NEW YORK — Melinda French Gates is already one of the biggest philanthropic supporters of gender equity in the United States and is now poised to put another $12.5 billion toward intractable problems like closing the gender pay gap and increasing women's political participation, her grantees hope.

The additional funds come as French Gates announced Monday that she was [*stepping down as co-chair of the Gates Foundation*](https://apnews.com/article/bill-gates-melinda-french-gates-foundation-cb0440349285c302184d54923cc72bd9), which she founded together with her ex-husband Bill Gates more than 20 years ago. Gates will provide the $12.5 billion as part of an agreement made when they divorced in 2021.

Organizations like Paid Leave For All, founded in 2019 to coordinate advocacy around passing [*federal paid leave legislation*](https://apnews.com/article/paid-family-leave-maternity-22aaac545f83b95842316a3029f3bb40), said French Gates' steady support over years as well as her advocacy to highlight the issue, counterbalance other funders who have been slow to back fights like theirs that challenge sexism in compensation and benefits.

“If you’re only willing to invest in a thing that you think is surely going to win in the short term, then you’re not making much of an impact,” said Dawn Huckelbridge, founding director of Paid Leave For All.

While no one knows exactly what French Gates’ future plans are, Huckelbridge's organization and other grantees anticipate she will use the funds as part of her focused advocacy and philanthropic support for increasing the power and influence of women.

“This amount of money to be moved into a space, even with just a standard 5% draw, is going to be so significant,” said Teresa Younger, president and CEO of the Ms. Foundation for Women, which supports the women’s movement and the movement for gender equality in the U.S. The Ms. Foundation's research has documented the disproportionately [*small amount of philanthropic dollars*](https://apnews.com/article/business-philanthropy-7c545feeca154541f61118e4e45a85b2) that support nonprofits led by women of color or that [*support Black women and girls*](https://apnews.com/article/health-race-and-ethnicity-business-philanthropy-death-of-george-floyd-7ce7a2d94414597376d8b6780a9fde19), especially.

In her post on Monday announcing her resignation, French Gates said she planned to commit the funds to her work on behalf of women and families, adding, "I’ll be sharing more about what that will look like in the near future.”

French Gates works through her organization, Pivotal Ventures, which is a limited liability company that also manages investments in for profit ventures. As a result, there is little public information about its grantmaking or the assets it manages. A spokesperson for Pivotal Ventures pointed to French Gates’ statement on Monday when asked for comment about her future philanthropic plans.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which will change its name to the Gates Foundation, is one of the largest philanthropic organizations in the world. As of December 2023, its endowment was $75.2 billion, thanks to donations from Gates and the billionaire investor Warren Buffett. While it works across many issues, global health remains its largest area of work, and most of its funding is meant to address issues internationally rather than in the U.S.

Pivotal Ventures has targeted a number of avenues to increasing women's economic and political participation and power, like closing the wage gap, compensating care work often done by women, and encouraging women to run for political office.

The Associated Press receives financial support for news coverage in Africa from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and for news coverage of women in the workforce and state governments from Pivotal Ventures.

Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and ***Politics*** at the Eagleton Institute of ***Politics*** at Rutgers University, began working with French Gates at least as far back as 2018, she said.

“I have to say, they were one of the most considerate funders, if I can put it that way, in that they provided funding for general support and asked only that we could make ourselves available to give guidance and advice early on,” Walsh said. She also credited French Gates with having a capacity for giving and focus on gender equity that no other single funder or foundation offers.

Walsh declined to say how much Pivotal Ventures has granted to her organization, but said the funding supports their research into multiple areas, including the intersection of race and gender in ***politics*** and ways female political donors can use their influence and voice to greater effect. Her center is also able to fund the research of faculty and graduate students at other institutions, which helps communicate to those schools that their research is valued, she said.

“I remember thinking that after 40-plus years of working in this space, it was the thing that in many ways I never thought would happen, which is that there would be somebody who would prioritize gender and gender equity, who had the capacity to make investments that could be transformational,” Walsh said.