



The Girl Effect

Tamara Woodbury

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LAST SUMMER, THE NEW YORK TIMES CAPTURED both the various facets and importance of investing in girls. [The Women's Crusade](#) by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn is actually several stories within a story. Staggering statistics of genocide based on gender. Profiles of individual girls and women who overcame abuse, poverty, lack of education, and societal stigma – enormous odds – and then improved their own lives and the lives of those around them. Also there is a strong case made for the connection between subjugation of women and girls and the promotion of violence, extremism and terrorism.

GIRLS AND WOMEN ACCOMPLISH NEARLY 70% OF THE HUMAN WORK THAT SUSTAINS FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMIES.

There are also some simple solutions, such as equipping girls to handle menstruation as a means of staying in school and showing governments with straightforward data and statistics that gender inequality significantly harms economic growth. Inequity is the “centrepiece of poverty.”

The Girl Effect is a movement that began several years ago to call attention to the magnified return on investment when girls are educated and supported to take their place as leaders in society. [This video](#) takes the viewer on a journey: a girl is educated, invests earnings in a cow to feed her family, expands to a herd of cows, and shares profits with her community. The



community members learn and follow her example. The effects, over time, are leveraged and exponential.

In a separate but related blog, Kristof announced the Half the Sky Competition, soliciting stories from

readers who have had an experience of the needs of girls and women in countries around the world. Also invited were solutions – simple actions that build on the capacities of women and girls in their communities. In the multitude of responses, there was one that said, “I live in a Third World country. You know it as Detroit.” The author, Frances Saad, goes on to discuss the plight of the impoverished in the United States of America and question why it is less in vogue to recognize and address poverty here, as opposed to countries that are readily accepted as “third world.” Her ques-

RESEARCH IS CLEAR THAT IN SOCIETIES WHERE WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE OPPRESSED AND UNDERUTILIZED, THE ECONOMY ALSO SUFFERS.

tion is timely. This is why some of us have gathered to bring voice, attention and organization to a movement called *The Girl Effect USA*.

While the storyline of the original *Girl Effect* video, set in a third world country, is perfectly clear, it is much more difficult to see *The Girl Effect* in a wealthy nation like the United States. Few American girls will begin their gainful employment raising cows. Yet, millions of American girls are oppressed in a myriad of ways, from situations of abuse and trafficking to being socialized to underestimate their value. Many set their sights low and see their value in terms of beauty, rather than

who they are and what they can accomplish. The Girl Effect USA proposes that the erosion of civil society in the US must be addressed and that girls are a critical part of the solution.



Religion has played a huge role in defining the culture that oppresses women. The women’s movement brought a liberating force into some long-held patriarchal practices, but sadly that same movement also reinforced a polarity between the genders and did not reveal the deep cultural biases against the expression of feminine qualities by either gender.

UNLEASHING THE POTENTIAL OF GIRLS IS THE PATHWAY TO SHIFTING THE PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY AND INCIVILITY IN VIRTUALLY EVERY COMMUNITY AROUND THE GLOBE – AND NOT JUST THOSE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES.



Last year, former President Jimmy Carter brought this issue to the forefront. As a member of The Elders, an independent group of eminent global leaders, Carter successfully lobbied his colleagues to make an unequivocal statement: “The justification of discrimination against women and girls on the grounds of religion or tradition, as if it were prescribed by a Higher Authority, is unacceptable.”

Carter himself continues to take a strong stand against religious beliefs that contribute to the subjugation of women and girls: “The impact of these religious beliefs touches every aspect of our lives. They help explain why in many countries boys are educated before girls; why girls are told when and whom they must marry; and why many face enormous and unacceptable risks in pregnancy and childbirth because their basic health needs are not met.”

Of course, Carter’s challenge will be particularly painful for men and women of many faiths. We can only hope that every religion’s underlying love of humankind is sufficiently robust to engage the emerging dialogue that invites us to look anew at how religious beliefs have negatively impacted human behaviours and culture. As we do, we will also see clearly the contributions and value of women, girls and so-called feminine qualities. With a rise in recognition for the value women, girls and these qualities bring to communities, it is natural that the centuries-old inequities will fall away.

Faith communities have long been leaders in addressing the turbulence that falls on families when economies and governments fail. This is true across the globe and to a growing extent here in the United States. Forty-eight of the fifty states have had to address huge budgetary shortfalls in 2010, and most of these shortfalls have been met by cutting vital services to the most vulnerable. Of the 37.5 million Americans living in poverty and the 36.2 million others who are “food insecure,” women and children predominate, in terms of percentage, degree of poverty, and vulnerability to budget cuts. Despite some recent signs of general economic recovery, the trajectories for the poor, the homeless, and the food insecure are forecast to continue downward.

It has been suggested that our troubles began with the financial collapse of 2008. Unfortunately, this is not true, as millions of women and girls in the US and billions around the world can attest. On the upside, the potential and power of women and girls remains strong, and we can ill-afford to squander that potential of full contribution – for the sake of our families, communities and economies. ♦♦♦

