

# How to Make the World a Better Place

G(irls)20

"The little girl wants to tell you something else. Please don't forget them. Please help them live in freedom."

That urgent message, delivered by a translator as I was leaving a room in Kabul, Afghanistan, came from a 13-year-old Afghan girl. She was enrolled in a reading program that was being funded by the U.S. government, trying to help girls catch up on the basic education that had been denied them during the years of Taliban rule. I remember being so proud of my country that day as I watched us demonstrate in a tangible way our founding conviction that every life has dignity and value.

At the time, in early 2003, the circumstances in Afghanistan were desperate. Years of war had left many families without shelter, food, clothing or water. Yet in this small room, almost 30 girls were crowded together, learning to read. The girls had never been to school before; the Taliban had specifically banned girls from going to school or even being taught to read at home. I asked the girls what they hoped to do once they had an education and one told me she wanted to write a book someday. I was writing a book at the time, and offered to say something on her behalf until she got around to writing her book. Her answer was quick and unequivocal: "Women should be free to go to school, to go to work, and to choose their own husbands."

That simple yet powerful statement of dignity and rights for women has echoed in my mind through all these years. I don't know what happened to the little girl, but I know that educating women and girls like her is critical to a better and more peaceful world.

During the years that I worked at the State Department, I witnessed first-hand the powerful difference that educating and empowering women and girls can make in a society. I met a woman named Rola Al-Dashti, who led a campaign to earn women the right to vote and run for office in Kuwait; she is now one of several women serving in Kuwait's Parliament. I met women who were becoming journalists and lawyers and police officers and health care workers in Afghanistan, all committed to helping bring about a more peaceful and more just country. I met a woman in Morocco who had learned to read and could help her children with their homework for the first time. I met women starting businesses and hiring other women, and using the proceeds to buy food and clothing for their children.

UN and World Bank studies show that when you educate and empower women, you improve virtually every other measurable statistic in a society, from the quality of its health to the strength of its economy. I think that's because women share. Teach a woman about nutrition, and she'll use that knowledge to help her children and husband live healthier lives. Give a woman a micro-loan to start a business and she'll hire friends and neighbours as the business grows. And studies show that women are far more likely than men to re-invest their proceeds in ways that improve the lives of their families and communities.

It's one of the reasons the women of my company, Burson-Marsteller, and I are providing pro bono communications support to Girls(20), a social profit enterprise that brings together girls from the G20 countries to develop recommendations for world leaders on ways to economically empower young women and girls. The girls will gather later this summer in Sydney, Australia, in advance of the G20 meeting, to develop and discuss their recommendations. The delegates go through a competitive selection process and what these young women have already achieved in their lives is remarkable. The 2014 delegate from Afghanistan is Fatima Hashimi, who is studying to become a political economist.

The accomplishment that she says she is proudest of reminded me of my long-ago conversation with the little girl in the reading class. Last summer, Fatima worked on a project called "Combat Child Marriage to Promote Girl's Education in Kabul, Afghanistan." The world will be a better place when women everywhere are free to go to work, to

go school and to choose their own husbands. And I'm confident that the girls of the G(irls)20 Summit will be leaders in helping bring about that day.

*By Karen Hughes, Worldwide Vice Chair, Burson-Marsteller*

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