



If She Can Dream It

Providing Role Models and Mentors for
21st Century Girl Empowerment

A research paper by Soroptimist International of the Americas

July 2014



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Soroptimist International of the Americas conducted this research as it began preparations for a global program for girls. The research informed the organization's new program, Dream It, Be It: Career Support for Girls. Headquartered in Philadelphia, Pa., Soroptimist (Soroptimist.org) improves the lives of women and girls through programs leading to social and economic empowerment. Its major program, the Soroptimist Live Your Dream Awards, provides cash grants for women seeking to improve their lives with the help of additional education and training. Since 1972, the award-winning program has disbursed more than \$25 million to tens of thousands of women, helping them to achieve their educational and build better lives for their families. Soroptimist, a 501(c)(3) organization that relies on charitable donations to support its programs, also powers LiveYourDream.org—an online community offering offline volunteer opportunities in support of women and girls.

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I. Introduction

Today's cohort of 600 million adolescent girls are currently at the center of the development community's agenda. Advancing girls' access to education and training is now widely accepted as a human right and development imperative. Girls' untapped vast potential for a nation's economic development and social change has been heralded by economists and health professionals, corporate foundations and journalists. There is growing agreement – in both the developed and developing world – that great power and opportunity lies within the community of girls. In order to unleash the power and opportunity that lies within each girl, many experts and members of the development community have turned to girls' access to education.

Despite such recognition of the potential of the world's millions of girls, and so many championing their access to resources such as education and training, research shows the message hasn't fully been received by girls. They hear over and over that an education and training will allow them to get jobs, earn income, care for their families, participate in their communities and local economies, and change the world. Unfortunately, girls hear these messages but do not feel like they have the power to overcome the obstacles they can readily identify.

Around the world adolescent girls are leaving school with ever-higher degrees of achievement, but with ever-lower chances of finding careers that will satisfy both their personal ambitions and their future financial needs. In developing countries, middle-income countries and rich nations alike, girls are the majority in the classroom, but continue to be the lesser-paid, lesser-hired and lesser-appreciated members of society as they seek to join the workforce.

That means at the same time they are being told they can make a difference in their world, adolescent girls are confronted with realities in their families, communities and countries challenging that ideal. This disconnect is a legacy of centuries of gender bias compounded by global economic volatility, rising tuition costs and stagnant wages. And it creates real uncertainties for girls on the eve of adulthood.

Soroptimist International of the Americas (SIA) believes in the power of girls to effect change. But there is an implicit burden in that challenge, especially when added to the unique struggles of being a young woman in the 21st century.

This report examines how adolescent girls interpret their future and approach the opportunities therein—opportunities that are both enticing and bewildering. It concludes that for this generation of girls—the beneficiaries of a new, hard-earned recognition of their potential—the guidance of experience, training and provision of resources is invaluable.

The research reflected in this report shows it is not enough to celebrate ‘girl power’ without also providing examples of strength. It is not enough to tell girls they can change the world without equipping them to take on the task. It is not enough to encourage young girls to dream big without direction or skills to make those dreams a reality. If adolescent girls are going to succeed in their life and career goals, they must be provided with guidance, training and resources. This is precisely the support requested by girls in every socio-demographic cohort polled, and confirms the thesis that girls have dreams that are easier to verbalize than to realize.

II. Methodology

From November to December 2012, SIA administered an electronic survey—available in six languages – to girls around the world, ages 11-20. The survey asked ten questions, focusing on challenges, concerns and support options for girls. Extensive distribution led to survey results from 413 girls in 22 countries and territories.

To supplement quantitative research from surveys with qualitative information, 90-minute focus groups with girls were conducted by Soroptimist clubs in their local communities. Suggested age ranges for focus group participants included girls ages 11-13 or 14-17. Soroptimist clubs were provided with a Girls' Focus Group Guide outlining step-by-step instructions for conducting a successful focus group. These focus groups occurred from October 2012 to May 2013. In total, 50 focus groups were conducted in seven countries: Brazil, Canada, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Mexico and the United States of America.

SIA interviewed adolescent girl experts from Girl Scouts USA, World Vision, Open Society Foundations, Girls Leadership Worldwide and Pegine Echevarria, the author of *For All Our Daughters: How Mentoring Helps Young Women and Girls Master the Art of Growing Up*. Each interview identified both emerging issues in the adolescent girl field and how to best use Soroptimist members' time and talents to meet the needs of girls in their local communities and across 20 countries and territories.

In July 2012, more than 650 individuals attending SIA's 42nd Biennial Convention were asked to brainstorm about what girls need and how Soroptimist could leverage its resources to meet those needs. Participants in the brainstorming came from Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Japan, Korea, Mexico, the Philippines, Taiwan, the United States and Venezuela.

Lastly, the voices of girls, experts and Soroptimist's network were supplemented with secondary research and statistics from a range of publications produced by global sources such as the United Nations, International Center for Research on Women, the Population Council, and the U.S. Department of State.

III. History and progress

“WE GOT GIRLS ON THE AGENDA. WE ARE HOPEFUL FOR WHAT WE CAN ACCOMPLISH.”

—girls’ program donor, quoted in
Landscape Analysis of the Adolescent Girl Field

In the past century women around the world have made historic advances in nearly all areas of public life, becoming active participants in the work force, electorate, classroom and global economy. Today, women regularly strive for political office, advanced degrees and corporate boardrooms that were once out of bounds.

In all of these advances, girls were historically thought of as the beneficiaries, as opposed to the catalysts, of change.

That thinking began to shift with the work of economists who recognized the measurable contribution educated, empowered adolescent girls could make to the global economy. Twenty years ago, economist Lawrence Summers made the case that educating girls was “the highest return investment available in the developing world.”² Similarly, women’s rights experts agree that adolescent girls are critical to the objective of gender equality: “We know that we cannot achieve empowerment for women until girls grow up with the resources and support they need to be empowered adults” stated Cheri Fleming, 2013-2014 President of Soroptimist International of the Americas.

It was in the last year of the last century that the United Nations addressed the growing attention to girls as a powerful niche focus, launching its first initiative to reach adolescent girls. Public-private collaborations, interagency consortia and governmental working groups quickly followed, including the Clinton Global Initiative’s Coalition for Adolescent Girls in 2005, the United Nations Task Force for Girls in 2007, and the World Bank’s Adolescent Girl Initiative in 2008.

² Lawrence Summers, “Investing in All the People: Educating Women in Developing Countries,” World Bank, EDI Seminar Paper, No. 45. Washington, D.C. (1994) p.1.

The recognition of the so-called “girl gap” by these and other organizations helped establish a near-universal acceptance in the field of the concept that advancing girls is a global socio-economic win-win.³

Making that same case to the general public has fallen to journalists, philanthropists and socially responsible corporate foundations. In 2009, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn made the topic theirs and spawned a movement based on their book *Half the Sky* that has found a larger audience through its documentary TV, film and even music projects.⁴ In 2008, the Nike Foundation launched a splashy and well-funded media campaign, which turned the argument for girl empowerment into a household name—*The Girl Effect*, and launched dozens of campaigns championing adolescent girls.

This groundswell of enthusiasm has indeed put girls’ issues on the global agenda. From the United Nations General Assembly down to grassroots groups in local communities everywhere, the world is showing its commitment to protecting, educating and investing in adolescent girls.

³ United Nations Foundation, [Landscape Analysis of the Adolescent Girl Field Summary Report](#), (March 2013) p.22.

⁴ <http://www.halftheskymovement.org>.

IV. Persistent challenges

“GIRLS’ RIGHTS ARE CRUCIAL, BUT IT IS EQUALLY CRITICAL THAT [GIRLS] ARE EQUIPPED TO EXERCISE THEM.”

—Because I Am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2012, Plan International

The 21st century girl movement has helped bring to light the quantifiable benefits of gender equality. From enhanced economic productivity to broader protection against HIV/AIDS, the evidence shows that the inclusion of girls in primary and secondary education has both a trickle down effect through all stages of the female life cycle and a ripple effect throughout her larger society.

Health professionals endorse investment in women’s health and family planning as antidotes to systemic poverty. Economists recognize the contributions of females in the labor force as the most beneficial on a community scale.⁵ This is particularly evident in developing countries: the returns to female secondary education are 15 to 25 percent higher for women than men in Thailand, Ghana, and Cote D’Ivoire.⁶ Investments in women have also been tied to improved environmental protection.⁷

Proof that policy makers are seeing this evidence and acting on it can be found worldwide. In the emerging countries of China, Indonesia, Brazil, Mexico, Uganda and Kenya, government programs to reduce, abolish or subsidize school fees are boosting girls’ enrollment.⁸ In developed countries from Japan to the United States, more girls are aspiring toward professional careers and traditionally male-dominated fields.⁹

The disproportionate potential of the 600 million girls who make up 1/8 of the world population has become a well-understood phenomenon. Whether viewed through the

⁵ The Girl Effect, www.girleffect.org.

⁶ Global Partnership for Education. “Accelerating Transition of Girls to Secondary Education,” (2013) p.10.

⁷ Lawrence Summers, *op cit.*, p.13.

⁸ Dr. Barbara Herz. “Educating Girls: What Works,” IIP Digital U.S. Department of State (July 1, 2011) p.4.

⁹ Daniel Krieger. “Japanese women kick and punch out a space for themselves in sports,” [New York Times](#), August 21, 2011.

lens of public health policy, economic development or human rights and social justice campaigns, it is the teenage girl who is trumpeted today as “the world’s greatest untapped solution,”¹⁰ as “the single highest return investment available,”¹¹ and as an “agent of change.”¹²

Yet for all the data indicating progress in addressing gender gaps at the policy level, there is a statistical flipside showing pervasive inequality.

In particular:

- Girls make up 54% of the global population of children out of school.¹³
- Girls have fewer economic opportunities than boys in nearly every region of the world.¹⁴
- 150 million girls under age 18 are victims of sexual violence each year.¹⁵
- One out of four girls in developing countries will marry before the age of 20.¹⁶
- One in four high school age girls in the United States does not graduate,¹⁷ with Hispanic girls bearing the highest rate (30%)¹⁸ of dropouts.
- In developing countries, girls are more likely to abandon training programs due to illness or injury than boys.¹⁹

¹⁰ <http://www.girleffect.org>.

¹¹ Lawrence Summers, op cit.

¹² <http://www.girlup.org>.

¹³ UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2013-14, (January 2014) p.8.

¹⁴ Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra, Allison McGonagle, Girls’ Education, Empowerment and Transitions to Adulthood: The Case for a Shared Agenda, International Center for Research on Women, (2012) p. 5.

¹⁵ Pinar Ilkkaracan, Interactive Expert Panel on Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls, “Elimination and Prevention of all Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls,” United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, Fifty-Seventh Session (2013). <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/csw57/panels/Panel1-paper-pinar-ilkkaracan.pdf>

¹⁶ UNICEF. “Progress for Children: A report card on adolescents,” No. 10, (April 2012) p.8.

¹⁷ National Women’s Law Center, “When Girls Don’t Graduate We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls,” (2007) p.5.

¹⁸ Suzanne Gamboa, “Study: Latina Girls Have Highest Dropout Rate,” ABC News, (January 25, 2014) retrieved April 15, 2014 <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=94298>

¹⁹ Yoonyoung Cho, David Kalomba, A. Musgfiq Mobarak, Victor Orozco, “Gender Differences in the Effects of Vocational Training,” (May 2013), p. 13.

Despite these challenges, it is clear that girls have vaulted from the most overlooked demographic to a position at the top of the development world's agenda in just a few short decades. Girls have reason to be encouraged. But are they?

In SIA's surveys of girls in 22 countries and focus groups conducted in Brazil, Canada, Japan, Korea, Philippines, Mexico and the United States, girl respondents frequently expressed idealism and optimism. But they also made observations that revealed uncertainty and even resignation about the status quo for girls.

Tellingly, the vast majority of girls surveyed, regardless of whether they had positive or negative attitudes toward their own futures, agreed that *girls around the world face similar challenges*.²⁰ This belief in a common body of obstacles is perhaps the greatest proof that, even as the playing field is leveling, there remain hurdles.

The pervasive stresses of female adolescence are well known: self-esteem, body image, family obligations and expectations, abuse and exploitation, violence and bullying, insufficient adult and peer support. These are all identified hazards for girls as they become adults.

While acknowledgement of these challenges is important, psychologists warn against allowing them to become "the defining factors" when designing social programs for girls. Equally important, notes the American Psychological Association's (APA) Presidential Task Force on Adolescent Girls, is "a focus on [how] to assist adolescent girls in navigating these risks during their development."²¹

²⁰ SIA survey, 2012-2013.

²¹ American Psychological Association. "A New Look at Adolescent Girls" (May 2001)
<https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/adolescent-girls.aspx#>

V. The gap between message and reality

“I HEAR THAT I CAN DO EVERYTHING. I MYSELF DON’T SEE MY OWN POWER.”

—Pegine Echevarria, speaking of girls

SIA consulted girls around the world to better understand their own perception of their abilities and potential. These girls concluded, overwhelmingly, that they are in control of their futures.

Taken on the whole, girls agreed three to one that they would “be able to live the life I want.” But underneath this confidence lay many caveats.

In Brazil, students asserted that “women are in the majority,” that “a woman’s place is where she chooses,” and that “women are more capable than men.” But they also told us “girls are controlled” and that “women must fight for their dreams.”²²

In Japan, girls cited “realities beyond my control” as hindrances to personal growth three times more often than economic constraints or parameters set by their families.²³

A group of girls in Clearlake, California, agreed that learning and academic success made them happy, but that a lack of focus and motivation made it “difficult to change one’s situation in life.”²⁴ Responses from a cohort of high school sophomores from families with a history of early pregnancy, alcoholism and drop-outs showed a self-destructive streak. These girls explained that constant pressure and low expectations from their community made them “assume it [teen pregnancy] is going to happen,” or less passively, make them want to “get pregnant just to show them.”²⁵

These and the responses of more than 400 SIA sponsored individual surveys and 50 SIA sponsored group forums reflect the mixed messages girls are getting from today’s society and point to a superficial embodiment of positive messaging confronted with a perceived powerlessness.

²² Results of focus group, SI Blumenau Leste, Brazil, November 2012.

²³ Results of focus group, Japan Kita region, February 2013.

²⁴ Results of focus group, SI/Clearlake, CA, 2012-2013.

²⁵ Results of focus group, SI/Fond du Lac, February 2013.

“In the beginning there is a sense of power: ‘I hear that I can do everything.’ But then there’s self-reflection: ‘I myself don’t see my own power,’” finds Pegine Echevarria, a workplace and leadership trainer, and author of *For All Our Daughters: How Mentoring Helps Young Women and Girls Master the Art of Growing Up*.²⁶

The transition from child to adult is a fraught period and the girls surveyed identified multiple challenges and sources of stress. The effect of any one of these forces—depression, dating, studies or sexuality—on a girl’s self-esteem and confidence cannot be considered in isolation.

| | English | | Japanese | | Chinese | | Spanish | | Portuguese | | Total | |
|---|---------|-----|----------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|------------|-----|-------|-----|
| Violence (for example, rape, relationship abuse or gang violence). | 16 | 13% | 28 | 21% | 2 | 40% | 32 | 42% | 30 | 48% | 110 | 27% |
| Health or negative body image-related (for example, eating disorders or obesity). | 63 | 46% | 43 | 33% | 2 | 40% | 23 | 30% | 15 | 24% | 146 | 35% |
| Bullying or peer pressure. | 35 | 26% | 44 | 34% | 0 | 0% | 14 | 18% | 5 | 8% | 98 | 24% |
| Suicide. | 2 | 1% | 5 | 4% | 1 | 20% | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% | 9 | 2% |
| Dropping out of school or other issues that prevent girls from getting an education. | 12 | 9% | 11 | 8% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 4% | 9 | 14% | 35 | 8% |
| Other: | 7 | 5% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 5 | 6% | 3 | 5% | 15 | 4% |

English: Canada, Philippines, United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Serbia, Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago, China and Indonesia

Japanese: Japan

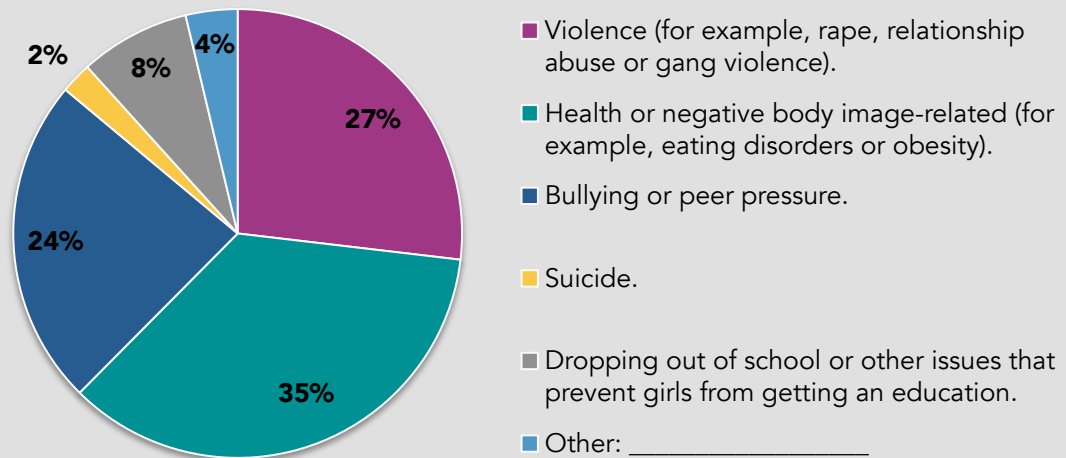
Chinese: Taiwan

Spanish: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru

Portuguese: Brazil

²⁶ Interview, Pegine Echevarria, Team Pegine, February 2013.

The biggest issue facing girls today is ...



Another factor is the impact of family influences. A majority of respondents to SIA sponsored research named their mother as the person they most admire. This bodes well for family dynamics, but it is not always the case that a young woman's mother provides a real representation of empowerment. In the Philippines and Brazil, focus group leaders noted girls admired their mothers' "sacrifice" and for "staying at home."

Even if one considers the more ambitious goals of young women, in the context of the feminization of achievement we see a disheartening example. In the United States, for example, women have solidified their position as fully 1/2 of the workforce and a staggering 2/3 of all primary or co-breadwinners. But that achievement has not been an unqualified boon: recent research finds that one in three women in the United States is living in or close to poverty. These are women who, according to the report's authors, once dreamt of *having it all* but are now consigned to *doing it all*: "Working hard, providing, parenting and care-giving. They're doing it all yet they and their families can't prosper."²⁷ Their daughters, of course, see this. One girl in Mexico described a mother who supports and listens to her and yet, she says, "I'm less optimistic than her."²⁸

²⁷ Maria Shriver and The Center for American Progress, [The Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink](#). Rosetta Books. (January 2014).

²⁸ Results from focus group, SI/Pachuca, Mexico, February 2013.

For young women whose families provide both healthy examples and moral support, it is sometimes the case that encouragement and motivation (from family members, teachers, and friends) does not always come with a navigation map. This also creates a contradictory outlook. As the APA Presidential Taskforce on Adolescence has noted, "Although these girls are expected to 'have it all,' few role models or guidelines exist."²⁹

These are the challenges: how to help girls prioritize long-term goals over short-term crises; how to bolster family support and simultaneously convince young women to reject dismissal, pursue nondestructive choices and embrace empowerment.

Ultimately, the solution lies in providing direction. The path to any goal, whether it is within grasp or many years in the distance, must be made more visible than the obstacles on that path. Providing direction is how to reach not just the handful of girls who when asked if they thought they will be able to "live the life I want" answered NO, but also the vast majority who said YES and then added "unless I can't."³⁰

²⁹ American Psychological Association. "A New Look at Adolescent Girls." (May 2001) <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/adolescent-girls.aspx?item=17>

³⁰ Results from focus group, SI/Curitiba-Batel, Brazil, February 2013.

VI. Closing the gap between messaging and reality

“THESE ARE GOALS, NOT DREAMS.”

—Respondent, SIA survey

Globally, young women are enrolling in post-secondary education at almost double the rate of their male counterparts.³¹ Research shows that U.S. girls who believe a college education is necessary for their career are six times more likely to earn a college degree.³² Among the surge in young women graduates worldwide are new mothers, first-generation college students, Ph.D. seekers and future CEOs and politicians.

These trends seem to support the mantra that says girls benefit from aiming high. But a closer examination of the experiences of individual girl respondents to questions about their aspirations point to a need to take the Girl Power concept further and acknowledge persistent gender-bias.

The fact is gains in female enrollment have not translated directly into enhanced career prospects, or into opportunities for young women to make use of their advanced degrees. Gender-bias continues in the workplace, as does the fact that young women who want a family in addition to an education and a job often have an uphill battle.

In the context of a global “youth bulge” that has manifested itself in a 75 million increase in young job seekers³³ over just four years, girls are doubly challenged. Gains in tertiary enrollment by young women have been most dramatic in East Asia and the Pacific,³⁴ but only Thailand and Macao rank among the five countries with the lowest unemployment of young women.³⁵

³¹ UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report 2011, (2012) p.75.

³² William Bedsworth, Susan Colby, Joe Doctor. “Reclaiming the American Dream”, (October 2006). p 19.

³³ Sarah Murray, “Cross-sector partnerships aim to match skills and jobs,” Financial Times (January 25, 2013).

³⁴ UNESCO EFA Global Monitoring Report, op cit.

³⁵ Plan International, “Because I Am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2012. Learning for Life.” P.158.

Eduardo Padron, the president of Miami Dade College, the largest and most diverse college in the United States, where more than half of the students are the first members of their families to go to college, calls higher education “the momentum that wipes out inequity for generations to come.” But he also notes this momentum fails without the assistance of programs to provide financial, child-care and career planning assistance to young women. “Success in college is more than an academic pursuit.”³⁶

It’s no wonder that even the most motivated of adolescent girls display concern:

- “My guidance counselor said that just being a sign language interpreter might not pay my bills so I would have to get a degree in speech and hearing therapy.”³⁷
- “I’ve heard that once you get into vet school you have so much school work that you can’t have a part time job.”³⁸
- I don’t know what it takes to be an FBI agent but ... I’m sure it requires a college degree. ”³⁹
- “I’d like to be a professional some day, but I can’t tell what the future will bring.”⁴⁰
- “I need to get a part-time job so I can start saving money but it is hard to find a job now.”⁴¹

³⁶ Eduardo J. Padron, “Higher Education: Interrupting the Cycle of Poverty”, [The Shriver Report: A Woman’s Nation Pushes Back from the Brink](http://shriverreport.org/higher-education-interrupting-the-cycle-of-poverty-eduardo-padron/). Rosetta Books. (January 2014)

<http://shriverreport.org/higher-education-interrupting-the-cycle-of-poverty-eduardo-padron/>

³⁷ Results from focus group, SI/Zanesville, OH, (February 2013).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

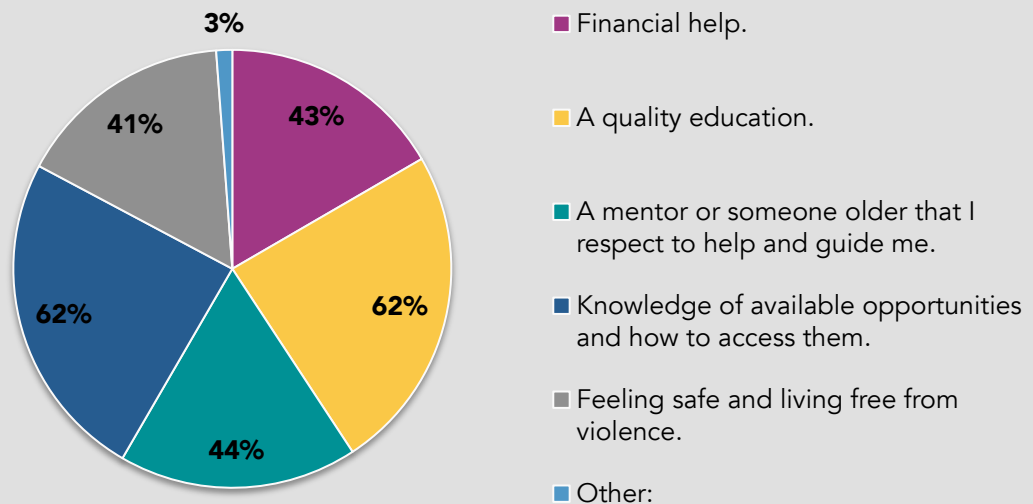
⁴⁰ Results from focus group, SI/Sta Maria, Philippines (November 2012).

⁴¹ Results from focus group, SI/Zanesville, OH (February 2013).

These responses to SIA research reflect the gap between aspiration and realization that confronts girls as they enter adulthood and the workplace in particular. When asked how they can best achieve their dreams, respondents selected a *quality education* and *knowledge of opportunities* in equal numbers.

| | English | | Japanese | | Chinese | | Spanish | | Portuguese | | Total | |
|---|---------|-----|----------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|------------|-----|-------|-----|
| Financial help. | 61 | 45% | 67 | 52% | 2 | 40% | 21 | 27% | 24 | 39% | 175 | 43% |
| A quality education. | 106 | 77% | 49 | 38% | 4 | 80% | 61 | 79% | 35 | 56% | 255 | 62% |
| A mentor or someone older that I respect to help and guide me. | 67 | 49% | 56 | 43% | 1 | 20% | 39 | 51% | 18 | 29% | 181 | 44% |
| Knowledge of available opportunities and how to access them. | 95 | 69% | 72 | 55% | 1 | 20% | 43 | 56% | 43 | 69% | 254 | 62% |
| Feeling safe and living free from violence. | 73 | 53% | 25 | 19% | 1 | 20% | 45 | 58% | 26 | 42% | 170 | 41% |
| Other: | 7 | 5% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 4 | 5% | 1 | 2% | 12 | 3% |

The most important thing that will help me achieve my dreams is...



The balance between the two answers was differently calibrated from region to region: In Japan, where the educational system is generally accepted to be strong, respondents were more likely to emphasize *opportunities*—calling specifically for “more places for counseling,” “information about financial support”⁴² and “good examples of successful professional women.”⁴³ In Latin America, on the other hand, 10 percent more girls chose a “quality education”⁴⁴ and frequently mentioned boring teachers, lack of motivation in school and pregnancy-related dropouts as obstacles to their future.

In voicing their belief in both the power of education and the necessity for guidance, these girls are gently correcting idealistic assumptions and slogans. In the words of one survey respondent, “These are goals, not dreams.”⁴⁵

⁴² Girls Survey, Japan Higashi Region (2012-2013).

⁴³ Results from focus group, SI/Saitama, Tone-Numata Japan, (February 2013)

⁴⁴ SIA survey, 2012-2013.

⁴⁵ SIA survey, 2012-2013.

VII. Including knowledge of opportunity in education

“WE HAVE NOT YET SUCCEEDED IN FOSTERING THE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE ... WE HAVE NOT ACHIEVED EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE.”

—Michelle Bachelet,
Former Executive Director, UN Women

For the past four decades, enrollment rates have been rising faster for girls than for boys in all levels of schooling, and women account for a majority of students in most countries.⁴⁶ The closing of the gender gap in global education is the welcome outcome of decades of advocacy, awareness building and government incentives, but it is only half the journey.

The challenge for women now is to ensure their equal footing in the post-school years. If social stability and economic growth are the ultimate goals of female empowerment; healthy families, successful careers and personal fulfillment represent these same goals on an individual level.

To capitalize on education afforded at the primary and secondary levels, girls need additional resources and evidence that they are in control their future.⁴⁷ But they also need skills that translate into good jobs and the ability to make good personal decisions. Without these girls are not fully served by their educational backgrounds. Recent research indicates this is too often the case. Many observers see a worldwide “global learning crisis” in which children leave school without the basic competencies required for healthy productive lives.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ UNESCO, “World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education,” (2012).

⁴⁷ Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra, Allison McGonagle, [Girls’ Education, Empowerment and Transitions to Adulthood: The Case for a Shared Agenda](#), International Center for Research on Women, p. 3 (2012).

⁴⁸ Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra, Allison McGonagle, [Girls’ Education, Empowerment and Transitions to Adulthood: The Case for a Shared Agenda](#), International Center for Research on Women, p. 7 (2012).

The deficit most cited in the “global learning crisis” is the mismatch between knowledge gained in traditional classrooms and the skill set needed in the 21st century workforce. This is true in the Philippines, where the failure of the education system to produce relevant results is an underlying cause for drop-out⁴⁹; it is true in Korea, where academic success has created a glut of graduates willing to fill any entry-level position.⁵⁰

In the words of Dahlia Khalifa, regional head of an IFC-World Bank Group program investing in youth employment in the Middle East, “the education systems [are] failing to produce youth with the right skills to match ... the marketplace.”⁵¹

Women are disproportionately affected by this skills mismatch, as well as by textbooks and curricula that reinforce gender-based vocational stereotypes. Among the countries with the highest rates of unemployment among adolescent girls and young women ages 15-24 are Macedonia, Jordan, Spain, Greece, Italy and Latvia—countries where the gender gap in school is now tipped in favor of girls, but where current economic conditions accentuate the disparity between education and work skills.⁵²

More and more experts see these two objectives—a quality education and knowledge of opportunities—as mutually dependent. When they declare girls are underserved by the education sector, they are implying they are leaving school unprepared for the transition to adulthood.⁵³

While progressive educators acknowledge that girls should be tutored in “decision making and gaining fair and equal access, representation and consideration under the law,” few formal school systems make a practice of doing so.⁵⁴ Improving young women’s *knowledge of opportunities and how to access them* is a task that is not being systematically tackled worldwide.

⁴⁹ “A Glimpse at the School Dropout Problem,” [The Filipino Child: Global Study on Child Poverty and Disparities](#), Policy Brief No. 4 (2010).

⁵⁰ Lucy Williamson, “South Korea’s Wasted Youth,” [BBC Business News](#), (9 November 2011).

⁵¹ Sarah Murray, “Cross-sector partnerships aim to match skills and jobs,” [Financial Times](#) (January 25, 2013).

⁵² Plan International, “Because I Am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2012. Learning for Life.” p.158.

⁵³ Ann Warner, Anju Malhotra, Allison McGonagle, [Girls’ Education, Empowerment and Transitions to Adulthood: The Case for a Shared Agenda](#), International Center for Research on Women, 92012), p. 3.

⁵⁴ Plan International, “Because I Am a Girl: The State of the World’s Girls 2012. Learning for Life.” p. 97.

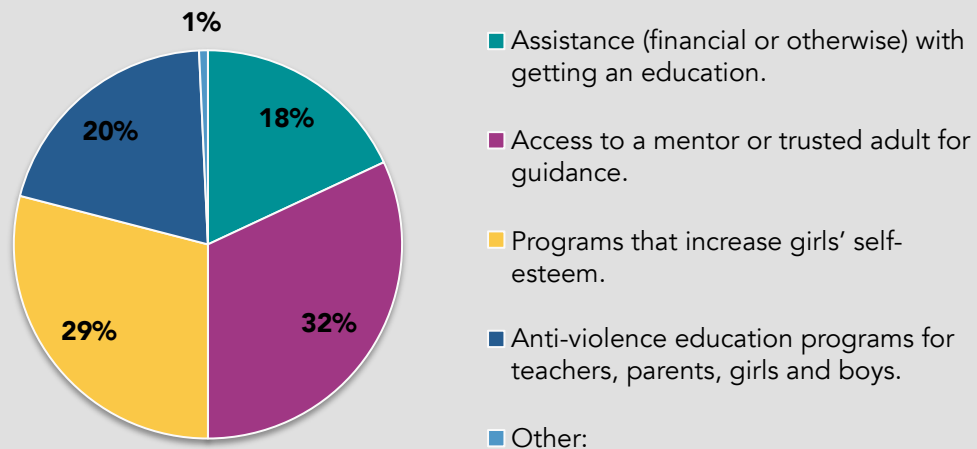
Online social networks, grassroots organizations and community initiatives borne of the Girl Power movement are certainly contributing to girls' awareness of opportunities, but they lack credible personal sources of information. When SIA asked experts what could best contribute to girls' advancement, they responded overwhelmingly: role models and mentors.

SIA focus group discussions also identified a need for more first-hand career information from professionals. When asked what women in the community can do to be of the most assistance, girls requested support in the form of guidance and direction. Thirty-two percent of survey respondents said access to a mentor would be helpful, more than the numbers endorsing financial assistance or programs for self-esteem.⁵⁵ Repeatedly throughout the focus groups, regardless of the community, girls identified career aspirations. But when asked how they would work toward these goals, they had very few concrete plans.

| | English | | Japanese | | Chinese | | Spanish | | Portuguese | | Total | |
|--|---------|-----|----------|-----|---------|-----|---------|-----|------------|-----|-------|-----|
| Assistance (financial or otherwise) with getting an education. | 14 | 10% | 33 | 25% | 2 | 40% | 8 | 10% | 17 | 28% | 74 | 18% |
| Access to a mentor or trusted adult for guidance. | 42 | 31% | 56 | 43% | 1 | 20% | 22 | 29% | 10 | 16% | 131 | 32% |
| Programs that increase girls' self-esteem. | 63 | 46% | 26 | 20% | 2 | 40% | 25 | 32% | 3 | 5% | 119 | 29% |
| Anti-violence education programs for teachers, parents, girls and boys. | 16 | 12% | 16 | 12% | 0 | 0% | 20 | 26% | 31 | 51% | 83 | 20% |
| Other: | 1 | 1% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 2 | 3% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 1% |

⁵⁵ SIA survey, 2012-2013

For girls to overcome the issues they face, it would be helpful to have...



VIII. Successful Support for Girls

“THE MOST IMPORTANT THING THAT WILL HELP ME ACHIEVE MY DREAMS IS SOMEONE THAT TAKES THE JOURNEY WITH ME.”

—Respondent, SIA survey

In 2012 the Population Council issued a report that found enhanced mentoring lessens the risks to girls’ health and wellbeing, and benefits their communities in three ways: providing heroes and models for young people; strengthening self-perception of older girls; and increasing women and girls’ social empowerment by challenging norms about the gender of leaders.⁵⁶

A United Nations Foundation publication released the following year concluded: “Take time to mentor a girl! This keeps coming up ... To be able to have a motivator, a

⁵⁶ Karen Austrian, *Girls’ Leadership and Mentoring*, Population Council & The United Nations Adolescent Girls Task Force (August 2012), p2.

woman, they can communicate with. It seems like such a simple way to improve things.”⁵⁷

Comparative research shows that students with equivalent academic readiness but disparate college readiness and success are differentiated by some key “non-classroom” experiences. Those factors include a girl’s ability to see a tangible link between education and career, her understanding of financial aid, and her social capital skills.⁵⁸ All of these nuances are best provided through a successful mentoring program—one that can accommodate personal and community dynamics.

In local communities, mentors must be seen as “one of us,” an active member, making an impact locally. Sara Nowlin of Girls Leadership Worldwide encourages mentors to be “marketers,” developing relationships with others in the community and “telling them ‘this is what we are up to. Can you encourage your girls to apply?’”⁵⁹

Experts stress that a successful mentorship program will have established expectations and clear guidelines. “If they are not explicit,” warned Nowlin, “then hearts get broken.”⁶⁰

Equally important is an awareness that girls themselves should have input into the mentor relationship and program. Says SIA Senior Director of Program Services Lori Blair “It’s incredibly validating to have a group of older professional women see your idea as valuable and then take it on as part of the program.”⁶¹

“All successful mentoring relationships come from a person sharing their experiences, sharing insight gained from those experiences,” noted girls leadership expert, Echeverria.⁶² Yet, according to Judy Schoenberg, the director of outreach and research at Girls Scouts USA, only a quarter of female high school graduates are approached during their last year of school by women who are prepared to discuss career opportunities.

Career support is a critical service for all girls, regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnic background or family history, but it is particularly critical for young women whose

⁵⁷ United Nations Foundation, *Landscape Analysis of the Adolescent Girl Field Summary Report* (March 2013) p. 22.

⁵⁸ William Bedsworth, Susan Colby, Joe Doctor. “Reclaiming the American Dream”, October 2006. p. 11.

⁵⁹ Interview, Sara Nowlin, Girls Leadership Worldwide, February 2013.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Interview, Pegine Echevarria, Team Pegine, February 2013.

life exposure is limited by their communities and families. This includes girls in developing countries, in economic ghettos or in disadvantaged communities.

Cindy Breihl of World Vision gave an example of girls in rural Appalachia in the United States who said their future plans were to work at McDonald's or cash a welfare check. "They are reflecting what they have seen in life around them. When they are in a community of poverty that doesn't have a lot of hope and aspiration, where does that come from? The idea is to provide girls with an alternative view of what's possible for them."⁶³

Girls, experts, Soroptimists and secondary research all agree: one of the strongest contributions that can be made in the adolescent girl landscape today is to provide girls with alternative views, networking skills, career mentoring and financial support. This is an extremely effective way to improve the prospects of all girls from all walks of life.

⁶³ Interview, Cindy Breihl, World Vision, December 2012.

IX. Conclusion

Today's cohort of adolescent girls—600 million—is the largest in human history. Adolescent girls today possess vast potential and experience equal uncertainty. Their ability to thrive in adulthood—whether by raising healthy families and obtaining personal financial security or by contributing to society and their larger community—is dependent on their preparation now. The gains made over the past half-century are a firm base for continued work toward securing equality on an individual and collective basis for women and girls worldwide. To take full advantage of the potential of girl power, the world must take the next step – to invest in more resources and guidance for the next generation of women.

SIA spoke with experts, the Soroptimist network and girls themselves to gauge just how prepared young women feel to exercise the Girl Effect in their own lives. The results show that while they are largely optimistic, they are not prepared—not without guidance, support and resources.

The message of empowerment in a world in which obstacles still exist for young women can be worse than confusing; it can be demoralizing. It is unfair to send a girl out into the world armed only with the promise of her potential. To tell a girl she can change the world, without showing her how or offering support, is a disservice.

Without skills, guidance and resources, girls often lose their way. Today more than ever, girls need tangible examples linking their education to their futures. They need real-life role models to offer personal examples of success, and mechanisms to tackle the challenges and failures that are part of that success story.

It's time to recognize that while the girl in aggregate is a catalyst, the girl as an individual still deserves to be a beneficiary—of the wisdom and experience of her elders and of the lessons successful women have learned on their own journeys.

Support programs for adolescent girls who already envision their career goals, as well as for less-certain girls in need of a range of options, are key to continued progress in helping girls to live their full potential. Through networking, training, resources and financial support, mentors can help harness and develop the potential of girls and help them navigate the path from dream to reality.