

THE WOMEN'S RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

# Empowerment of Women through Education

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The Need to Provide Resources for  
Individualization, Choice and Relevancy

**Karen E. Hyer, Ph. D., J. D.**

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# **Empowerment of Women through Education: The Need to Provide Resources for Individualization, Choice and Relevancy**

Karen E. Hyer, Ph.D., J.D.

Women's Research Institute

Brigham Young University

In the last decade, evaluation of educational projects designed to raise the status of women and meet the Millennium Goals (MDGs) and Education for All Goals (EFA) has yielded disappointing results (United Nations, 2005; UNESCO, 2003/2004). It is now known that 65 developing countries will not meet one of these goals until 2040 and that at this moment 50 countries are regressing on at least one goal (UNDP, 2005). This has caused large scale reassessment of how to reach the MDG goals and specifically, how to address the education and empowerment of women, seen as key to sustainable development. Of special concern is the failure to achieve gender equity in primary and secondary education by 2005. Empirical studies have found that gender inequity in education correlates with substantial negative impact on economic growth in both rich and poor countries as shown in lower GDP per capita (Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004; Klasen, 2002; Hill & King, 1995). Countries with larger gender gaps in education are also viewed as having lower levels of aggregate well-being for their citizens (Sen, 1999; UNDP, 1995; Grün & Klasen, 2003). Gender inequity in education creates a “poverty trap” that lowers the overall level of human capital by perpetuating high rates of child mortality, fertility, and undernutrition, thus negatively affecting the education and productivity of succeeding generations (Lagerlöf, 1999; Galor & Weil, 1996; Abu-Ghaida & Klasen, 2004).

## **The Benefits of Educating Women**

Women constitute the majority of illiterate adults in most regions of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Expectations of traditional societies, rooted in religious and cultural beliefs, emphasize early marriage and childbearing as the primary and appropriate roles for women. In these societies women lack control over their own fertility and health, boys are given

preference over girls in most areas of life; there are gender biased curricula and learning environments, and higher dropout rates for female students who are required to contribute to the economic welfare of the household (Ramdas, 1989; Stromquist, 1990; Carmack, 1992; Etta, 1994; Odago & Heneveld, 1995).

Research confirms that the education of women produces several positive social and economic outcomes for the individuals involved, their families, communities, and ultimately their nations. Frequently cited are improved health and nutrition, declines in fertility rates, increased educational attainment of children, lower infant and maternal mortality rates, improved ability to deal with adverse conditions, and increased agricultural output (Caldwell, 1986; Thomas, 1990; World Bank, 2001; Brown & Barrett, 1991; United Nations, 1991; Comings, Smith, & Shrestha, 1994; Ainsworth, Beegle, & Nyamete, 1995). Empowerment of women through education has also been seen to provide opportunities for exercising choice in regard to their own rights and welfare as well as those of their families (Hill & King, 1995).

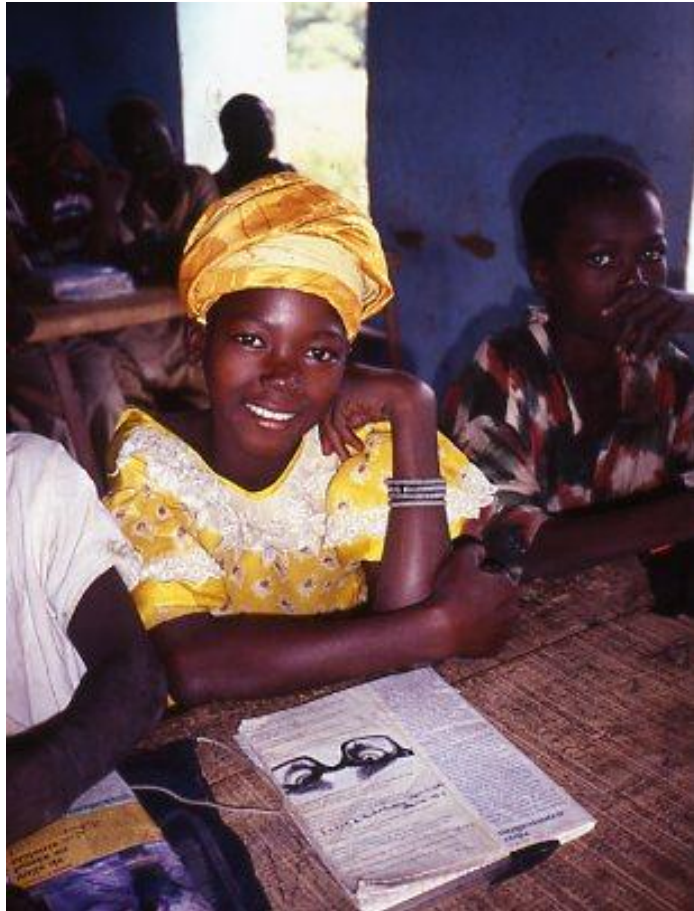
### **The Importance of Basing Educational Programs on Needs of Recipients and Communities**

Education of women, if not addressed to their needs, is not always seen as having positive results (Robertson, 1986; Clark, 1992; Diven, 1998; Hollos, 1998). For example, in Africa, educating women has often reinforced oppressive subordinate roles in classroom settings and has perpetuated female lower status by failing to teach skills that equip women to compete equally in the market place and by not providing instruction and experience that would develop practical survival skills. In a sad irony, poor quality formal education often removes women from the labor force or community trading situations where they can learn skills that will make them more self-sufficient, thus rendering them even more dependent on male relatives (Hollos, 1998). In addition, some educated women are seen as less respectful of traditions and their husbands and have engendered a backlash from other women in their families and communities (Fuhrman, Ballif-Spanvill, Ward, Solomon, & Widdison-Jones, 2006).

### **The BYU Women's Research Institute's Longitudinal Studies of NGO-Sponsored Primary Education and Women's Literacy Programs**

A recurring problem in evaluating the effectiveness of development projects sponsored by non-government organizations (NGOs) has been the lack of evaluation research by outside,

independent sources such as universities (Murtaza, 1995). A number of development scholars have called for independent longitudinal studies to test the effectiveness of local participation-based projects related to education and literacy (Blaikie, 1998; Watts, 1993). Responding to this need, Brigham Young University's Women's Research Institute (WRI) has collaborated with the private African-U.S. NGO called the Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance (OUA)<sup>1</sup> for the past decade. The WRI has conducted longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of village



primary education and on adult literacy programs within the context of community development projects. The research employed ethnographic techniques, case studies, and survey data obtained from OUA personnel and local participants from rural villages in Mali, a west African country (Fuhriman et al., 2006; Ballif-Spanvill, Ward, Fuhriman, Solomon, Widdison-Jones, 2005).

### **The Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance Literacy Project: Typical of NGO-Sponsored Programs to Empower Women**

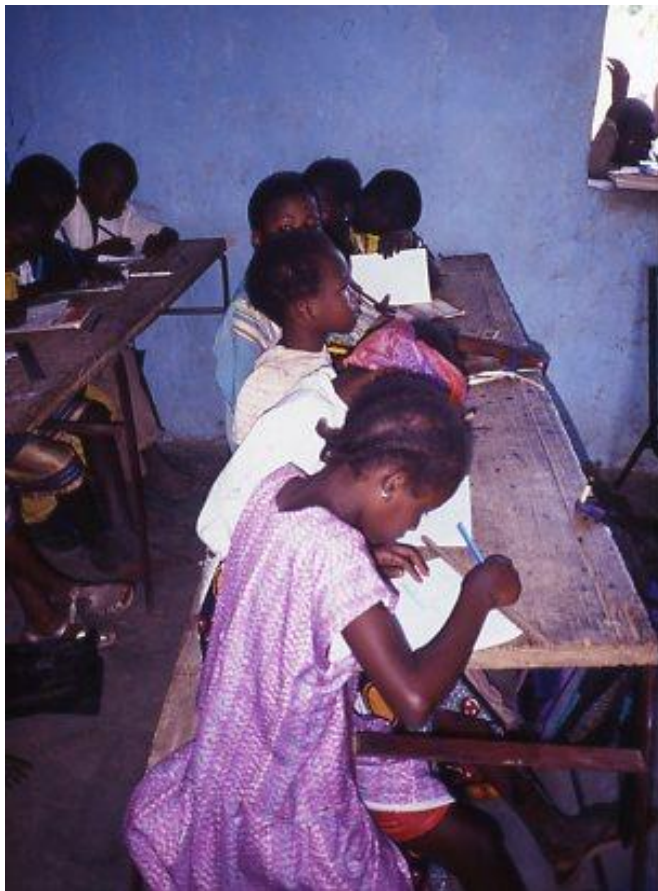
The Women's Research Institute used qualitative methods to examine the meanings that village residents of Ouelessebougou attach to literacy and to their experiences with the OAU literacy program. Methods included focus groups, individual interviews, participant observation,

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<sup>1</sup> For twenty years the Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance (OUA) has been working on community projects in rural Mali, which have been locally based and have included adult literacy, elementary schools, wells for drinking water and irrigation, market gardening, training of health workers in conjunction with a central pharmacy, and a micro-lending cooperative (Ouelessebougou-Utah Alliance (OUA), 1997).

and programmatic surveys in all 50 villages where OUA implemented adult education projects. Participants included the chief and council, women's associations and men's associations, 14 extended family groups, participant teachers and students and non-participants, and OUA program staff in Mali.

**Problems with Literacy Training Programs.** Earlier literacy projects in Mali had failed because of top-down approaches that involved curricula imposed from the central government, without local participation in planning, and initial instruction in French (the colonial era language) rather than local languages. High attrition rates, lack of materials, irrelevance to rural life, and ineffective monitoring were also common. When UNESCO called for a change in



strategy involving more local control over the programs (Richmond, 1986) many projects established multimedia community learning centers and programs to increase literacy of specific groups involved in economic activities, such as workers in a local manufacturing facility. Most of these projects had mixed or disappointing results and despite considerable planning, consistency, and inclusivity, the OUA literacy program also enjoyed limited success.

The Women's Research Institute (WRI) research found that some of the critical Laubach readiness indicators<sup>2</sup> necessary for a successful critical literacy

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<sup>2</sup> Laubach Literacy International uses a teaching model entitled "literacy for social change" that involves four elements: (1) fundamental skills: writing listening, comprehension, and math skills; (2) critical thinking: the capacity to understand and react to information and to analyze causes of problems in daily life;(3) cultural expression: the ability to appreciate culture through the arts, music, and dance; and (4) action: the fulfillment of learning through action. Successful implementation requires readiness conditions on the part of the participant community such as: recognition of the need and demand for literacy, stated commitment from leaders and learners regarding participation, and contribution of time and resources, a capacity and willingness to institute a credible local action plan, and access to training materials or capacity to develop new materials (Curtis, *Literacy for social change*, 1990; Curtis, Oueslesbougou-Utah Alliance Literary Project, 1994).

program<sup>3</sup> were absent and that the idea for the adult literacy program was initiated by the OUA, not the local villages. After two years of operation, two-thirds of the programs were discontinued and today there are only 20% of the programs operating because of several prominent factors. First, there was initial lack of demand and community support needed for sustainability. Second, project staff lacked capacity to develop new community based materials and relied on central government produced textbooks that were irrelevant to the issues and details of local community life in Ouelessebouyou, thus limiting learners' ability to acquire sustainable literacy skills applicable to daily life or useful in promoting social change for women in their communities. Third, training of literacy teachers was inconsistent and not up to universal standards, which hampered teaching of rudimentary functional literacy skills and precluded the teachers from facilitating students in their learning of critical literacy skills needed for women's empowerment. The results are a current nominal functional literacy rate of 3% for women (5% for men) in the participating villages (Fuhriman et al., 2006).

**Poor Planning.** Oversights in planning and logistics of the literacy program contributed to low participation rates: (1) Lack of classroom space necessitated clumping males and females together and combining students with different comprehension levels in the same rooms; (2) All of the teachers in the adult literacy program were men, which negatively affected the learning environment for women in a traditional culture; (3) Instructional styles were authoritarian, teacher-oriented and didactic emphasizing rote memory, repetition and recitation contrary to the recommended interactive approaches for women students; (4) The community was forced to accept directives from the NGO and was punished by withdrawal of funds or transfer of teachers when the communities acted independently, further eroding local support for the programs; (5) Classrooms were poorly lighted, subject to disturbing outside noise, and lacking in adequate materials and learning space.

**Gender Bias.** Although the literacy program initially targeted women, the above conditions of poor planning, coupled with a number of traditional gender biases, reduced women's participation. The heavy daily workload of women caused women's participation to

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<sup>3</sup> Critical literacy is an approach to training in developing countries that sees reading and writing as important tools in democratization, providing skills that enable marginalized groups to challenge existing power structures and conditions that disadvantage groups, such as women and girls. Critical literacy (also termed the conscientization model) is a response to the lack of empowerment and social change that was seen with UNESCO conventional functional literacy programs. For the background of the critical literacy movement, that began in the 1970's, see Freire (1970), Lankshear (1987), Lind & Johnson (1990), Stromquist (1990), Lankshear & McLaren (1993), Street (1995), Roberts (2000), Markowitz (2001).

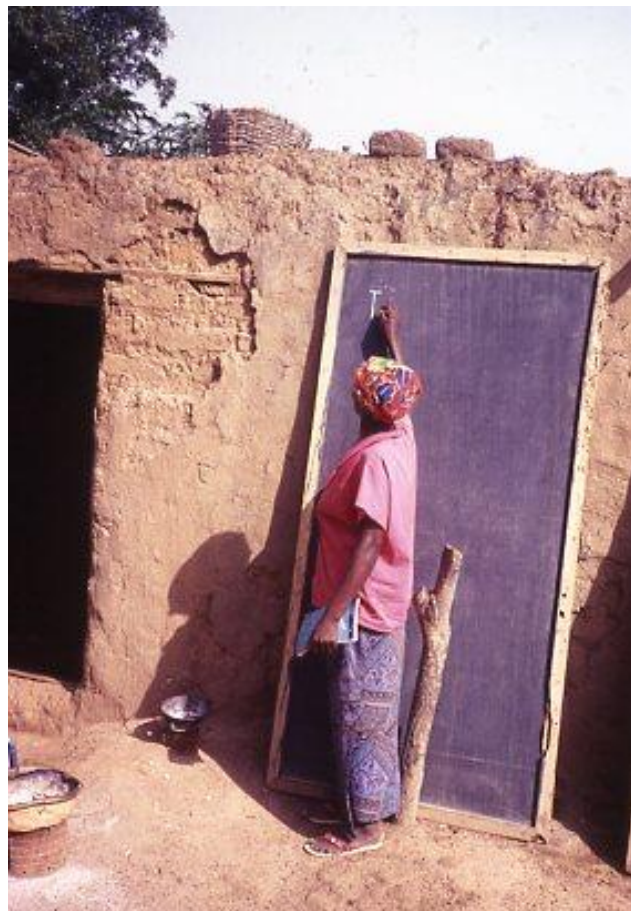


significantly decline over the years as they were primarily responsible for pounding millet, gathering wood for fuel, caring for children, gardening for income, grinding nuts, making shea butter, and making charcoal. Another restriction was the need to obtain permission from husbands who were reluctant to allow their wives to attend night classes. Women were perceived by their male teachers and fellow male students as being lazy and unintelligent and treated accordingly, rarely encouraged. Cultural norms inhibited women from speaking in public gatherings in the presence of men, which led to embarrassment and reticence in the classroom. Though women were targeted, male students benefited most from the literacy training because they were able to immediately use their skills in the work world.

Some hopeful findings, despite all of the difficulties in providing literacy instruction in poor traditional rural communities, were that there were positive gains for some individuals and that the women who participated still perceived literacy as helping them to obtain a better life. Even an inadequate experience for women learners translated into their appreciation for literacy for their children.

### **Important Considerations when Teaching Women**

The case of the OUA literacy program represents some of the factors that an NGO must consider in providing meaningful instruction for females in traditional cultures. The OUA experience certainly is not unique. Some of the factors that need to be considered are: social and cultural structures, inclusion of the target community in planning and implementation, material and social support of the target community, understanding constraints on women's participation, providing adequate classrooms, materials and flexibility of



instruction, having curricula and topics that are relevant to the daily life of students, providing opportunities to use literacy skills, providing gender sensitivity training for all teachers, training more female teachers, promoting critical thinking and raising consciousness about inequities enough to encourage the community and individual women to question oppressive practices that reinforce women's inferior position in society (Stromquist, 1990; Bhalalusesa, 1996).

### **The Need for Relevancy and Choice to Empower Women**

Any education program, such as literacy training that has been conceived and imposed externally with little regard for local cultures, ideologies, utility of the learning, and specific needs of the learner will likely be unsuccessful. To ensure relevancy, some scholars have suggested that literacy training be incorporated in existing development activities such as income production and agriculture (Rogers, 1994). Based on the research discussed, characteristics of a successful educational program for women will be generated by local needs and characteristics, will provide individual women the opportunity to learn skills that will enable them to obtain better health care and educational opportunities for themselves and their family, will enhance their future prospects for income generation, will increase their self esteem and confidence, will involve raising their consciousness of gender bias issues that are relevant to their lives, and will provide choice of program elements to meet their specific individual and family needs.

### **The 2005 Sundance Summit on Gender Inequalities in Educational Participation.**

During an October weekend in 2005 at the Sundance Resort in Utah, the BYU's Women's Research Institute (WRI) sponsored a conference of scholars experienced with women's issues to discuss the failure of most developing countries to meet the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UNMDGs) and UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) goals relating to achievement of universal primary education, promotion of gender equality, and the empowerment of women. To frame the discussions, Professor Nelly P. Stromquist delivered an address "Global Policies, Local Realities: The Increasing Distance between Educational Policy and Social Transformation."



This two day seminar produced a number of critiques of problematical conceptions found in educational policies and generated some suggestions for potential solutions (Hyer, et al, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Included were the following observations (paraphrased):

- Gender is vaguely or seldom defined, often being too simplistic (e.g., masculinity and femininity) rather than a complex structure of interactions and discriminations that lead to unequal access to production, distribution, and communication (United Nations, 2002; Stromquist, 1995);
- Gender is not a priority in educational policies that focus on children in general or boys, perpetuating traditional stereotypes (USAID, 2000);
- The role of power and context in construction of gender is overlooked by failure to understand the fundamental differences in the power of men and women leading to gender inequalities in several areas such as political, household, legal, economic, security and status, and religious;
- Prevailing conceptions of gender consider “women” to be a homogeneous category and fail to address the wide range of diversity in perceptions and needs such as social class, race, ethnicity, religion, language, residence status, age, or disability that would affect access to educational opportunities;
- Assumptions that educational systems are gender neutral lead to failure to consider obstacles to girl’s access to education such as poverty, unsafe school facilities, parental objections, rigid social norms, and classroom environments that favor males over females;
- A narrow definition of women’s empowerment that focuses on equality rather than equity and fairness as means to reach equality for all women regardless of race, ethnicity, social class, or disability (Stromquist, 2005);
- Focusing on access to education or enrollment, rather than on completion rates and attainment levels, does not ensure that the content, environment and educational experience is supportive of females and transformative of educational institutions;

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<sup>4</sup> These suggestions are being published in a forthcoming book, edited by Donald B. Holsinger and W. James Jacob, entitled *Inequality in Education: Comparative and International Perspectives*, 2008, in the chapter entitled “Gender Inequalities in Educational Participation.”

- Giving limited attention to gender issues in school content, such as domestic violence, reproductive health, and self esteem, tends to perpetuate gender imbalances by viewing gender as irrelevant, ignoring opportunities to expand women's participation, and disregarding societal conceptions and expectations of women;
- Lack of gender training for teachers leads to a hostile learning environment where stereotypical and discriminatory practices silence girls and instill lower expectations and aspirations;
- Gender policy decisions are often made without the input of women's civic organizations or the few women who are leaders within the educational system;
- Overlooking gaps in science and technology education and opportunities for continuing education, coupled with limited societal expectations for female traditional roles, makes it difficult for female graduates to obtain high paying jobs and leadership positions;
- Viewing women's education as a means to achieving economic progress precludes the perspective that education is a fundamental human right for all.

### **An Approach to Improving Gender Equity in Education**

The Sundance Summit conference produced a list of specific practices and strategies that could improve gender equity in education. **Within the classroom** the following were proposed: (1) gender sensitive classrooms; (2) teaching in the local language; (3) recruiting more female teachers; (4) flexibly scheduling lessons and classes to take into account female domestic responsibilities; (5) using effective teaching styles that involve more interactive and sequential approaches are more effective with female (and male) students than traditional rote approaches; (6) having adequate supplies and teaching/learning materials that allow girls personal access and abilities to take materials home for study improve success of females; (7) linking topics to personal, family, and community needs and life makes the educational process more relevant and practical for females.

**Outside of the classroom** the following strategies have improved female attendance rates in schools: (1) providing food and health programs in the schools helps girls and their families; (2) decreasing girls' domestic workload by providing grinding mills, day-care centers for younger children, installing water pumps and wells in closer proximities, can alleviate female

workloads and enable them to attend schools; (3) moving schools closer to children in rural areas alleviates the danger inherent in long travel times and distances for girls and women; (4) making schools “girl-friendly” by providing clean separate toilets and facilities for hygiene would counteract the high dropout rate of girls when they reach puberty in traditional cultures; (5) mobilizing support for female education among men and boys will facilitate females remaining in or returning to school; (6) discouraging early marriage through reform movements and governmental policies (7) setting minimum age and literacy requirements for work, and (8) providing financial incentives such as scholarships for girls, tax relief for parents, and government subsidized board and transportation

### **New Initiatives to Improve Women’s Empowerment through Empirical Research and Direct Financial Support to Individuals**

In September 2006 the World Bank set forth a four year action plan to advance women’s economic empowerment in client countries that were falling short of meeting their Millennium Development Goal 3 (promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment). The Action Plan was generated by the work of a high-level consultative meeting held in February 2006 that explored ways to accelerate progress toward gender equality (World Bank, 2006).<sup>5</sup> The World Bank Gender and Development Group was concerned about the inefficiencies of women’s lack of economic empowerment since women’s increased labor force participation and earnings are associated with reduced poverty, faster growth and improved education and health outcomes, benefiting women as well as men, children, and society as a whole (Wolfowitz, 2006). Among the guiding principles of the Action Plan are that programs should be focused on selected countries, tailored to individual realities and needs, grounded in empirical evidence, oriented to results, focused on building and replicating success, based on incentives, and designed to promote development.

**The BYU Women’s Research Institute’s WomanStats Database Project.** The World Bank Action Plan lists one of the areas of most pressing need as the collection and use of more and better gender statistics and indicators in order to improve analytical work and rigorous evaluation of projects. Under the auspices of the BYU Women’s Research Institute over the past five years,

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<sup>5</sup> The Group included representatives of governments and agencies from Norway, the United Kingdom, the OECD-DAC Network on Gender Equality, UNIFEM, UN Division for the Advancement of Women, and the UN Millennium Project.

a group of scholars has been compiling an extensive database that is available online to investigators around the world. The project, called “WomanStats,” compiles data on 245 variables on the status of women derived from governmental and nongovernmental sources secured from 172 countries. (For further information on WomanStats and website links, please see Appendix A of this paper.)

**The Perpetual Education Fund of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.** Two of the pervasive problems outlined earlier in this discussion that contributed to the frequent lack of success of NGO-sponsored programs were (1) failure to consider the needs and constraining problems of the individual women participants and (2) the lack of local involvement and support. The World Bank Gender and Development Group’s guiding principles also emphasize individualization, as well as outcome orientation, replication of success and incentives (World Bank, 2006, p.3). A model for creation and maintenance of a successful perpetuating fund for educational assistance that has enjoyed replication in many countries was created by a world-wide religious organization. In 2001, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints established The Perpetual Education Fund (PEF), a global self-perpetuating financial resource to assist impoverished individuals obtain education and training needed for employability in their local areas. Participants are interviewed and recommended by local leaders and are given loans for technical training and education that will enhance their immediate employability. On completion of their training or educational programs and when they are established in a job, these individuals repay their loans so that others can benefit from the program. The awards of financial assistance are based on the specific needs and plans of the individual as well as on the job market in the local community. The funds are provided by donations which are then locally administered and supported. One of the strengths of this program is that it has not generated a large administrative bureaucracy in order to accomplish its goals. To date, the Perpetual Education Fund (PEF) has helped over 30,000 people from many countries obtain educations that enable them to elevate their employment status and improve their family conditions. Half of fund recipients have been women. (Carmack J. K., 2008).

### **Summary**

This paper has outlined some of the recurring and pervasive problems that have plagued the well-meaning efforts of many non-governmental organizations which have spent

time and resources trying to empower women through educational programs. References have been provided for representative programs and suggestions to guide further efforts have been summarized from evaluation studies and the collaborative work of scholars. An example of an independent longitudinal evaluation study of African literacy efforts provided some typical problem areas common in many of the empowerment programs. The Sundance Summit suggestions for improving programs designed to empower women and girls were summarized. The WomanStats Database Project was introduced as a new cooperative effort to amass quantitative and qualitative data concerning women in 172 countries that will assist and promote gender issues research. The Perpetual Education Fund was presented as an example of a locally based, individually oriented perpetuating education program. It is hoped that some of the ideas and suggestions presented here can be of interest to those who are involved in new initiatives to improve the status of women around the world.

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## APPENDIX A

### BYU WRI WomanStats Database Project

Valerie M. Hudson, Mary Caprioli, Rose McDermott, Chad F. Emmett, and Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill

#### Principal Investigators

In 2001, a group of scholars<sup>6</sup> investigating the linkage between the security of women and the security of states found that existing databases were limited in both scope and quality of data collected, with overlaps, few variables, and narrow focus on demographics or women's participation in a labor force, literacy programs, formal education, and governmental decision making. There was virtually no available quantitative or qualitative data on variables affecting the level of violence against women, the inequity of family law administration, laws affecting intermingling and relations between men and women, double standards of conduct, laws and attitudes concerning prostitution and trafficking, discrepancies between laws and women's actual experiences, and evidence of degree of polygyny in a society.

Given these constraints on their research, the group formed the WomanStats Project to collect data in both numeric and text formats and to link each piece of data to its full bibliographic source, including live links where possible. The WomanStats Project significantly expanded the scope of variables concerning the status of women, currently compiling information for 245 variables from 172 countries (all those having over 200,000 population). The Project compiles not only numeric information but also textual information on laws, practices, customs, and some anecdotal experiences. Data is obtained from governmental data sources as well as reports from nongovernmental organizations and triangulated so that researchers can see and analyze discrepancies.

The WomanStats investigators wanted to make the data available to other researchers world-wide so data is accessible through a website (<http://www.womanstats.org>). The user can compare up to five countries for up to five variables, sorted by various variables such as time period or source of data, and can view and download reports that summarize available data on the search criteria and other reports that indicate missing data, bibliographic sources, and percentage coverage for countries and variables. As of the end of 2007, the WomanStats Database included over 65,000 data points. The Project is also working on a five step procedure for qualified users to contribute data.

The WomanStats database has been online since July 23, 2007 and with no announcements or advertising attracted 2,400 hits by the end of 2007 (5 months). The Project seeks users, collaborators and supporters who can help to build its structure and usability worldwide.

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Affiliations of Principal Investigators on the Project are: Valerie M. Hudson, Political Science, Brigham Young University; Mary Caprioli, Political Science, University of Minnesota; Rose McDermott, Political Science, UC-Santa Barbara; Chad Emmett, Geography, Brigham Young University; Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Psychology, Brigham Young University.

Karen E. Hyer holds a Ph.D. from Stanford and a J.D. and is a long-time teacher, researcher, and consultant involved in women's education and leadership training. Hyer has worked on projects in China, Mongolia, Iran, and Mexico, taught at leading universities around the world, and been active in charitable organizations that help women and children improve their lives. Her publications focus on leadership, corporate identity, education, and women's issues.