

VIII.

THE TIPPING POINT:

Toward a Critical Mass of Educated Women

Currently, girls are the exception rather than the rule in secondary classrooms. Adopting the suggestions in this report to increase access and improve survival and completion rates, make classrooms more gender equitable, and increase expectations for girls' independence and success will result in an environment that empowers girls for the benefit of themselves, their families, and their societies.

According to *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell: "The best way to understand the emergence of...trends...is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do...The Tipping Point is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point."⁹⁹ In one particularly poignant example, Gladwell discusses the impact of adult role models—professionals, managers, teachers, etc.—on youth and their educational behavior in a particular community:

When the number of professionals dropped below five percent, the problems exploded. For black school children, for example, as the percentage of high-status (black) workers falls just 2.2 percentage points...dropout rates more than double. At the same Tipping Point, the rates of childbearing for teenage girls—which barely move at all up to that point—nearly double.¹⁰⁰

This example illuminates the pull of particular ideas once they hit a critical mass among a population, and demonstrates that while a slight change in behavior or reality can have a dramatic and fast negative impact, so too can a change in the other direction have a positive one.

⁹⁹ Gladwell, Malcolm. "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference." Little, Brown and Company: New York, NY, January 2002.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

As the *Tipping Point* for girls' education is reached in communities and subsequently, regions, the likelihood of girls going to school will increase dramatically, and behaviors and attitudes that negatively affect their ability to succeed — such as acceptance of sexual harassment — should decrease.

Currently, with girls more frequently shut out of secondary school, they are cut off from the positive pressure of a critical mass and are left to face alone the risks, from pressure to marry early to pressure to have sex with “sugar daddies” in order to meet their basic needs and the needs of their families. The story of Margaret Mwanamoiza, a Ugandan female role model in a 2006 calendar, demonstrates how having so few girls in secondary school can be a source of difficulty and of the need for a greater cadre of women to reinforce one another's goals. “One challenge was her upper primary teacher's negative attitude towards girls who excelled. ‘We were two girls who were getting better marks than boys and the male class teacher did not like it at all. Whenever we got better marks than boys in tests, he would call us abruptly, there and then, and give us another test, but still we would beat the boys.’ Excelling in these subjects earned her rejection by fellow students, especially boys who looked at her as abnormal.”¹⁰¹

Similarly, a Cameroonian female role model discusses her experiences of positive peer pressure in secondary school during the 1970s when very few girls were in school: “In secondary school, her exchanges with classmates galvanized her to pursue advanced studies. She succeeded on all of her exams, including the BEPC, BAC, and A4.”¹⁰² Her story demonstrates the positive impact that a small group of girls with similar ambitions and goals can have on one another.

Secondary education is also an extremely important experience for girls because it provides them with this social reinforcement and support from their peers — other young women facing the same decisions — at a period when they are beginning to face decisions that will truly affect their lives. While some pressures begin occurring at the primary level, it is not until adolescence when factors such as pressure to get married early or to have sex begin to surface. Writing for the *New York Times*, Sharon LaFraniere explains: “The pressure on

¹⁰¹ Wasike, Agnes. “Margaret Mwanamoiza: Chemistry and Math Teacher/Deputy Head Teacher,” AGSP 2006 Calendar: Uganda. The Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC, 2006.

¹⁰² Bako, Aissatou. “Denise Awa Ahidjo: Interpreter,” AGSP 2006 Calendar: Cameroon. The Academy for Educational Development, Washington, DC, 2006.

girls to drop out peaks with the advent of puberty and the problems that accompany maturity, like sexual harassment by male teachers and parental pressure to marry.”¹⁰³ Being in secondary school at the time when these decisions begin to arise provides young men and women with the structure and camaraderie necessary to explore these issues appropriately.

According to a study prepared by The Population Council on sexual behavior in Kenya, “The sexual activity of girls — for whom early sexual relations are fraught with a number of dangers, physical as well as social — appears to be more subject to environmental influences. A home containing authoritative female role models and the support of two parents, and a school characterized by teachers supportive of girls and a gender-neutral atmosphere, appear to help minimize premarital sexual behavior among girls. On the other hand, and not surprisingly, schools where girls feel pressured to engage in sexual activity appear to be associated with more of such behavior.”¹⁰⁴

As Gladwell writes, “Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place — it can be tipped.”¹⁰⁵ For young women in Africa, in South Asia, and certain Middle Eastern countries, the push to make secondary education an accessible reality could provide that impetus for change that today seems so incomprehensible to the many girls who sit in classrooms feeling marginalized, disconnected, or afraid of being mocked or harassed, or to those who can only wonder and dream about the learning that is going on inside a secondary classroom.

¹⁰³ LaFraniere, Sharon. “For girls in Africa, education is an uphill fight.” *The New York Times*, 23, December 2005. Last accessed 15 June 2006. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/12/22/news/ethiopia.php>

¹⁰⁴ Mensch, Lloyd, Erulkar, and Wesley Clark. “Premarital Sex and School Dropout in Kenya: Can Schools Make a Difference?” The Population Council, 1999. Last accessed 12 May 2006. <http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/wp/124.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Gladwell, Malcolm. “The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference.” Little, Brown and Company: New York, NY, January 2002.



Social Benefits

Increasing
Primary
Completion

Reducing
HIV/AIDS

Health Benefits

Poverty
Alleviation