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SPECIAL REPORT
GIVING BACK

FROM KARACHI TO DURBAN, AMERICAN WOMEN ARE LINKING UP WITH FEMALE ARTISANS

BY COELI CARR

Who could have predicted that foot scrubbers would bring big change to a small village in Pakistan? Ann Thariani's fascination with handcrafted terra-cotta foot scrubbers began when she lived in Karachi with her Pakistani architect husband Kумы and led them to start a company, Gilden Tree. Sales of the product skyrocketed, but the women who made the scrubbers were not the only beneficiaries. The Tharianis decided to pay to educate the women's offspring, with one challenging stipulation: the girls, who often stay at home in rural Pakistan, had to go to school with the boys. "Everything Gilden Tree does is a reflection of my values," says Ann. "You have to treat every human being with respect."

Thariani is part of a cadre of U.S.-based businesswomen committed to bringing a better life to financially disadvantaged women overseas, who often live in patriarchal societies in which work outside the home is frowned on or condemned outright. Why are women entrepreneurs getting in the



business of giving back? "Women have a special gift for friendship," says Clare Brett Smith, an executive at Aid to Artisans, based in Hartford, Conn., which helps match U.S. entrepreneurs with artisans overseas. The other component? "Trust. It's one of the basic elements of a decent business."

Giving It Back To the Girls

HOW DID THARIANI FIND THE INSPIRATION for her business? Newly married and living in Karachi, she had exhausted the supply of pumice stones she had taken with

her from the U.S. She found *jahwaan*, traditional foot scrubbers, in the local market. "They looked really rough and strange, but when I started using one, it made my feet smoother and softer and did a wonderful job cleaning them," she says. As she prepared for a visit to her native Omaha, Neb., with her son, she asked herself, "Do I

Gilden Tree's founders Ann Thariani and husband Kумы show off their freshly scrubbed feet. Their scrubber of choice: Gilden Tree's terra-cotta model, made by artisans



bring foot scrubbers for family and friends or pack the baby's clothes?" When she got eight orders for the tool, a business was born.

A family friend helped the couple find two small clans near Karachi whose women were able to make a sophisticated version of the foot tool. The Tharianis, who live in Omaha, have since added a Gilden Tree skin-care line to their company, but the Foot Scrubber—which sells about 100,000 units annually—is still their best-moving product, with a presence at Whole Foods, bath shops and spas.

The growing business gave the female producers a disposable income, something they had never had before. "There's a real change in the power in families once a woman can earn," Thariani says. Her epiphany came, she says, when she heard the husband of one of the women say about his newly schooled daughter, "kind of with mock annoyance, 'That daughter of mine, she's always got her nose in a book.' That was a tectonic shift in these people's lives. These are no longer families of laborers. They're now educated families." The Tharianis—and the Pakistani girls—are the winners.