

Policy Entrepreneurs and the Education of Girls in Developing Countries

Carol Hubbard

February 2011

In developed countries, citizens take for granted the right to free education through high school, for boys and girls alike. But in many other parts of the world, education is neither free nor available to most children — especially not girls. Girls are excluded because of millennia-old beliefs in the inferiority of females in spite of the fact that, as a Chinese proverb says, “Women hold up half the sky.”¹ Therefore, leaders such as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton² and humanitarian Greg Mortenson, best-selling author of *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*³, have taken on the challenge of making education for girls a priority in the developing countries just as it is a right in developed ones.

This policy focus is grounded in the fact that education for girls, more than any other single factor, advances a country in numerous, verifiable ways.⁴ Studies show that “with even a few years of primary education, women have better economic prospects, fewer and healthier children, and better chances of sending their own children to school. If girls’ education continues to secondary level, they will be better equipped to make informed choices about their lives.”⁵

¹ Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn. 2009. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* [E-book]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

² “The State Department is committed to advancing the rights of women and girls as a central focus on U.S. foreign policy interests, in partnership with the private and nonprofit sectors,” <http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/womensfund/index.htm> (accessed January 14, 2011). Also, P.J. Aroon, “Clinton Decries Poison-Gas Attacks on Afghan Schoolchildren,” September 1, 2010, <http://hillary.foreignpolicy.com/category/topic/education>, accessed January 14, 2011.

³ Saeed Qureshi, “The Handsome American Greg Mortenson — A Role Model Humanitarian,” Pakistan Think Tank, <http://pakistanthinktank.org/component/k2/item/731-the-handsome-american-greg-mortenson-a-role-model-humanitarian> (accessed January 14, 2011).

⁴ “Women do 66% of the world’s labor in return for less than 5% of its income. For every one year increase in education of women of reproductive age, child mortality has decreased by 9.5%. And, providing girls one extra year of education beyond the average boosts their eventual wages by 10-20%. A child’s probability of survival is increased 20% when household income is controlled by the mother rather than the father.” Garrans, Yvette. “Investing in Women and Girls: Access to Rights and Resources.” November 15, 2010. Global Washington. <http://globalwa.org/tag/bill-melinda-gates-foundation> (accessed January 28, 2011).

⁵ Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, “Investing in Women and Girls,” http://www.oecd.org/document/23/0,3746,en_-2649_34447_46041815_1_1_1_1,00.html (accessed January 28, 2011).

Moreover, one of the eight United Nations Millennium Goals, endorsed by 180 countries, is that “every boy and girl will receive a quality basic education by 2015.”⁶

Therefore, the level of United States support (monetarily and diplomatically) for the education of girls in developing countries is a crucial issue. In fact, Greg Mortenson has often said that fighting terrorism originating in Muslim countries only perpetuates a cycle of violence and that, therefore, it should be a global priority to promote peace through education and literacy, with an emphasis on girls’ education. “You can drop bombs, hand out condoms, build roads, or put in electricity, but unless the girls are educated, a society won't change,” says Mortenson.⁷

This paper focuses on the policy entrepreneurs who have taken indicators about the oppression and marginalization of girls around the globe and used them to define a problem and set a national policy agenda that is growing in scope and visibility. Policy entrepreneurs come from many walks of life, especially the media, civil service, academia, politics, and lobbyists, and they work to “... highlight the indicators that so importantly dramatize their problems.”⁸ Using (1) claims to a hearing, (2) political connections, (3) negotiating skills, and (4) sheer persistence, they “soften up” the general public and government leaders alike until a problem ends up on the decision agenda by policy entrepreneurs and the larger policy community pushing it through what is known as “a window of opportunity.”⁹

Those who are leading the charge for the education of girls in developing countries include Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Greg Mortenson, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl

⁶ Barbara Hertz and Gene Sperling, Executive Summary of *What Works in Girls Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2004), http://www.cfr.org/publication/6947/what_works_in_girls_education.html?id=6947 (accessed January 14, 2011).

⁷ LitLovers, *Stones into Schools* Discussion Questions. http://www.litlovers.com/guide_stones_into_schools.html (accessed January 28, 2011).

⁸ Kingdon, John W. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd edition. 2003. Longman Classics in Political Science. New York: Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers Inc., 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 204-205.

Wudunn, Melinda French Gates, and Oprah Winfrey. While these individuals have powerful claims, connections, skills of persuasion, and personal tenacity undergirding their efforts, it is also undeniable that the obstacles they face include millennia of deeply engrained cultural and religious prejudice against females in much of the world, overt and often violent opposition to projects focused on educating girls, and a lack of awareness on the part of the American public.

Hillary Clinton has long been a policy advocate for equality for women and girls, even though she's taken a lot of flak for doing so in an era where any focus on women's issues is still considered to be "soft" policy.¹⁰ However, her persistence and growing influence — especially since becoming U.S. Secretary of State — have made her a game changer in this arena.¹¹ Not surprisingly, during her tenure as Secretary of State, Ms. Clinton has strengthened the Office of Global Women's Issues and launched the Secretary's Innovation Award for the Empowerment of Women and Girls — to encourage individuals and organizations to develop innovative proposals for engaging woman at all levels of society throughout the world.¹²

Recently, in the wake of poison gas attacks on schools for girls in Afghanistan, Clinton minced no words, saying: "We condemn such attacks and are working with the Afghan government to address this important issue and prevent further incidents from occurring.... We urge the international community to continue their support for the Government of Afghanistan in combating repression and violence against girls seeking an education, and in bringing to justice those responsible for these appalling attacks."¹³

The dramatic story of how Greg Mortenson, a former registered nurse and mountain

¹⁰ Mungal, Ivy. "Clinton Earns Praise for Feminist Foreign Policy." Devex. Devex, January 13, 2011. <http://www.devex.com/en/blogs/development-assistance-under-obama/clinton-earns-praise-for-feminist-foreign-policy?g=1> (accessed January 18, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² <http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/innovation/rfp/index.htm>

¹³ Aroon, P.J. "Clinton Decries Poison-Gas Attacks on Afghan Schoolchildren," September 1, 2010, <http://hillary.foreignpolicy.com/category/topic/education> (accessed January 18, 2011).

climber, rewarded the inhabitants of an isolated village in Pakistan who saved his life by raising money to build them a school — and then went on, against all odds, to spearhead the founding of the Central Asia Institute, which has built more than 130 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan, most of them for girls, has been told in his two unforgettable best-sellers, *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools*.¹⁴ Mortenson's uncanny ability to connect with people from all walks of life — along with his determination to persevere in his new vocation over some two decades — has galvanized interest among both the American public and international change-makers in the plight of girls in underdeveloped countries, especially those from which anti-Western terrorism originates. But it was the terror attacks of 9/11, in particular, that led him to redouble his efforts. “‘Schools [provide] more effective bang for the buck than missiles or chasing some Taliban around the country,’ says Mr. Mortenson, who is an Army veteran.”¹⁵ In fact, not only did Generals McChrystal and Petraeus end up consulting with Mortenson and having him arrange for meetings with Afghani tribal leaders¹⁶, but *Three Cups of Tea* is now required reading for all Special Forces soldiers deploying to Afghanistan.¹⁷

Likewise, husband-and-wife humanitarian and writing team Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, in their dramatic and often heartrending book, *Half the Sky*¹⁸, have documented the importance of educating girls in order to give them the confidence, skills, and social worth necessary to keep them from being exploited by traffickers, abusive husbands, and archaic cultural systems that have disenfranchised and silenced half their populations. They also publicized the shocking fact that less than one percent of U.S. foreign aid currently goes to

¹⁴ Mortenson, Greg and David Oliver Relin. *Three Cups of Tea: One Man's Mission to Promote Peace ... One School at a Time*. 2006. New York: Penguin Books. Mortenson, Greg. *Stones into Schools: Promoting Peace with Books, not Bombs, in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. 2009. New York: Penguin Books.

¹⁵ Mortenson, Greg. “Fighting Terrorism with Schools.” *Parade*. November 22, 2009. <http://www.parade.com/news/2009/11/22-fighting-terrorism-with-schools.html> (accessed January 28, 2011).

¹⁶ Bumiller, Elisabeth. “Unlikely Tutor Giving Military Afghan Advice.” *The New York Times*. July 17, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/world/asia/18tea.html?ref=gregmortenson> (accessed January 28, 2011).

¹⁷ Mortenson, Greg. “Fighting Terrorism with Schools.”

¹⁸ Kristof and Wudunn.

programs directly aimed at helping women and girls.¹⁹ Moreover, Kristof has used his role as a *New York Times* columnist to write frequently about fellow activist and author Greg Mortenson's work.

Eight years ago, Melinda French Gates of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, highlighted the importance of education for girls when she said:

“How does a girl become strong? How does she enact change? How does she grow into a strong woman? It begins with a step that sounds simple, but isn't. She finds her voice. A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult. It's complicated by the fact that in most nations women receive substantially less education than men. In fact, in the developing world, the majority of women don't receive an education at all.”²⁰

The Gates Foundation's Senior Fellow of Global Development, Geeta Rao Gupta, Ph.D., specializes in gender and development issues, and the Foundation invests in various types of educational programs for women and girls, both in the disadvantaged areas of the U.S. and in developing countries. With its multi-billion-dollar budget, high visibility, and reputation for outstanding and innovative work (both directly and through the projects it funds), the Gates Foundation is a key policy entrepreneur for the education of girls.

TV show host Oprah Winfrey has leveraged her celebrity status and massive wealth to advance a large number of worthy causes — among them, the importance of education for girls in developing countries. Her website contains a plethora of links to articles and organizations working to empower women and girls. For example, the Oprah Winfrey website's “Teach a Girl” page mobilizes fans to support any one of a number of international “girl education” projects that they can link to immediately.²¹ But perhaps her best-known philanthropic effort is The

¹⁹ Kristoff and Wudunn.

²⁰ Gates, Melinda French. Speech at the annual luncheon of Powerful Voices, October 16, 2003. <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/speeches-commentary/Pages/melinda-gates-2003-powerful-voices.aspx> (accessed January 28, 2011).

²¹ <http://www.oprah.com/oprahshow/How-to-Help-Teach-Girls-Around-the-World>

Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls/South Africa, which provides a first-class education for impoverished but gifted girls who Ms. Winfrey hopes will become a key part of South Africa's future.²²

The efforts of these policy entrepreneurs — and others like them — on behalf of girls and women may seem paltry in the face of the global need, but there is a growing policy community and potential windows of opportunity which, together, will hopefully push this issue to the forefront of the U.S. policy agenda in the years ahead. In the meantime, when we look back just a few decades, we see significant progress. American policy entrepreneurs and humanitarians took documented indicators about the appalling condition of girls in developing countries and persevered in speaking out until the problem was identified and highlighted. Connections (big and small) continue to be made and leveraged for what is now a legitimate agenda item and key project at various federal and international organizations. Not surprisingly, with Hillary Clinton as our current Secretary of State, the State Department is one of them:

“The Secretary’s International Fund for Women and Girls is a State Department-led, privately-funded initiative committed to providing flexible, rapid, targeted, and high-impact grants to nongovernmental organizations working to meet the critical needs of women and girls around the world. The State Department is committed to advancing the rights of women and girls as a central focus of U.S. foreign policy interests, in partnership with the private and nonprofit sectors.”²³

While promoting and funding education for girls in developing countries is not yet on the United States’ decision agenda in the ways it should be and could be, I believe the tipping point will come in our lifetime — when the synergy of the required components (policy entrepreneurs, policy communities, and one or more windows of opportunity) will do for deprived, oppressed, and disenfranchised girls what was done to outlaw slavery in the western world in the 1800s.

²² http://oprahwinfreyleadershipacademy.o-philanthropy.org/site/PageServer?pagename=owla_homepage

²³ <http://www.state.gov/s/gwi/womensfund/index.htm>, accessed January 14, 2011.

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