



TGUP's Girls' Equality Project: An Extended Meditation

Half of the world's population—the female half—live as second-class citizens. We don't see it so much in the West because the status of females has advanced further here than in other parts of the world. So, the discrimination is less overt, and less harmful. But outside of the West, the discrimination is pervasive, relentless, and insidious. How does this second-class citizenship show up in the developing world? It starts before birth.

Gender-based abortion is routinely practiced where technology is available to discern the gender of the fetus, and it is usually the girls that are aborted. Female infanticide is still practiced in China, India, and other developing world countries. That's about half of the world's population right there. When droughts or other disasters hit in India, female death rates exceed those of males, because families feed the boys before they do the girls. Should we keep going?

Girls receive substantially less education than do boys. That's because they're expected to work around the house, helping with younger siblings, doing housekeeping, cooking, and such. But, it's also because societies have paying jobs available for men but not for women, so why waste money on educating girls? Because of the education gap that this creates, women in the developing world earn only about 40% of what men earn. That means that it is all but impossible for women to exist without dependency on men. Should we keep going?

Legal protections for women are weak to non-existent in many developing world countries. Women are not protected from spousal abuse, including physical violence and rape. They have fewer rights in divorce, if any at all. They have virtually no protections against abuse in vocational settings. Many countries discriminate against women in laws of inheritance. Female genital mutilation is tolerated. Women cannot vote, in some countries cannot drive, cannot leave the

house without a male escort, and are forced into arranged marriages at ages as low as 10. Should we keep going?

All of this is the result of deep, broad-spectrum, historical and cultural discrimination against women and girls in *all* countries of the world. When you look at the true novelty of rights accorded women, *even in the U.S.*, this becomes all the more real. Consider.

When the country was founded, women had no right to vote. It wasn't until the 19th Amendment, in 1919, that women got that right. It wasn't until 1963, with the Equal Pay Act, that it was illegal to discriminate in pay. Remember when the only jobs available to women were "pink collar," i.e., nursing, secretarial, and teaching? Title IX, which gave women equal access to resources in education, wasn't enacted until 1972.

Our point is that even in the U.S., equal treatment of women is relatively recent, and still incomplete. Women here earn only 72 cents for each dollar a man earns. For minority women it is even less. And if that's so here, imagine how much worse it must be in countries with low economic development and cultures of tradition and patriarchy. The level of economic development is especially important in predicting rights for women.

In less-developed countries, most of the economic output involves human labor: agricultural self-sufficiency; harvesting cash crops; etc. As such, men are advantaged because of their larger size and muscles. As economies industrialize, and machines do more of the work, that advantage diminishes. It's not an accident that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, in the midst of the Industrial Revolution.

In the most highly developed countries, including the U.S., much of the work involves symbolic manipulation—science, engineering, finance, medicine, etc.—where the physical component of work is almost non-existent. In this kind of work, women are easily the equal of men, and are accorded commensurate respect and power.

In other words, there is a direct link between the level of economic development and the rights and respect accorded women in the society. The problems are especially acute for adolescent girls, and this fact is tied up with discrimination surrounding menstruation.

Every civilization in the history of the world (save for a few, pre-historical matriarchic ones) has explicitly discriminated against women because of

menstruation. This is the most notorious, open secret in the world. It is extraordinary, since the human race—and that includes men—would not exist were it not for the fact of menstruation. Nevertheless, the discrimination is real, is deeply rooted, is pernicious, and is enduring. For example...

In Ghana, in west Africa, menstruating women may not enter the same room as a man. In Nepal, in south Asia, menstruating women are forced to spend the time of their period in a shed for animals. This is still practiced, today. The same practice occurs in parts of Venezuela and in the Amazon basin. In India, menstruating women are not allowed to touch cows, which are considered sacred. In strict Islamic traditions, menstruating women may not touch the Koran. In the Solomon Islands, menstruating women may not go into gardens, or serve food to men.

And lest we think these barbarisms only occur in other cultures, recall the way Judeo-Christian culture signifies menstruation to its own. In the Bible, Leviticus instructs, “Whenever a woman has her menstrual period, she will be ceremonially unclean for seven days. Anyone who touches her during that time will be unclean until evening.” The passage goes on for another 11 verses intoning the “unclean,” and, therefore, unholy, nature of menstruation.

So, discrimination against women is so intractable because it is tied up in both ancient religious and cultural mythologies, and in the pragmatics of modern economic development. A more perverse combination of deep, systemic detriments could hardly be conceived. This is where TGUP’s Girls’ Equality Project comes in.

When a girl in the developing world begins her period, around age 11 or 12, she often has few ways to deal with it. First, she’s often not sure what is happening. She doesn’t understand the role of menstruation in procreation. She is surrounded by bad information about how bleeding is unclean and might cause others to become cursed, or infected, or insane (actual myths we’ve encountered in Africa!). She is likely to be confused, fearful, shamed, bullied. She is almost certain to begin missing school.

The question becomes, what will she do about it?

As for the immediate challenge, she may try to stanch the flow using old rags, or by sitting on corn husks or dried leaves. A common recourse is to use dried cow dung as an absorbent. All of these have obvious problems with hygiene. The bigger problem is that they don’t allow the girl to continue going to school.

If a girl cannot go to school during her period, she begins to fall behind. In Kenya, where we do a lot of work, adolescent girls miss an average of four days of school

per month because of their periods. That's 20% of school time. Even if they were able to remain in school, their performance falls behind that of boys because of all the days missed.

Inevitably, many girls drop out. Their options at that point—at age 12 or 13—are grim. They can go to work in the fields. They can become domestic servants. They can be married off. Or they can be sold into the sex trade. According to UNICEF, as many as 50 million girls a year drop out of school because they cannot deal with their periods. This is not just a personal loss, it is a human tragedy. Why?

Because education is THE single greatest avenue for improving the lot of women in life, no matter the country. And the ripple effect is strong and almost infinite. The data are overwhelming. With more education, girls make better health choices, including using contraception. This prevents both unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Girls with more education marry later, make better choices of partners, have fewer children, have better vocational options, are better parents, and are more engaged in their communities.

An educated girl helps lift up herself, her children, her extended family, her community, and, yes, her entire nation to a better life. This effect is so strong and so well documented, the United Nations has stated that the single highest return on investment for development spending is in educating women. And when you think about it, how could it not be? The future literally flows from mothers' wombs.

TGUP's Girls' Equality Project helps girls in Africa and Asia manage their periods so they can stay in school and realize their human potential. The GEP kits contain absorbent, washable, yet water-proof sanitary pads that help girls deal with menstrual flows. Properly taken care of, they last three years, which is often long enough for the girls to finish school.

Even better, when we distribute the kits, we do so with education to the girls about female biology, the reproductive process, the role of menstruation in that process, and how they can manage it all using GEP kits. This education is profoundly illuminating to the girls. We do it in classes of as few as 10 and as many as 30 girls. Learning together gives the girls a community of support, with common experiences among classmates. It is one of the most empowering, liberating things the girls ever experience.

Maybe for the first time in their lives, the girls have a sense that they might be able to be the master of their own self. They learn that being female doesn't mean being inferior. They begin to develop a sense of self-efficacy, and a belief in life outcomes that they probably had never imagined before. These are not our projections or

overstatements. They are the distilled feedback we have received from the thousands of girls who have received GEP kits and the education that goes along with it.

When we started distributing kits in the summer of 2017, we were buying them from a third party. They cost \$9 per kit. But soon, that supplier told us that the cost would be going up to \$16 per kit. That meant we would be able to provide only about half as many kits. Worse, the supplier couldn't justify the massive price increase. So, we began exploring alternatives. We quickly arrived at the idea of producing the kits ourselves.

Actually, TGUP doesn't produce them itself, but we helped our NGO partner in Kenya set up a sewing center to produce the kits. They are now producing kits for less than \$5 apiece. This means we can distribute three times the number of kits we would have, had we stayed with the original supplier. We have distributed thousands of GEP kits in Kenya, Zambia, and South Africa. We are employing local seamstresses in dignified, remunerative work that directly helps the girls in their communities.

The Kenya model was so successful, we approached another NGO partner, this one in Nepal, with the same idea: set up a small sewing center so local seamstresses can make GEP kits for distribution to girls in Nepal. That center began operating in January and is now distributing hundreds of GEP kits to girls in Nepal. We are evaluating a third center, in Ivory Coast, in west Africa, and a fourth center, in Tanzania. The need is all but infinite, and eternal. But the impact is astounding.

This is no hyperbole: investing \$5 so an adolescent girl can stay in school for three more years may be the highest return-on-human-investment on the planet. We are hard pressed to think of anything that produces anything comparable, either in impact or in the duration of its effect. We circle back, then, to education, economic development, and rights for women.

Greater levels of education lead directly to higher levels of economic development. And, higher levels of economic development are directly linked to greater rights, legal protections, autonomy, and self-realization for women. Keeping even one girl in school, so she can better realize her human potential, lifts up the whole of humanity, even if just a little. It's like a boat: when any part of it rises up in the water, all of it does. Humanity is no different.

Think, then, of doing so, not just for thousands, or tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, but millions of girls. We can readily see a quickening of the pace at which humanity evolves. Even better, we can actually affect that pace. The portent

is breathtaking. *There might be nothing else we could do to so directly accelerate the advancement of the human condition.* And it's working.

But we don't want to leave things with only abstractions. If you could see the joy on a single girl's face when she realizes that she now has a way to deal with her period, and that because of that she can stay in school, it would melt your heart. Here are some real quotes from real girls in Africa expressing their thanks for what TGUP is doing and that *you* have helped make possible.

- "I don't have to keep bothering my parents. This gives me independency."
~ *Wanja, age 13*
- "The pads are good and comfortable. I was able to use them smoothly."
~ *Karimi, age 14*
- "I have been using the pads. They are dry and very convenient. I do not shy from using them here in school or even at home."
~ *Wanjiku, age 13*
- "I was worried at first about leaking and the smell. But they are good. I can do my school work and home chores with no worries. Thank you."
~ *Chomba, age 15*
- "I learned my body is special and I can take care of it and protect it."
~ *Ntsako, age 14*
- "I was afraid at first because I thought I was sick or dying. Then I learned menstruation is something beautiful."
~ *Sbongile, age 13*
- "My mother is not working so money is a problem. This gives me confidence."
~ *Kgopotso, age 13*
- "I learned a lot about my health and became grateful for my beautiful body. This is so easy to use it helps me and I'm not embarrassed."
~ *Tino, age 14*

This is the most important, most impactful work we have ever done. We are *dramatically* improving life chances for thousands of the poorest girls in the world.

In doing so, we are increasing the capacity for self-sustenance for the hundreds of thousands of people they will touch over their lives.

Perhaps most importantly of all, we are demonstrating that if we will all do just a little bit, but all do it, the effect is astounding. It is, and we can see it unfolding before our eyes. As our motto says: “Even the greatest waterfall starts with a single drop of water.”

If you want to help *even one girl* have a better chance at life, you can. Text TGUPGEP to 71777. Donate what you can. We have raised money from private foundations to cover operating costs, so *100% of every dollar donated* to GEP goes to buy kits for girls in the developing world.

Thank you. It sounds cheesy, but it is not. We could not be doing this without you.

Yours in a Better World,

TGUP