



TGUP's *Save a Girl* Campaign

An Extended Meditation

Half of the world's population - the female half - live as second-class citizens. Discrimination against women is overt, pervasive, relentless, and enduring. It is especially insidious against adolescent girls when they start menstruating. This paper discusses some of the historical and cultural reasons for this discrimination and explains how TGUP is helping to address it.

Gender-based abortion is one of the starkest indicators of discrimination against females. 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 occur in India, female death rates exceed those of males, because families feed boys before they do girls.

Girls receive substantially less education than do boys. They're expected to work around the house, helping with siblings, doing housekeeping, cooking, and such. The resulting education gap means that women in the developing world earn only about 40% of what men earn, making it all but impossible for women to exist without dependency on men.

Legal protections for women are weaker in most developing world countries. Women are not protected from spousal abuse, including physical violence and rape. They have fewer rights in divorce. They have few protections against abuse in vocational settings. Laws of inheritance discriminate against women. Female genital mutilation is tolerated.

All of this is the result of broad-spectrum historical and cultural discrimination against women in *all* countries of the world. When the U.S. was founded, women had no right to vote. It wasn't until 1919 with the 19th Amendment, that women got that right. It wasn't until 1963, with the Equal Pay Act, that discrimination in pay was made illegal. Title IX gave women equal access in education but wasn't enacted until 1972.

The level of economic development is especially important in predicting rights for women. In less-developed countries, most economic output involves human labor for agricultural production. Men are advantaged because of their larger size and muscles. As economies industrialize and machines do more of the work that advantage shrinks.

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 the equal of men, and are accorded commensurate respect. In other words, there is a direct link between the level of economic development and the rights accorded women.

Problems of discrimination are especially acute for adolescent girls, a fact tied up with discrimination surrounding menstruation. Every civilization in the history of the world (save for a few, pre-historic matriarchal ones) has discriminated against women because of menstruation. Such discrimination still persists today. 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. 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.

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." The passage uses another 11 verses to intone the "unclean," and, therefore, unholy, nature of menstruation and, implicitly, the inferiority of women compared to men.

So, discrimination against women persists because it is tied up in both the pragmatics of economic development and in ancient religious and cultural mythologies. A more perverse combination of deep, systemic detriments could hardly be contrived.

This is where TGUP's *Save a Girl (SaG)* campaign comes in. When a girl in the developing world begins her period, around age 12 or 13, she often has few ways to deal with it. She is surrounded by bad information about how bleeding is unclean and might cause others to become cursed, or infected, or insane. 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 absorb 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 Ivory Coast, fewer than 10% of girls finish high school. In Kenya, 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 or become domestic servants. They can be married off. Or, they can be sold into the sex trade. UNICEF puts their numbers at between 20 and 50 million *every year*. This is not just a personal loss, it is a human tragedy. Why?

Because education is THE single greatest avenue for improving the lot, not just of women, but of men, too. The ripple effect from better educated women is almost incalculable. With more education, girls make better health choices, including using contraception. This prevents both unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Girls with more education have fewer sex partners, make better choices of partners, marry later, have fewer children, see that their children receive more education, have better vocational options, 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 young women. And when you think about it, how could it not be? The future literally flows from mothers' wombs.

TGUP's *Save a Girl* project helps girls in Africa and Asia manage their periods so they can stay in school and realize their human potential. A *SaG* kit contains absorbent, washable, reusable 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. The kits are funded by TGUP donors and are given free of charge to the girls.

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 *SaG* 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, or debilitated. 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. They are the distilled feedback we have received from the thousands of girls who have received *SaG* 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. They couldn't/wouldn't explain why. But it meant we could only provide about half as many kits. So, we decided to make the kits ourselves. They are simple and we created our own, improved, design.

TGUP doesn't physically make 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 about \$6 apiece. This means we can distribute three times the number of kits we would have, had we stayed with the original supplier. Better yet, it is a better design: more comfortable and durable. We have distributed tens of thousands of *Save a Girl* kits in Kenya, Zambia, and South Africa. We are employing local seamstresses in dignified, remunerative work that directly helps the girls in their own communities.

The Kenya model was so successful we approached another partner, in Nepal, with the same idea: set up a small sewing center so local seamstresses can make *SaG* kits for girls in Nepal. That center began operating with three machines in January 2019. It now has 19 machines and is distributing thousands of *Save a Girl* kits to girls in south Asia. We are currently evaluating a third center, in Uganda, and a fourth center, in Mozambique. The need is all but infinite, and eternal. The impact is astounding.

This is not hyperbole: **investing \$6 to help an adolescent girl stay in school for three more years might be the highest return-on-human-investment on the planet.** It is certainly one of the most humane. We are hard pressed to think of any investment that produces anything comparable, either in immediate impact or in duration of 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. Higher levels of economic development are directly linked to greater rights, legal protections, 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. When any part of a boat rises up in the water, all of it does. Humanity is no different.

Think, then, of doing so, not just for tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, but for 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 than keep adolescent girls in the developing world in school.*

This is the most important, most impactful work we have ever done. 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. We are *dramatically* improving life chances for tens of thousands of the poorest girls in the world. In doing so, we are increasing the capacity for self-development for the hundreds of thousands or millions of people they will touch over their lives.

Perhaps most importantly, we are demonstrating that if we will *all do just a little bit*, the effect is astounding. We can see it unfolding before our eyes. TGUP works. As our motto says: "Even the greatest waterfall starts with a single drop of water." **You** are one of those drops. The world needs you, and you have much to give. Join us.