

Theme: “Whatever it takes” – Holistic Approaches Empowering Adolescent Girls

“When adolescent girls win, everyone wins.” – [The Girl Effect](#)

For years, significant attention has been focused on the fact that empowering women can bring economic development, peace, and stability to developing countries. More recently, some programs have narrowed their efforts to focus on adolescence as a critical time for development that will have the greatest impact on both the individual girl and on her future world.

It has become apparent to leaders in international development that beyond educating girls (still a tremendous challenge in some parts of the world), imparting attitudes and values designed to enhance leadership competencies is crucial to girls’ ability to overcome multiple disadvantages and put their educational opportunities to use building better lives for themselves, their current and future families, their communities, and their countries.

Improving people’s quality of life, and empowering them to sustain a higher quality, is (theoretically) the goal of international development. Quality of life is a holistic concept encompassing many elements, and programs that focus on improving one or two elements may fail to achieve success. More successful development efforts are holistic approaches that view those they empower as actors who operate within systems. Attention must be paid to all the ways the systems affect adolescent girls and their environments, and vice versa, in order to come up with interventions that will work over the long term. The most successful efforts go beyond strategies to change the girl’s perception of herself, to proactively change the entire community’s perception of the girl.



“Taking action is simple. It doesn't mean changing everything. It just takes including girls in what you are already doing. Economic growth and competitiveness. Food security. Climate change. Migration. HIV/AIDS. Population growth. Maternal mortality and reproductive health. Peace and security. You get the idea. If there is an issue you are working on, including girls will deliver better results. And be careful: don't assume they are already included. Find out.”

Maria Eitel, President and CEO, NIKE Foundation, in [Smarter Economics: Investing in Girls](#)

Pictured – Maria Eitel with girls in Ethiopia

Holistic Approach Example

The [Ishraq program](#) in Upper Egypt is a multi-dimensional program for 12-to-15-year-old out-of-school girls - an early girl-centered program generated by the [Population Council](#) in 2001. The program sought to equip adolescent girls with social, health and economic assets while ensuring sustainable change by systematically developing the support of families, the community and local government. Ishraq (“sunrise” in Arabic) has expanded from four classes in rural villages to fifty classes, informing and benefitting girl-centered programs in several other countries along the way. In addition to providing literacy classes, a life skills program, and sports, Ishraq established girl-friendly spaces in the communities for girls to meet, learn, and play. Prior to this program, local youth centers were off-limits for girls, and they had no opportunities to socialize together.



The program trained locally selected female secondary school graduates, known as *promoters*, in outreach, advocacy, communication, and networking. The promoters serve as teachers, role models, and advocates for the girls. Among the unintended benefits of the program was the vibrant personal development of the promoters themselves. In the first few years of the program, some Ishraq promoters formed women’s associations in their communities, joined political groups, accepted local leadership positions, and lobbied successfully to increase the access of girls and women to local youth centers.

Ishraq leadership also knew that success would be enhanced by changing the attitudes and behaviors of boys, especially brothers of adolescent girls, who are traditionally tasked with controlling their sisters’

mobility. The program trained two young men from each village to lead learning groups for boys, teaching gender issues, communication skills, values and human relations.

“Real gender equity will remain elusive until policies and programs are directly linked to the daily experience of poor and marginalized young women. There is a clear need for inclusive political processes and strong partnerships with civil society in order to advance those goals. Ishraq offers an opportunity to ensure that adolescent girls are included in the process.”

- Nadia Zibani, “Ishraq: Safe Spaces for Girls to Learn, Play and Grow”

This month’s Featured Program, the Mariposa DR Foundation, has a holistic “whatever it takes” attitude to achieving their mission to end generational poverty by educating and empowering girls to create sustainable solutions. “Whatever it takes” includes finding ways to demonstrate that girls’ participation brings benefits not only to the girls, but to their families and communities. For details, see our April 2014 Program Fact Sheet.

“You cannot prepare young people for livelihoods today without taking a really comprehensive approach. The issue of livelihoods is not [only] about skills, it is a whole package of issues that need to be responded to.”

[USAID Youth Research, Evaluation, Service and Learning Project 2013](#)



So many of the organizations Dining for Women has supported over the past ten years embrace a holistic approach to their programs that we tend to take for granted the practice is widespread. An article by Alfio Cerami, professor and author, in the April 2013 issue of [The Guardian](#) seems to indicate that international development has much work ahead of it to achieve holistic programming. In *Development institutions: adopt a holistic approach*, Cerami accuses such organizations as UNDP, Unicef, USAid and World Bank of paying little attention to “the vital synergies that exist, and must be strengthened, between development economics, social protection and democratization”. Cerami claims that long-term goals such as “economic growth, individual well-being, community-based solidarities, interpersonal trust and political representation” can only be achieved by addressing every component in the system, including corruption.



Strong Call for Holistic Approach

In the process of planning for a framework to succeed the UN Millennium Development Goals, a civil society campaign has organized to press for specific goals. [Beyond 2015](#) is built on a diverse global base, bringing together more than 900 organizations in more than 100 countries around the world. They range from small community-based organizations to international NGOs, academics and trade unions. Their 2012 paper, [Addressing Inequalities](#), calls for the next agenda to “embrace a holistic, rights-based approach to development that fundamentally focuses on equality, equity and inclusive participation, ensures that the most marginalized can benefit from development and growth and must empower all to be active agents of change.”

Holistic approaches are more likely to engage systems thinking, more likely to identify barriers and obstacles not immediately foreseen, and more likely to develop sensitive ways to transform or surmount those obstacles. Holistic programs also focus on transforming the lives of the people who surround adolescent girls – shifting their thinking to bring awareness to the value of girls. This gives the entire community ways to design a future free from poverty. Girls can ultimately become developers of strong societies and prosperous communities, and organizations that assist them need to honor the complexity of the systems in which they live.

*“At Mariposa we educate, we empower and we employ adolescent girls. We show them that they are valuable.
We continuously do what we can to honor their existence.”*

Patricia Thorndike Suriel, Founder and Executive Director of Mariposa DR Foundation

By Marcie Christensen