to learn as much as she could directly about the lives, perspectives, and needs of the women and girls she hoped to help. In some instances, she met with groups of young women and simply listened to their stories to help her learn about the relationship between child marriage, girls' education, and health outcomes, Ley says. Some of the stories were full of tragedy with little hope for a better future.

"Sometimes you have to let your heart break. She's not afraid of doing that. There's no buttoning up. There's no turning away," Ley says. "I do believe that is what she believes is her obligation as a person of privilege. She can't look away."

When French Gates began to integrate women's empowerment across the foundation's many programs, her approach was mostly carrot, not a lot of stick. She provided resources for various teams to do research or to collect data, often where little existed, and to come forward with their own ideas about where changes would make a difference. There were meetings and memos and efforts to bring program leaders along with the idea, but there was never a mandate.

In a 2014 article in *Science*, French Gates argued that by ignoring the role of women and their empowerment, international development programs are failing to achieve their objectives and lose out on opportunities to transform society. It was, she says, a public stake in the ground — a flag to mark the direction the foundation was heading.

"I could have just said to the foundation we will turn from X to Y, but we already had a set of strategies in place that I believed in. I believed in our malaria strategy — I still do. I believed in the AIDS strategy. So what I needed to do was to give the teams time and space for me to signal this is where we're going. What I did was very purposeful," French Gates says. "I don't think it's a great way to manage and lead an organization, to just

say we're going to go from X to Y. Let people come to it. Because if you do that, then the work happens more deeply, and it sticks and stays over time."

Challenges Along the Way

But not all of the foundation's efforts to include gender have been runaway successes. French Gates writes about the importance of engaging with women using the example of the foundation's agriculture work in Africa. In her 2019 book *Moment of Lift*, she discusses the pitfalls of using only feedback from men to develop rice seeds for small land-holding farmers in Africa. However, women, not men, did much of the work. The rice grew low to the ground, forcing the women to bend over to harvest it. They told their husbands to avoid those seeds in the future, and the program suffered.

By engaging women in these discussions and better understanding their roles in the family, community, and economy, French Gates argues in the book, these programs can be more successful.

That program, however, has drawn criticism. The effort was run by AGRA, a public charity started by the Gates and Rockefeller foundations and initially chaired by former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The Gates Foundation has remained a key supporter, giving \$263 million between 2018 and 2023. In August, 150 organizations signed a letter from African faith, farming, and environmental leaders asking the Gates Foundation and other funders for reparations for environmental damage, economic losses, and a loss of biodiversity in food systems stemming from AGRA's industrial-agriculture programs.

A 2021 review of AGRA's work funded by the Gates Foundation found that women benefited little from these programs. Gains in crop yield were concentrated largely among commercial farmers, who were primarily men. With only a few exceptions, AGRA programs did not have gender-inclusion goals and most of its programs failed to assess the barriers women and young people faced. Data collection on women was sporadic.

Timothy Wise, a senior research fellow at Tufts University, and author of a study of AGRA's work, says that rather than doubling productivity and farmers' income by 2020 — AGRA's stated goal — malnutrition actually increased. He says AGRA's industrial agriculture techniques that rely on synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and commercial seeds were a poor fit for small African farms.

Cash crops like rice and corn from AGRA pushed out more nutritious traditional crops, which can make it harder for women to feed their families if a crop fails, says Anne Maina, national coordinator at the Biodiversity and Biosafety Association of Kenya.

AGRA did not respond to a request for comment.

French Gates says that it was challenging to set up AGRA as a new Africa-based institution, and the foundation had other, smaller programs focused on the barriers women faced to owning livestock and land and helped educate men about these issues. AGRA purposely focused on staple crops like corn and rice that could be both eaten and stored for sale.

"Am I glad we did it? Absolutely. Did it do as much for women as I had hoped? No. But was it important for us to be transparent about that? Yes, because if we wanted to change and to do more for smallholder farmers, it needs to do better," she says. "We were also doing a lot of other things to

try and lift up smallholder farmers. It wasn't that we thought, 'Oh, this is the only way to do it.'"

'Growing and Shifting'

French Gates knew from her own experience that there was plenty to do to level the playing field for women in the United States. Her entire professional life had taken place in largely male environments. She studied computer science in college in the 1980s. She worked at Microsoft in its early years, which she describes as a deeply male workplace and culture. Philanthropy has a long history as a bastion of older white men.

French Gates started Pivotal Ventures in 2015 to advance the well-being of women and girls in the United States. She recruited a handful of trusted advisers from the Gates Foundation to help her think through what the new entity could be. Ley brought in speakers and arranged trips. French Gates read copiously to learn what issues were most pressing for women and how Pivotal could advance women's power and influence. In that start-up period between 2015 and 2019, Pivotal spent about \$200 million in grants.

From the beginning, French Gates wanted to use a different structure than the Gates Foundation. She created Pivotal as a limited-liability company so she could spend money in any way that could foster change — charitable gifts, political donations, investments in companies.

"I was brand new at it, and I thought I wanted a lot of flexibility. I wasn't sure actually how much I wanted to do at the beginning, grant making versus V.C. [venture capital] investments versus advocacy," French Gates says. "The LLC just gave me a ton of flexibility as I was changing and growing and shifting."

Pivotal focuses on creating large-scale change. So, for example, in its caregiving work, it doesn't fund groups that provide child- or eldercare. Instead, it works to create the blueprint and environment for systemic change so caregivers and families can have affordable solutions making care a source of comfort and joy rather than burden and hardship.

It supports research that could be used in policy discussions and to help businesses that are developing caregiving products and services. One example: a study done by the Holding Co., a for-profit firm, that determined the caregiving market was worth about \$648 billion a year. Pivotal also studies state policies and engages with policymakers and business leaders.

Pivotal, which has about 100 employees, now also focuses on women's political power, youth mental health, women and tech innovation, centering women and girls of color, and other issues. French Gates made her first funding announcement for Pivotal in 2019: \$1 billion over a decade to bolster women's power and influence in the United States.

Unlike a foundation, Pivotal is free to make political donations, and it has — \$15.74 million between 2022 and 2025, according to the FEC and ProPublica 527 databases. It gave \$3 million to Campaign for a Family Friendly Economy PAC, which advocates for paid family leave. In addition to making political donations, Pivotal supports a group that works with business leaders to create better leave policies at their companies, and it puts money in two venture funds that invest in care-related businesses.

The groups Pivotal supports tried and failed to get a paid-family-leave bill passed at the federal level during the Biden administration. But they have found success at the state level. Between 2016 and today, the number of states with paid family leave jumped from four to 13.

Understanding how Pivotal works, whom it makes grants to, how much it spends, its staffing, and other details of how it operates hasn't always been easy.

"Society is just better off when women can step into their full power, whether that's their voice, their decision making, their resources."

Until very recently, the public knew about only the donations Pivotal chose to disclose. As an LLC, Pivotal is not required to make its grants public, and it has been selective about which nonprofits it names on its website. In 2022, the Pivotal Philanthropies Foundation was formed, and it had \$530 million in assets at the end of 2023, according to the informational tax return it has to file as a private foundation. It makes grants to nonprofits using funds from the 2019 \$1 billion announcement, and it will also disburse the grants from the 2024 \$1 billion announcement. Pivotal says the foundation's assets also include other funds that have not been announced. So far, Pivotal has spent or has committed to spend \$875 million of the \$1 billion French Gates announced in 2019.

Limited Transparency

The privacy afforded by an LLC is attractive to many ultrawealthy philanthropists. An LLC offers much more flexibility and far fewer rules than a private foundation, says Dana Brakman Reiser, Centennial Professor of Law at Brooklyn Law School and author of *Profit Philanthropy: Elite Power and the Threat of Limited Liability Companies, Donor-Advised Funds, and Strategic Corporate Giving*.

An LLC doesn't require any disclosure of grant-making activity, staffing levels, expenditures, or other information available on the informational tax return of a foundation. The Pivotal Philanthropies Foundation, for example, has no staff and only three board members — French Gates, her longtime adviser John Sage, and Brooke Anderson, Pivotal's CEO. All the decisions are made by staff at Pivotal, which does not need to provide the public with any information at all.

"The LLC is just one example of how elite donors no longer need to worry about what government or society at large would expect from them. They can pursue their philanthropic goals with much less regulation and much less visibility," Brakman Reiser says. She is worried that researchers will lose the ability to track the activity and strategy of the biggest donors. "It's a 'trust us' model, and I think that's dangerous."

French Gates expects Pivotal to become more

transparent over time — largely through the foundation. And she points to her announcement last year about the \$1 billion she is giving away: "I like to signal where I am going."

'Even More Important Now'

Alfiee Breland-Noble, founder of the AAKOMA Project, a youth mental-health nonprofit, got startling news last spring. She was one of 12 individu-

als that French Gates picked to direct \$20 million each in grants to other worthy nonprofits. The AAKOMA Project was a longtime Pivotal grantee, but Breland-Noble had never even met French Gates. "Many days I wake up and it catches in my throat because I think it is so amazing that someone from afar could look at me and say, 'Yeah, I'm going to put you in this group with Ava DuVernay,'" she says, referring to the acclaimed filmmaker. "I believe in your ability to do this."

The money is managed by the National Philanthropic Trust, and Breland-Noble makes decisions about where the funds can go. The idea is that these 12 people will do things with the \$240 million that French Gates would never consider. It's one way French Gates is putting more trust in grantees and finding more creative ways to give effectively. "Why not tap into that real, lived expertise of people who are actually boots-on-the-ground themselves?" Breland-Noble says. "I think it's a brilliant idea."

The May 2024 announcement of Pivotal's second \$1 billion round of giving was detailed. In addition to the 12 individuals each directing \$20 million in giving, French Gates listed recipients and dollar amounts for each area she planned to fund, including \$235 million to support 23 organizations protecting women's rights and advancing their power in the United States.

Those funds will go out over two years — far more quickly than the 2019 \$1 billion commitment, which is taking place over a decade.

French Gates says she intends to increase her giving to Pivotal and to women's and girls' issues now that she has left the Gates Foundation. In the early months of the Trump administration, with so many issues that have been close to her heart for decades under attack, the work has become more urgent.

"Society is just better off when women can step into their full power, whether that's their voice, their decision making, their resources," French Gates says. "If some things are moving backwards, some of it is that we haven't invested enough in some of these women's organizations. They've been on the defensive. We need to make sure they're all on the offensive. For me, my work continues. It just feels like it's in some ways even more important now." ■