

## **What's Sex Got to Do with It?**

By Kavita N. Ramdas

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Summer 2012

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## What's Sex Got to Do with It?

An inconvenient truth is hiding behind the current excitement about educating girls **BY KAVITA N. RAMDAS**

**GIRLS ARE HOT.** Reproductive rights are not. This is the strange and yet unspoken contradiction endemic in the current development discourse about gender equality. From the boardrooms of Exxon Mobil, to the World Bank, to the offices of the Nike Foundation and the overflowing halls at Davos and the Clinton Global Initiative, you can hear people talking about the importance of investing in girls. Women are often added as an afterthought—their inclusion is often phrased as “girls and women” rather than as “women and girls.” Most often you hear that “educating girls” is the magic bullet of the 21st century.

The last time I heard something being prescribed as often as the solution to everything from low GDP rates and malnutrition in infants to endemic poverty, it was the early 1990s and the buzz was about something started by a Bangladeshi man named Muhammad Yunus. Girls' education *is* the new microfinance. Yet educating girls about their sexuality and providing funding for access to contraception, safe and legal abortion, and broad education about their reproductive health and rights—which was a significant emphasis of global philanthropy in the 1980s and 1990s—has now dwindled in popularity. Although a few dedicated foundations and the European bilateral aid donors continue their commitment to organizations such as the United Nations Population Fund, the new global actors are focused on girls' access to schools and learning.

Proponents of girls' education (of whom I am one) are right about many things. Girls who are educated are, in the long run, likely to marry later, bear fewer children, educate their own children, and be less vulnerable to sexual abuse and coerced sex (and therefore less likely to be infected by sexually transmitted diseases). These outcomes have important positive implications for the poorest developing countries that are still struggling to expand their economies and provide basic services to their citizens. Larry Summers, former president of Harvard University, who was widely criticized for his 2008 comment about women's lack of natural aptitude for science and math, was once considered the guru of girls' education. During his tenure as chief economist at the World Bank, he argued that investing in girls was among the most effective development choices that poor countries could make in their march toward economic and political development. Yet while these outcomes are encouraging, we need to remember that girls deserve the right to be educated, even in the absence of such results, simply because they are human beings and because women's rights are human rights.

**KAVITA N. RAMDAS** is executive director of Ripples to Waves: Program on Social Entrepreneurship at Stanford University, and served as president and CEO of the Global Fund for Women from 1996 to 2010.



Second, it is important to remember that although education brings with it many benefits for girls and the women they grow to be, it is not a magic bullet. It is not the solution to the pressing and interlinked problems of climate change and population growth. High levels of education for girls and women at high-income levels can coexist with stubborn structural gender inequality, as is the case in Saudi Arabia and Japan.

Third, as the disturbing Stieg Larsson novels remind us, it is far from clear that educating women is the answer to decreasing violence against them. Societies with highly educated women and girls still continue to struggle with endemic and ongoing violence against women. A November 2011 report from the US Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

for example, estimates that one in four women in the United States has been sexually abused, and one in five has experienced physical violence and abuse.

So what is going on? Why is the discourse in the United States so determinedly focused on the issue of educating girls, and what are we refusing to talk about?

#### WOMEN'S SEXUALITY IS MESSY

The answer is the messy stuff: women's sexuality. It is striking that the most influential media messages about the importance of investing in girls tend to depict them as "little girls." They are 12 and pig-tailed in Nike Foundation's short and catchy animated film. There is nothing threatening or unsettling about a cute little girl. We don't see a young woman in all her sexual complexity—her power, her attractiveness, her vulnerability, her mystery, her desire to attract and influence others, her need to be loved, recognized, valued. As a colleague from the Nike Foundation once said to me, "It is much easier to sell girls' education programs to male CEOs than the politically charged agenda of women's reproductive rights!"

Campaigns about girls' education rarely focus on girls in the United States or other parts of the developed world. Implicit in the

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message is that this is about "those girls"—the ones who are brown and black and poor and live in different countries and aren't like us. There is little, if any, talk about the similar challenges that face our own girls—the ones who live at or below the poverty line in Oakland, Calif., the South Bronx, and rural Mississippi.

So we want to educate girls, but we don't want to talk about sex. We want girls to read, but we don't want to provide them with information about their bodies. We want to save girls from female genital mutilation and rescue them from brothels, but we don't want to know why they choose to sleep with their boyfriends or trade sex for commodities or affection or grades. We want girls to get married later, but we don't want to talk openly about contraception or abortion. Even the Obama administration, the best friend American women's reproductive rights advocates have had in a decade, refused to abide by the US Food and Drug Administration ruling to allow over-the-counter access to birth control pills that would allow early prevention of possible pregnancy. Last November, it was only thanks to the feverish efforts of women's rights advocates that Mississippi did not pass a law outlawing the use of IUDs.

This is the inconvenient truth that is hiding behind the current excitement about educating girls. We are happy to educate them and hope that reading, writing, and arithmetic will somehow magically translate into positive outcomes. Yet everything I learned from funding women's rights organizations for 14 years at the Global Fund for Women suggests that women and girls cannot rely on formal school education alone to prepare them for a world that continues to treat them as "less than." Girls and young women need basic information about their bodies and programs to build confidence and self-esteem. The value of sex education in schools has been studied and recommended for decades, and sex ed has been incor-

porated into the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet this remains one of two important documents—the other is the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women—that the United States has refused to ratify because of internal political resistance from conservative forces, which believe the best way to deal with sexuality is to suppress it and encourage abstinence.

In February, I was in meetings at the United Nations Population Fund, or UNFPA. In the 1990s, UNFPA was a pioneering organization in global reproductive health and rights. Working with civil society and governments, it helped create the groundbreaking consensus of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, where more than 150 governments committed to making access to contraception and family planning part of a comprehensive approach to gender equality. Yet, despite this global consensus, the Bush administration cut funds for this UN agency, pushing millions of women into positions where they had little or no access to birth control. As Julia Whitty wrote in a

May 2010 *Mother Jones* article, "Although it's unclear how many babies were added to the human family as a result of the global gag rule, the UN estimates that at its height in 2005, the unmet demand for contraceptives and family planning drove up fertility rates between 15 and 35 percent in

Latin America, the Caribbean, the Arab states, Asia, and Africa—a whole generation of unplanned Bush babies."

The real irony about the unwillingness to talk about sex and contraception is that this conversational lacuna is happening against the backdrop of climate change and natural resource depletion. Last October, the seven billionth person was born on our globe. You would think that everyone would be touting the results of studies by the Futures Group and the National Academy of Sciences. These show a strong correlation between addressing the unmet need for voluntary contraceptive use and family planning and the potential to reduce carbon emissions by 8 to 15 percent. Yet these are topics that most environmental and women's rights activists are wary of broaching. The environmentalists shy away from talking about family planning for fear of being labeled racists; the women's rights activists resist openly discussing contraception or abortions for fear of losing support among US conservatives.

Yet if we want our daughters to grow up with confidence, courage, and competence, we must make sure that they grow up with knowledge about and access to contraception. We should build schools, fund libraries, encourage teacher training, and support free tuition, but we also need to push for comprehensive access to sex education for both girls and boys, not just abroad, but right here in the United States. The words of Margaret Sanger are as prescient now as they were when she first uttered them: "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother." If the future of the world depends on the freedom of women, it must include their sexual and reproductive freedom. If not, their "freedom," to paraphrase Janis Joplin, will be just another word for "nothing left to lose." ■