

# The Impact of Policy Learning on the Issue of Educating Girls in Developing Countries

by Carol Hubbard  
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## Introduction

The U.S. has a policy agenda promoting education for girls in developing countries, as evidenced by then-First Lady Hillary Clinton's significant participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), the Action Platform that emerged from that Conference (which called for eliminating inequities in the education, skills development, and training of girls<sup>1</sup>), public statements by now-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and funding such efforts through USAID<sup>2</sup>.

What is interesting is how this policy agenda is promoted now versus the way it was twenty years ago, when education for girls was demanded purely as a human rights issue — an approach that offended countries that didn't appreciate the U.S. positioning itself as the global role model for and teacher of human rights. Now, more pragmatic approaches such as citing economic studies that document the profoundly positive economic and societal impact of educating girls are often the tools of choice. Whatever the causes or processes, this is evidence of what is called "policy learning." Its impact on the policy issue of educating girls, as evidenced by changes in Hillary Clinton's public statements from 1995 to the present, is the focus of this paper.

## Policy Learning and the Issue of Educating Girls in Developing Countries

In public policy, people regularly spout things as purported truths that *aren't* truths.

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1 Strategic Objective 4. "Platform for Action," Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995). <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/girl.htm>

2 GEMS (Girls' Education Monitoring System) publishes reports on USAID-funded efforts in a number of developing countries in Latin America and Africa. [pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PDABX953.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PDABX953.pdf)

Therefore, we should not assume that everything we are learning is correct, accurate, and true.<sup>3</sup> Most everyone involved with the policy process would agree that inherent components lead to policy change. But agreement about which components and mechanisms effect change is more elusive. The phrase "policy learning" refers to "... a focus on learning as the source of policy change."<sup>4</sup> And, as Frank Laird explains, "the growing interest in policy learning parallels the growing scholarly focus on the role of ideas in public policy."<sup>5</sup> A policy learning focus is important because it gives us another way of thinking about policy change. Policy learning can be divided into two parts:

1. Technical — The institution finds a new means of doing what it's already doing (more efficiently).
2. Mission — The institution changes its ideas about what it thinks its goals really are (this is long-term, much more profound change). This does not happen often, but when it does, you see a sustained change in the output. Changing a mission statement isn't enough.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1990s, policy entrepreneurs such as then-First Lady Hillary Clinton framed the importance of educating girls as a human rights issue. Therefore, when she went to China in 1995 to participate in the Fourth World Conference on Women, she maintained that American values established the *sine qua non* of women's rights, saying, "It [was] important to me that we really lay down *a declaration of American values when it comes to women.*" (Emphasis added.)<sup>7</sup> This was not atypical behavior for someone with Clinton's law degree and American upbringing, for "resolving policy problems with legal rights is a long-standing impulse in American politics."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Anglo-Saxon countries in general have a concept of human rights rooted in the Magna Carta and other similar legal traditions.

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3 Class notes.

4 Bennett and Howlett. "The lessons of learning."

5 Laird, "Rethinking Learning."

6 Class Notes.

7 Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "The Hillary Doctrine."

8 Stone, 324.

Not surprisingly, however, this statement equating American values with the best in human rights thinking did not sit well with many around the world, both in developed and developing countries. It is a big mistake to think you can take a public policy in Country A, plug it into Country B, and it will work just fine. Whether or not public policies work depends on the context in which they land. There can be multiple barriers to transnational learning — political or economic discontinuities, and institutional structures that oppose them or constitute bottlenecks, including cultural institutions (norms and values embedded therein) that run counter to them.<sup>9</sup>

However, recent statements by now-Secretary of State Clinton and Helen Clark at UNDP have taken a more pragmatic and pan-culturally acceptable approach:

"And people say, 'Well, why do you focus on women ... ?' Well, we focus on women because all of the research going back decades demonstrates the best development strategies are focused on women; that focusing on a woman, helping a woman get better nutrition, getting access to credit, getting education, improves life for the families."<sup>10</sup>

"Certainly both Helen Clark at UNDP and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton are speaking up forcefully about the powerful impact of investing in women and girls. Helen Clark has called it the *breakthrough strategy for achieving the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]*."<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, in light of this development, we might ask: How does policy change occur? Sometimes, policy makers learn something new or incorporate new thinking into their thinking. Other times, however, they simply yield to pressure. Therefore, if the pressure goes away, so does the policy.<sup>12</sup> For a more sustained change in policy, you need one or more of the following:

1. To effect deep changes in the organization (i.e., bring in new people).
2. Create a new organization (e.g., environmental agencies or ministries).

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9 Class Notes. Issues in Policy Making (Professor Frank Laird, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, the University of Denver). Winter Quarter 2011.

10 Clinton, Hillary. 11 May 2010. "Remarks at CARE's 2010 National Conference and Celebration." Washington, D.C. <http://bit.ly/aWNYxO> (accessed 24 February 2011).

11 Lomoy, Jon. 3-4 June 2010. "The impact of development cooperation in reaching the MDGs on gender equality: challenges and solutions." 2010 Development Cooperation Forum – Helsinki.

12 Class Notes.

3. New ideas brought in by new people or a new organization get institutionalized.
4. To change the rules and procedures by which the organization operates (hugely influential).
5. To change the institutional culture (norms and values).<sup>13</sup>

In this case, while we may not be able to pinpoint which factors were instrumental in the shift from linking the education of girls and women to human rights to economic and familial benefits, we can make some solid guesses. Certainly, if nothing else, new ideas, along with cultural changes brought about by rapid globalization (including instantaneous global communication) from the late 1990s to the present, were key factors.<sup>14</sup> The many research studies done in the first decade of the 21st century that document the profoundly positive economic, health, and community impact of educating girls<sup>15</sup> have had a huge impact. And, also, speeches and best-selling books<sup>16</sup> by popular policy entrepreneurs such as humanitarian Greg Mortenson and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof and his wife Sheryl Wudunn took a much more culturally sensitive, bridge-building, and conciliatory approach — one which has resulted in the active attention of U.S. Army generals and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the conflict-abating potential of educating girls in developing countries.<sup>17</sup>

In light of the division of policy learning into "technical" and "mission" categories, I would maintain that American policy makers seem to be making a technical, not mission, shift. Our goals with regard to the importance of educating girls haven't changed, but our approach

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13 *Ibid.*

14 Stone has noted the role that a crisis, or series of crises, can play in effecting policy learning, saying, "We construct crises; we have to interpret events to be crises. What we learn may or may not be useful. But crises aren't the only stimuli for learning. Complaints from constituents or other organizations, ongoing monitoring of an organization's policy, or social interaction (formal or informal) can stimulate learning."

15 (1) "The rate of return on women's education is higher than that on men's in most developing countries. (2) Increasing women's education not only increases their productivity on the farm and in the factory but also results in greater labor force participation, later marriage, lower fertility, and greatly improved child health and nutrition. (3) ... more educated mothers lead to multiplier effects on the quality of a nation's human resources for many generations to come. (4) Because women carry a disproportionate burden of the poverty and landlessness that permeates developing societies, any significant improvement in their role and status via education can have an important impact on breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and adequate schooling." (Todaro, 377)

16 *Three Cups of Tea and Stones into Schools* (Mortenson); *Half the Sky* (Kristof and Wudunn).

17 Bumiller, Elisabeth. "Unlikely Tutor Giving Military Afghan Advice."

has. Increasingly, we are emphasizing the pragmatic (economic, health, and population control) benefits rather than positioning the issue primarily as a human rights one.

### Conclusion

When American policy makers assume that American norms, values, and priorities will automatically transfer to underdeveloped countries like Afghanistan and Pakistan that are about as different culturally, historically, and religiously from the United States as one could imagine, it is not surprising that they encounter resistance, if not outright defiance. You cannot take an American perception of human rights and education for girls and drop it into a developing country, especially one that values ancient traditions over seeming progress.

However, with rare exceptions, Afghanis and Pakistanis have welcomed Greg Mortenson's "schools for girls" projects. Why? Because he has lived with them, built relationships with them, respected their religious and cultural values, and approached education for girls from a culturally relevant and respectful perspective. Moreover, instead of approaching the problem of little to no education for girls from a normative<sup>18</sup> perspective, Mortenson approached it pragmatically — as a means to improve the health and financial prosperity of indigenous communities.

The influence of policy entrepreneurs like Greg Mortenson, on foreign nationals and Americans alike, should never be underestimated. As Bennett and Howlett quote Jack Walker (1974), "An extremely important source of influence of civil servants, consultants and other policy specialists is their ability to shape the intellectual premises and performance measures employed by policy-makers ..."<sup>19</sup> While I have not been able to find any evidence of meetings or other kinds of direct communication between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Mortenson,

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18 As Vivien Schmidt explained in her article "Discursive Institutionalism": "Policies, programs, and philosophies tend to contain two types of ideas: cognitive and normative. Cognitive ideas elucidate 'what is and what to do,' whereas normative ideas indicate 'what is good or bad about what is' in light of 'what one ought to do.'"

19 Bennett and Howlett, "The Lessons of Learning."

it is highly unlikely that Clinton has not been impacted by Mortenson's work, since it has become so well-known and is so germane to her long-time global campaign for equality for women and girls.

Moreover, Clinton herself has not only benefited from policy learning but is an instrument of it. As Jon Lomoy says, "Too often we talk about the vulnerability of women. We need to put much more emphasis on women as leaders — as agents of change in their communities and countries." Hillary Clinton is a proven and respected leader from the U.S. with global visibility. So as a policy entrepreneur, a big part of her influence is how her life demonstrates the impact a well-educated, gifted, and empowered woman can have.

Granted, there are certain institutional structures that punish those who learn — and who change their behavior based on what they have learned.<sup>20</sup> People or institutions who I would characterize as "policy purists" — those who are so focused on the perceived superiority of their norms and values that they refuse to let them take a back seat to more cross-culturally acceptable and relevant statements — will often react emotionally to those who change their techniques or even their mission. As Stone says, "To name is to take a stand.... Moral ideas and social conventions about behavior and language give us some standards for judging names as more or less close to the truth."<sup>21</sup>

That said, while the arena of policy making and implementation may not be for the faint of heart, it can be an exhilarating and ultimately fulfilling vocation for those entrepreneurial, visionary, and pioneering spirits who want to make a difference locally, nationally, and internationally by facilitating change-making and policy learning.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Stone, 310.

## RESOURCES

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