

BELINDA STRONACH

Investing in girls pays off in social and economic progress

The Globe and Mail
September 22 2009

Despite demonstrable evidence that countries enjoy comparatively greater economic growth if they choose to invest in improving and protecting education for girls and young women, too little is still being done to nurture these vulnerable young people – especially in developing countries.

Chronic neglect of this critical population is detailed in a new report by Plan International, and although most prevalent in the developing world, its impact extends far beyond. A grim legacy of lost opportunity and squandered economic potential continues.

Many charitable foundations and non-profits are active in promoting improved educational outcomes for girls and young women in Africa and other parts of the developing world. But this work would be greatly advanced by concerted action at the highest level of government.

Overseas, real progress on this issue requires the participation of the developed world to break once and for all the cycle of inferior education and limited economic chances. The timing is right for Canada to take up the charge and show real leadership.

As host of the next G8 Summit, Canada can kick-start this engagement – and, in doing so, begin improving the lives of the 500 million girls and young women in developing countries.

Advancing the potential of girls and young women, here at home and around the world, is one of the Belinda Stronach Foundation's primary goals. This week, in partnership with the Clinton Global Initiative, the Belinda Stronach Foundation is making a commitment to bring together leading national and international organizations to focus our collective efforts on elevating the advancement of girls and women to the G8's agenda.

The global recession both magnifies the challenge and heightens the urgency of the situation. As the preface of Plan International's report puts it, even fleeting economic turmoil can take a long-term toll on the futures of girls and young women around the world: "In times of financial stress it is girls who will be pulled out of school by cash-strapped families; who will bear the brunt of increased household chores as their mothers search for work; and who may end up in exploitative and often dangerous jobs because the immediate need for money is so pressing." Family hardship all too often results in the future of girls and young women being neglected.

The report also offers a basis for hope. The proportion of girls in school, primary and secondary, has risen markedly during the past 20 years, which is important because education is so closely connected to opportunity. Education is a critical step on the path toward economic equality – and greater economic equality for girls and young women in the developing world will benefit us all by helping poor countries rise out of poverty.

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But much more needs to be done – and more attention needs to be paid to the fact that in some parts of the world, tremendous opportunity is being lost because education options are inadequate or denied outright. Governments need also to take a look within their own borders: Even in the developed world, girls and young women – especially those of aboriginal or other minority backgrounds – are confronted by growing inequality. In the words of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, managing director of the World Bank, adolescence in many parts of the world is marked by a stark divergence between genders. “During adolescence,” she says, “the world expands for boys but contracts for girls. Boys gain autonomy, mobility, job prospects; girls are systematically deprived of these opportunities.”

Restricted mobility, domestic duties, forced marriage, social custom – these elements still conspire to restrict girls’ access to schooling. As a result, the gap between men and women in the developing world labour force remains wide. In South Africa, for instance, 82 per cent of men are active in the labour market, compared to just 27 per cent of women.

As economic turmoil threatens to push girls and young women further to the margins, diminishing not only individual but national economic outcomes, Canada can emerge as their champion – leading a summit that responds to their needs and respects their potential. At every stage of a girl’s life, there is action that can be taken to advance her potential – feeding her, giving her a school and making sure she’s able to attend, providing skills training to bridge the space between formal education and the labour market.

An investment in girls and young women is an investment in economic equality and social progress. It’s an investment in the future of the world.