Help or Not - Series 2: Anna Carella’s Criticism of The Girl Effect

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n 2008, the Nike Foundation came out with an initiative called the “Girl Effect.” My thoughts at that time was that this initiative was a remarkable phenomenon. It had a catchy video which I have attached below to give you an idea about the initiative, and at the World Economic Forum in 2009, the Girl Effect was the 4th most popular session.

I came across an article on Aidwatch titled “So now we have to save ourselves and the world too? A critique of the girl effect”. That title did not sit well with me. I wondered how anyone could criticize such an initiative and how much research the writer had done to back up her criticisms. The writer’s criticisms were based on four factors (some parts of which I have reproduced below).

The writer points to some evidence of increases in domestic violence by women who have been recipients of micro-loans, and how men may feel threatened by the singular focus on women. I must state that I disagree with this line of thinking. It is quite possible that there might actually have been such an increase but the fact that domestic violence exists (on both sides) is certainly not caused by initiatives like this. Granted such initiatives empower women but if we apply the writers logic i.e. empowerment leads to abuse, then each time a lady gets drunk at a bar and is raped, should we blame the victim on the grounds that she went to the bar? In addition, the fact that some men may feel threatened by the focus on women, should not lead the writer to conclude that the initiative is a bad idea.

The writer also states “…the girl effect has nothing to say about domestic violence, rape, the wage gap, or other systemic problems…gender discrimination in poor countries”. Again, I disagree with the writer on this statement. A cursory look at the “Girl Count” policy paper points to the fact that some of these issues are addressed by the Girl Effect.

The writer states that “The girl effect reinforces the perception of women and more generally people in developing countries as needing ‘saving.’ In the girl effect video above, the viewer is told to ‘imagine a girl living in poverty.’ Then the word ‘GIRL’ is displayed with flies buzzing around the letters, drawing on a stereotypical image …Such images perpetuate the dichotomy of modern Western world vs. the backwards, charity-dependent rest of the world… Westerners are invited to ‘fix this picture.’…” As a “girl” who has lived in a developing country, I would be the first to admit that some parts of the video are stereotypical (something which I am 100% against) and arguable untrue. However, the idea behind that video is clearly to empower girls/women, create awareness and not to focus on the dichotomy between the modern Western world and the rest of the world. Looking at the video from the writer’s point of view seems to me, a deliberate attempt to misconstrue the initiative and nothing more.

The writer also states that the Girl Effect “relies on the… view that women are innately more nurturing than men, and that women’s natural strengths lie in the home ….Rather than attempting to increase men’s domestic workload, …Why not …address the structural factors that underlie men’s apparent disinterest in the health and education of their children?” I completely understand the need to encourage men’s participation in domestic care, health care, and education of their children. Pallavi, a fellow contributor to this blog, had written about the importance of involving men in maternal care a couple of weeks ago. So that point is well taken. However, the writer in her criticism fails to take into account the fact that in many cultures, women do a lot of work which in more ways than one contributes to economic development and it appears that the central point to the writer’s criticism is that investment in women’s health care and education might actually be harmful to women, and it is on this point that I disagree with the writer.
Finally, the writer states that “...women in developing countries already make up a larger proportion of the workforce ...and yet development is stalled. It’s a myth that women will drive growth enough to pull the poorest countries out of poverty: What poor countries need to stimulate sustainable growth are ...better governance and better terms of trade with rich countries.” I agree that better governance and terms of trade with rich countries will certainly stimulate sustainable growth. However, I do not believe, without statistical data to the contrary, that it is a myth that women will drive growth enough to pull the poorest countries out of poverty. Notwithstanding the fact that women might occupy a majority of the workforce in developing countries today, there is no harm in further investment to ensure a stronger workforce.

Although I have no affiliation with Nike Foundation and not even much data to show that their initiative has met some of its intended goals, I believe that if writer’s are to make critical statements about initiatives, which might cause the public to doubt the integrity of such initiatives, the minimum writers can do is to back their criticisms with statistics and other relevant data.

What do you think?

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