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How can young women
become global leaders?



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Where women stand today

Great strides forward have been made, but there is still much further to go

Government:

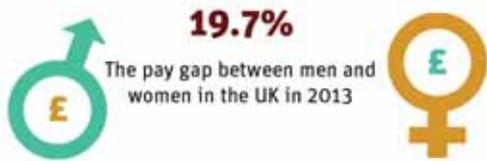
Top five countries for women in national parliaments



21.8%

The world average for women in national parliaments. This rate has increased by **37%** since 2004

Work:



If women's paid employment rates were equal to men's, then gross domestic product would rise by an estimated:



Per capita income would rise by 14% (by 2020) in 15 major developing economies



The percentage of women participating in the labour market globally in 2012, compared to **76.8%** of men

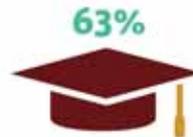


The percentage of women on the corporate boards of FTSE 100 companies

Education:



The number of women per 100 men enrolled in higher education in Southern and Western Asia



The percentage of countries with a female bias in higher education enrolments

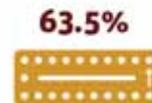


126 million

The number women starting or running a new businesses in 67 economies around the world



The number of girls out of primary education, globally, has decreased by **25.3%** since 2004



The rate of contraceptive prevalence among women or their partners, globally

Sources: IPU, Gov.uk, World Bank, UN Women, GEM

New Statesman
7th Floor
John Carpenter House
John Carpenter Street
London EC4Y 0AN
Tel 020 7936 6400
Fax 020 7936 6501
info@
newstatesman.co.uk
Subscription enquiries,
reprints and
syndication rights:
Stephen Brasher
sbrasher@
newstatesman.co.uk
0800 731 8496

Supplement Editors
Becky Slack
Charlotte Simmonds
Design & Production
Leon Parks
Graphics
Roshni Maher

Commercial Director
Peter Coombs
+44 (0)203 0962 268
Head of Partnerships
Eleanor Slinger
+44 (0)203 0962 275

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Girl power

Around the world, young women are taking their rightful place in positions of leadership – in their communities and families, in their schools and workplaces. Young women such as Masooma Maqsoodi, an Afghan student at the Asian University for Women (AUW), who writes on page 15 about the impact education had on her personal development and capacity for leadership.

However, while steps forward have been taken, there is still a considerable distance to

be travelled. The proportion of women globally in senior positions of government and industry remains poor, while in every nation there are women who lack the basic right to study, work, vote, or make reproductive choices.

Facing up to these challenges is a requisite for women everywhere to achieve their dreams. Institutions such as the AUW are breaking this cycle through the education and empowerment of today's young women who will change

tomorrow's world. This supplement brings together female leaders from business, politics, education and philanthropy – a collection of voices who, in turn, encourage others to raise their own.

As Shirley Williams says on page 12, without more female role models, the tide of inequality will be hard to turn.

Many thanks to Judy and Mark Moody-Stuart and to Tej Lalvani, without whose support this report would not have been possible. |

This supplement, and other policy reports, can be downloaded from the NS website at www.newstatesman.com/page/supplements

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An army of women for social justice

Forget the military – it may well be a diverse army of young women committed to justice, knowledge-sharing and inclusive decision-making that will solve the crises that continue to shape our world, says **Dr Fahima Aziz**

On 29 January, Unesco declared that the world is suffering from a “global learning crisis”. Its assessment was that poor-quality education costs the world over \$129bn per year, a figure likely to be dramatically trumped by losses in human development and potential. Increased primary school enrolment figures mask the fact that 33 per cent of students complete their primary education without gaining basic literacy skills. More than 25 per cent of teachers lack the necessary training to do their jobs. Women shoulder a disproportionate share of the illiteracy burden; more than two-thirds of illiterate adults are female (Unesco 2014). Expanding primary and secondary education for girls is imperative, and many governments, NGOs and international organisations are addressing this, with some success. But we need to change the structural and cyclical perpetrators of this crisis, a product of substandard teaching and inadequate investment in high-quality education. We need to provide college-level education to women from underserved sections of the society so they can increase their opportunities and establish themselves as leaders in society, catalysing other women into higher education.

The Asian University for Women (AUW) – with its mission to educate women to become service-oriented leaders, to teach students in an environment which is vibrant and socioeconomically diverse, and to maintain academic excellence – is attempting to make the structural changes in the region. Opening its doors in 2008 in Chittagong, Bangladesh, the AUW seeks to educate, inspire, and empower women from underserved

backgrounds so that they in turn educate, inspire and empower others. Thanks to the gifted and dedicated faculty members from all over the world, the AUW has already obtained external validation for outstanding teaching effectiveness and exceptional gains in analytical and communication skills among students.

Our students come from 16 countries in Asia and the Middle East, and many are on full or partial scholarships. Because of their diverse high school backgrounds and languages, most enrol in the AUW

AUW students show how educating women can transform societies

Access Academy in their first year to build up a foundation in English (the primary language of instruction), mathematics, computer skills, and an introduction to critical thinking, preparing them to start the rigorous four-year programme leading to a Bachelor of Arts or Science degree.

They are also helped to demonstrate their commitment to social changes through community services, collaborative research with faculty, and informational public health campaigns. They teach Bangla, English, and maths to children and adults in Chittagong, organise community discussions about early marriage and sexual harassment in Kabul, participate in campaigns to increase access to healthcare in rural areas, and conduct research on institutional responsiveness and accountability. They take part in sports, debates, theatres, music and arts. Our students

bring strong communication, analytical and service-oriented leadership skills, alongside their experience with intercultural engagement, to their internships or jobs upon graduation in the public and private sectors. The AUW’s students have started to show the world how educating women can transform societies.

The AUW’s students are formidable women who have often surmounted great challenges to gain an education. They include a student who participated in a “student-led revolution” that prevented village elites from shutting down her school in her home country. They include survivors of domestic violence and sexual harassment. Our students are determined to fight for justice, and their experiences with sectarian and ethnic conflict have motivated their efforts to work towards conflict resolution and peace building. They are often the first in their family to attend college. The AUW’s diversity gives students the opportunity to identify allies, critically assess problem-solving strategies, and build networks that will enable them to contribute to long-standing struggles for social, economic, and political justice around the world.

The global learning crisis underlines the need for countries to invest in the quality of education. Billions have been invested in militaries around the world, but it may well be a diverse army of educated, service-oriented women committed to social justice, knowledge-sharing, and inclusive decision-making that will show us the way out of the multiple crises that continue to shape our world. |

Dr Fahima Aziz is vice-chancellor of the AUW

21st-century equality

Despite progress, true equality between women and men remains elusive around the world. Collective action is needed to make this the century of change, says **Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**, director of UN Women

The recent elections in Afghanistan saw high participation and high hopes from women who before the vote gathered 250,000 signatures countrywide calling for peace and security. Around the world, women are mobilising for change and taking on leadership positions in politics, business, and their communities in greater numbers.

However, equality between men and women remains elusive in every country. Only one in five parliamentarians globally are women. At peace talks convened in the past decade, fewer than 10 per cent of negotiators were women. Women's membership on corporate boards stands at just 4 per cent. And, in some parts of the world, a woman's right to vote is not a given, even where it is granted by the constitution.

The evidence is mounting, however, that gender equality and women's full participation brings progress for all.

For example, countries with higher levels of gender equality have higher economic growth. Shareholders on companies with more women on their boards have higher returns. Parliaments with more women consider a broader range of issues and support women's full participation in the economy and society, with more legislation on health, education, anti-discrimination and child support.

I was in Japan recently and met with the Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. His much-lauded plan for economic recovery is to create a society where women "shine" in at least 30 per cent of senior leadership roles in politics, business and society by 2020.

Research shows that when women and men lead together, their leadership better reflects and responds to the diverse needs of society. Having more female leaders

also has a role-model effect that changes the public perception of girls' potential and aspirations.

For UN Women, expanding women's economic and political participation is a priority. In Egypt, we worked with the UN Development Programme to support the government in providing ID cards to two million marginalised women, so that they can vote and access social services. Last year in Pakistan, we supported a voter education campaign that reached 26 million women. Despite threats to their lives in some cases, Pakistani women cast 40 per cent of the vote.

In Mali and Colombia, UN Women convened meetings of women demanding their place at the negotiating table. And recently we supported national coalitions of women from Syria and South Sudan demanding a place in peace talks, and laying out their vision for a peaceful, democratic and inclusive future.

Yet these efforts are not yet of sufficient scale or depth to achieve the kind of transformative change required for true equality. The political arena provides an instructive example. Discrimination, party structures, poverty and lack of finance can make it all but impossible for female candidates to be elected. In some cases, women face a very real threat of violence if they participate in politics.

While temporary special measures such as quotas are effective and have raised women's parliamentary representation in nations as diverse as Rwanda, Sweden, Nicaragua, East Timor and Algeria, we also need to address structural inequality within the broader society.

Today, some 860 million women are excluded from economic activity, a number expected to rise to one billion in the next decade. More than 100 countries still have

laws that ban women from doing certain jobs, accessing finance, owning businesses or conducting legal affairs, which is leading to wasted human potential.

Next year marks the 20-year anniversary since governments agreed on a comprehensive platform for action at the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. This provides an opportunity to mobilise for its full implementation, as UN member states agreed in March at the 58th Commission on the Status of Women.

The commission outlined a roadmap identifying critical issues that must be addressed with clear targets in the post-2015 development agenda that will replace the Millennium Development Goals.

We must take collective action to end the pandemic of violence against women and girls that affects one in three globally; to close gender pay gaps and women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work; to equalise access to assets and productive resources; to advance universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights; to ensure equality in decision-making, and tackle the discriminatory attitudes, norms and laws that impede progress.

To move this agenda forward, I am advocating for the SHE Imperative. S stands for security from violence. H is for human rights and E is for empowerment and equality.

Governments, the private sector and civil society must work together to tear down the barriers that prevent women from claiming their rights so they can realise their potential. Together we can make the 21st century the century of equality between men and women. | *Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and executive director of UN Women*

How can we inspire young women to become global leaders?

Leading women's advocates from around the world answer the question and explore how they, and the institutions they support, are working to change the future

PHILANTHROPY

The best sort of leaders are rich in experience and fearless in spirit

Judy Moody-Stuart

Fifty years ago, I married a geologist, and travelling with him worldwide I have had the privilege of watching leaders in business, government and civil society. There are two main factors of equal importance which keep women out of leadership positions: the expectations of women, and the attitude of males in our societies. Addressing the first, the Asian University for Women is a brilliant example and I expect to see our well-educated, self-confident, multinational graduates serving in all spheres of world influence. To address the second, from my own observation and as a past research scientist without prejudice, I believe that the average man must change

so that he does not only listen politely to a woman, but expects to learn from a woman. The average man expects to hear confirmation and support for his ideas from a woman, yet when she puts forward something different, he shuts his mind to serious consideration of the counter-suggestion. This is not wilful, but instinctive.

I believe that the best sort of leaders are people who are rich and balanced in past experiences from several cultures; kind and intelligent listeners with a fearless independent spirit in a strong body, people willing to realise that they may not be right, but are able to defend their position logically to educate an antagonist. They need to have initiative and charisma in order to inspire and head a team of equals, and energy to set a hard-working example.

"Global" implies a rounded world view that strives to take in facts and opinions from the whole surface of the earth. We certainly do need more women like this in the corridors of power, especially young women who can still think in the way that a woman's mind naturally works, who have avoided the need to think and behave like a man in order to reach office. She will need to know and recognise her own ego

– and how to control it. I view reckless empowerment as a dangerous activity, and concur with Lord Acton's 1887 statement that "power tends to corrupt ...". Thus, rather than "empower" I hope to "enable" young women to become global leaders. |

Judy Moody-Stuart is an international philanthropist engaged with the AUW since its inception

EDUCATION

Empowerment means enhanced choice

Jo Beall

Empowering women is not only the right thing to do; it is also the smart thing to do. The World Bank recognises the contribution women make to prosperity and emphasises women's economic empowerment. The United Nations, too, emphasises women's political empowerment, acknowledging the association between improved gender equality and

peace and stability in countries around the world.

In both the fields of education and international relations, I have sat on the sort of leadership teams and executive boards where I have been the only woman, and those where there has been a critical mass of women, generally acknowledged to be at least a third. I have seen that teams and boards where women are well represented are not only fairer, but often more effective. Thus it is for personal and professional reasons that I am passionate about the empowerment of girls and women.

The potential of millions is limited by practices that need to be challenged

Previously the British Council had a good reputation for its work on women's empowerment, particularly around leadership, but like many organisations that sought to "mainstream gender", our activity and impact diminished. This has changed and the focus on women's and girls' empowerment has gained momentum once again across the organisation and infuses our work with partners.

To us, empowerment means enhanced choice. Choice implies alternatives and in many contexts women have few. The potential and rights of millions of women globally is limited by cultural practices that need to be understood, questioned and challenged to advance women's empowerment. Through our cultural relations approach, the British Council seeks to address issues that constrain women's exercise of choice. One way is through education. Too many girls worldwide are denied access to study, which means their leadership potential is curtailed. Another is through increasing women's voices so they are able to play their part in decision-making, whether in the community, nationally or globally.

When female leaders claim empowerment rather than having it bestowed upon them, our work will be done. Until then, we remain committed to supporting women to overcome the barriers they face, acquire confidence and skills and to connect with other women who share their interests and goals. |

Jo Beall is director of education and society and on the executive board of the British Council



Teach for change: education is the key to empowering young women in Afghanistan and globally

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Information is key to empowerment

Dr Sakena Yacoobi

I work in Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in the world with one of the highest illiteracy rates. In my experience in working with young women over the past 20 years, the key to empowering them to become global leaders is through education. What kind of education? Education that teaches critical thinking skills and exposes girls and young women to information about issues such as human rights, gender, health, peace, leadership, the rule of law and their own rich cultural traditions. In addition, girls and women need to be in a safe and trusted environment to learn and express their ideas and try out their leadership skills. In Afghanistan, this has been difficult after more than 30 years of war and insecurity.

To build trust and encourage education for females, the Afghan Institute of Learning uses a community-based approach that asks the local people, both women and men, to contribute to educational

learning centres and offers the education that this community requests. Because the community is involved and supporting education for women and girls, a safe environment is created and trust is built.

As women study, they are able to help their children study, they are healthier, they learn new skills and they continue their education beyond basic literacy. Families and the community benefit. Then women and girls begin to spread their wings, go on to university, take up leadership roles. They start in their own community and then move forward. It takes time, but young women now own their own businesses, have started community-based loan funds, are running for local and provincial offices, and are taking leadership roles in the government.

In time, Afghan women will become global leaders. My personal view is that, considering the situation of Afghan women, they have come a long way very quickly. Other nations need to follow in our footsteps by providing education and gender and leadership training in a safe and trusted environment that involves the community. |

Dr Sakena Yacoobi is president and executive director of the Afghan Institute of Learning

VOLUNTARY ACTION

This generation is ambitious about their future

Julie Bentley

Girlguiding is a leading charity for girls and young women in the UK. We passionately believe that young women have the potential to be leaders in all walks of life. The thousands of girls we work with every day constantly inspire us with their passion, energy and sense of adventure – and we know this generation is highly ambitious about their future.

As a charity, we feel strongly that we have a responsibility to listen to what girls tell us about how they see the world and give them the power to express their views. By giving girls a voice, we know that they can play an active part in shaping a fairer society where they can truly be everything they want to be.

When our youth advocate panel decided to support the “No More Page 3” campaign, a movement to end gratuitous female nudity in Britain’s *Sun* newspaper, we listened and acted upon this. And they were the ones who personally took to TV and radio to explain why.

We know that for girls to have the confidence to speak out publically, they need a space where they have the freedom to develop their beliefs and opinions.

This autumn, we launched a resource called “Be the change”, developed by two young members, which gives girls aged ten to 14 skills in leadership, decision-making, debating and advocacy.

Every year, we publish research into the opinions of girls and young women in the UK, called the *Girls’ Attitudes Survey*. This survey gives a unique insight into girls’ perspectives – and gives them a voice about how they see the world. In our 2013 *Girls’ Attitudes Survey*, more than half of seven- to 21-year-olds said they would like to be a leader in their chosen profession. Yet female representation remains frustratingly low for this generation of young women.

We know from our research that low body confidence is an issue that affects girls’ aspirations – which is why we recently launched a body confidence campaign and introduced a self-esteem

boosting badge called Free Being Me. And later this year, we are hosting Camp CEO – a brand new event bringing together Girlguiding members with leading businesswomen to inspire a future generation of leaders.

We know that, collectively, our half-million members are an incredible powerful force for good, and I’m proud to be able to support these inspirational young women as they take their positions in the world. |

Julie Bentley is chief executive of Girlguiding

EVERYDAY SEXISM

Tackling gender discrimination and workplace harassment is essential

Laura Bates

Empowering young women is vital and important. We can do it by increasing the visibility of female role models in leadership, business and industry, by celebrating successful women, and addressing the sexist media lens through which such women’s achievements are so often filtered. We can do it by going into schools and explicitly addressing the received assumptions about men and women’s roles and abilities; encouraging both boys and girls to recognise their own potential.

But empowering young women won’t work if we continue to send them out into a world that judges them on their appearance, makes negative snap judgements about their abilities based on their sex alone, exploits and objectifies them, and bombards them with discrimination and sexism, both implicit and explicit, at every turn. Empowering young women is vital and important, but it is useless without real change in the industries and professional structures they will have to navigate to achieve a successful career.

It’s no good empowering a young woman to believe she has just as much right to pursue a career in engineering or politics as her male peers, if she finds herself sidelined and pushed out five or ten years later because she chooses to

start a family. It won’t work to inspire a young girl to realise she has the skills and potential to go into business, if she finds herself dealing with such regular sexual harassment in the workplace that she is forced to leave her job.

Starting early in schools, examining gender inequality and making young people aware of their rights in situations like these is a good start and will help to equip women better to tackle them. But no individual woman’s attitude can change the structural inequality which our girls face in the workplace. We must address issues such as workplace discrimination by ensuring all employees are protected from sexual harassment and discrimination at work, making those protections clearly known to them and ensuring that transparent, victim-focussed reporting strategies are in place. We can put mechanisms in place for shared parental leave, shifting archaic stereotypes about women’s domestic duties and making it harder for employers to discriminate during the hiring process. We can implement better provisions for flexible working hours to help women cope with the demands of family and career and help more women return to the workplace after having children.

Above all, as well as empowering our young women, we must tackle at every level the sexist stereotypes, attitudes and discrimination that stand in their way. |

Laura Bates is the founder of The Everyday Sexism Project

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Women’s equal decision-making is the unfinished business of the 20th century

Rangita de Silva de Alwis

Why is women’s leadership in political and public service the cause of our time? Globally, women are vastly under-represented in leadership positions across all sectors and regions. At the historic Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, governments undertook work to raise women’s representation to a critical mass of

30 per cent. To date, only 37 countries have reached the 30 per cent mark in national legislative bodies recognised as the critical mass of change. Nine still have no female members at all. Although progress has been made – in 2013, the average number of women in parliament globally stood at 21.8 per cent; in 1995 it was only 11.3 per cent – it is estimated that, at this rate of change, women will not reach equality for a one and a half centuries.

Increasing women’s participation in politics and in public service advances a plurality of perspectives, strengthens national security, efficiency, and transparency in government. But this is not all: the evidence is now clear that women’s decision-making is an economic imperative. To give just one example, in Ghana, where women have equal access to decision-making on fertilisers, there is a 17 per cent increase in the maize yield.

The same impact can be seen in the realm of policymaking. Historically, men drafted laws in the image of men, and women were absent from the table.

With women at the table, policies are more equal and more inclusive. Across the world, it was only after women joined Congress that critical issues such as healthcare, childcare, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and gender-based wage differentials took priority. Having a woman in a seat of power can also be transformative for future generations. For example, in communities where female leaders are more visible, fathers tend to send their daughters to school and keep them there.

The Women in Public Service Project (WPSP) was launched by Hillary Clinton – in partnership with Seven Sisters Colleges, a US consortium of women’s liberal arts colleges, and academic institutions from around the world – to inspire a new generation of women to serve their communities and countries so as to forge new solutions to the intractable challenges of our times. We believe in the transformative power of networks and mentorships. Our institutions are crucibles for transnational idea sharing, bringing together an

emerging generation of female leaders to advance constitution building, legislative drafting, peace negotiations and institution building. Networks are the single most important cornerstone for women in leadership. Those like the WPSP can not only help to advance women, but help drive change in their communities. Role models, too, are a powerful force for change. As Dilma Rousseff said on her first day as president of Brazil: “I stand here to open doors for other women.”

Finally, male champions of change are the missing link in the global movement for women’s leadership. Male leaders can transform orthodoxy by championing women in leadership as a public good.

By fulfilling the WPSP’s mission to mobilise government and academic partners, I hope the next generation will realise the unfinished business of the 20th century – to forge a partnership where men and women play an equal role in nation building. |

Rangita de Silva de Alwis is the director of the WPSP, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington DC

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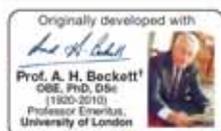


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* Professor Beckett is not cited in the capacity of a health professional, but as former Chairman of 18 years and Head of R&D at Vitabiotics.



Selima Ahmad: how I got here

The founder of the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry shares her story with the readers of the *New Statesman*

Selima Ahmad is a Bangladeshi business-woman and founder of the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI), the country's first chamber of commerce exclusively working for women's economic and social empowerment. Since 2001, the BWCCI has supported thousands of female entrepreneurs all over the country. She speaks with the New Statesman about her own path to success and why she is so committed to nurturing the futures of women everywhere.

How did you begin your career in business?

I was married by the time I took my final exams in the 12th grade. I had wanted to be a journalist, or an artist, but when I was admitted to university in 1978 I decided to study business management instead. I was 17 years old and seven months pregnant; a young expectant mother trying to fulfil her dreams.

I had aspirations to go into business, because I thought that entrepreneurship would be the best thing for me and my situation, giving me flexible time for my children. So after I finished my studies, I started a business with four of my male university friends. We were a business consultancy firm, making business plans for other entrepreneurs. This lasted two years, but in 1984 my four partners decided to join a new up-and-coming private-sector bank. They thought running your own business was too risky.

I ended up by myself, but I always believed that if things didn't work out you

just had to change directions and keep going. It was then that my husband and I decided to start our own business together.

We founded a diversified automobile company, the Nitol Niloy Group. Today, our company is a great success, with 6,000 employees. During that period, I was also involved in the handicraft industry – founding the country's first manufacturing and exporting business for artificial silk flowers. Between these two businesses, I often found myself the only woman at trade fairs in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

What led to the founding of the BWCCI?

Well, 1998 was a turning point in my life. At the time I was involved with The Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), an absolutely male-dominated trade organisation. There were about 700 male members and maybe only two or three women. I was elected and became the only woman on their membership board.

I wasn't happy on the board; it was politicised and not doing enough for the business community. When I was elected for a second term and saw that things were not going to change, I resigned.

It was during this time that I was having a meeting with other Southern Asian female entrepreneurs at the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, in Delhi. We were all thinking about how to promote more entrepreneurship, and they asked me – why don't

you have a women's chamber of commerce in Bangladesh? I thought yes, why not! I had been in the world of business for so long, working with my husband, raising two sons – I was surrounded by men. I decided it was time for me work for the women.

On my return from Delhi, I immediately applied to start the Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry. I met with huge resistance from the business community, who said, "Why do we need a separate chamber of commerce for women?" A case was even filed against us. It took us six years, but we finally got our permanent licence.

What work has the organisation done to support women in business, and why is this so important for the country?

The women's chamber has 3,200 members and linkages with more than 7,000 entrepreneurs around the country, a strong team of staff and 14 board members. We work to build the capacity of female entrepreneurs and to increase their access to finance. Bangladesh is famous for microcredit institutions, but they take a high rate of interest. I wanted to see women rise from micro-enterprises to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and to help them become recognised legal entities.

The challenge here was that many micro-entrepreneurs did not have trade licences of their own; their money was handled by a husband or son. Further-



Working for women: The BWCCI offers advice on entrepreneurship, health and human rights

more, getting business loans required property collateral, which a father would often provide for his son but not for his daughter. I said to myself, is this empowerment? I met for two years with the government, with the central bank, with policy makers and ministers to raise our voice in a very positive way. Eventually, we secured a women's SME loan with a low interest rate and no collateral. Since 2006, more than 9,000 female entrepreneurs have received this loan.

We do so much other work too; from training women how take out bank loans or use computers, to running an anti-corruption hotline centre where women can seek advice. We work with rural, minority and indigenous groups to help them develop products and access markets. We also do work with the UN around family planning, educating young girls about their human rights and their reproductive and sexual rights, a topic very close to my heart. We raise awareness about cervical cancer. We promote democracy, because without democracy in the family and in society, neither men nor women have equal opportunities.

I strongly advocate that female entrepreneurs will bring huge benefits to the

whole society. Women in work means more employment, more taxes paid, and a real difference to the country. Women reinvest their earnings in their family, meaning more nutrition and more education for their children. A society is built upon individual families – the stronger each family becomes, the more the whole world will benefit.

Did you ever find it hard as a woman in your line of work?

Of course. Especially when I was young, as people didn't take me so seriously. They assumed I was successful because I was charming and attractive; it was never about my merit. I used to think: when can I grow old? But I was ambitious and rarely aimless. Today, I am so proud to be the founder of the chamber, but it is no longer mine. A piece of it belongs to everyone.

You also teach at the University of Dhaka. What challenges do you think young women face today when starting out in their careers?

One challenge is that many are newly married, or are going to be. They are not sure whether their family or their husband's family will support their choice

to have a career once they are wed.

I think that young men are facing more challenges today, too. Many are uncertain, their roles are changing, and now men and women can go for the same jobs. It is a contradictory phase in the universe, but men have had the advantage for so long. We need something extra that equalises our status.

I am optimistic that the presence of women in business and politics will increase. Today's young women are committed to doing their best – they want to prove themselves. They are hard-working and determined to contribute. In a country like Bangladesh, there are barriers of course, but ultimately I have perceived this change to be welcome. There will always be a minority who create obstacles, but the majority of our nation welcomes empowered women. Even in the most remote villages, I have never had a community of men say to me: "We don't want you here."

Looking back, what advice would you give to your younger self? What do you wish you knew then that you know now?

I have always craved fulfilling my dreams. When I started, there were many things I didn't know, but I learned along the way. The whole process of life is learning, and people should be educating themselves in new ways every day. Each day is a lesson.

To my younger self, and to young people everywhere, I would say this: work hard. You might cry in the night, and believe me I cried many times. But in the morning, I never showed it. Work through your weaknesses and show that you are strong.

I would also say: be humble and be honest. There are many leaders who simply pretend they are doing good work, but dishonesty will never sustain you. If you work hard with sincerity, then success will automatically come. I hope young women who read this will go away and write their own mission statement. It is good to have a strategy to reach your goals and fulfil your dreams.

Be passionate and happy about what you are doing. And remember that loving other people is the most important thing in the world. A life should not be all about ourselves, the individual, but about what you have done for another individual who needed help. |

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Why aren't more women at the top?

There have never been more women in work in the UK, and girls outnumber boys at universities across the country. Why, then, is this not reflected in positions of leadership, and particularly in government?

Baroness Shirley Williams speaks to **Charlotte Simmonds** about women in parliament and the power of role models

A recent government study, released in March by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport, took a close look the gender pay gap between 1997 and 2014. It was not a reassuring view. The pay gap is a measurement of the difference in an average man's hourly earnings as compared to a woman's. While generally on the decline, in 2013 this gap still stands at 19.7 per cent, meaning your average women will earn 19.7 per cent less per hour than your average man.

As an approximation for the progress of gender equality, the pay gap speaks to endemic issues of financial dependence, undervalued labour and a lack of employment opportunities available to women, not only in the UK but around the world.

The outlook in the United States is no better, with 2012 census data showing that the average American woman earns 77 per cent of what her male counterparts earn (a pay gap of 23 per cent). Developed countries such as the UK and the US preach gender equality on a global stage but, as far as numbers go, they fail to deliver. The number of women in sectors such as government, business, banking and law remains astonishingly low – the UK ranks 65th globally for its percentage

of women in parliament, the US 84th, while the number of women on FTSE 100 executive boards sits at an abysmal 5.5 per cent. Even in traditionally female-dominated spheres such as the voluntary sector, where the latest data has shown the workforce to be 66 per cent female, these numbers are not reflected at senior-level positions.

So how far have we really come on our quest for equality, and why are there still so few women at the top?

Baroness Shirley Williams is a politician who, throughout a political career that has seen her serve as education secretary, paymaster general and Liberal Democrat leader of the House of Lords, has broken the mould of what many women thought possible for a career in politics. As one of the original founders of the breakaway Social Democrats Party in 1981, which later joined with the Liberals in 1988 to become the Liberal Democrat Party, Baroness Williams is among Britain's boldest and most admired politicians.

In government since the mid-1960s, her time spent in the corridors of Westminster may have seen the first female prime minister, but has the outlook for

women aspiring to positions of leadership really improved?

"Not much," she tells me. "It has probably only inched forward." Her tone is pragmatic, though I detect a sense of disappointment. She continues: "If you look at something obvious, like the number of women in the cabinet, it probably improved the most under Harold Wilson, where the number leapt. As a percentage of recent governments, it hasn't really improved. In the current cabinet, there are very few. In terms of women in the top offices of state, well, the Home Secretary [Theresa May] is the only one. There tend to be many more women in middle and lower rungs of seniority."

Why is this the case? Delivering a lecture at the LSE on the 5 March 2014, Baroness Williams had spoken of the "chronic lack of confidence in women" she noted while serving as education secretary from 1976 to 1979. She had illustrated this with an example: under her policy to merge boys and girls' schools into larger, mixed "comprehensives", Williams was upset that the ratio of men to women appointed as head teachers of these new schools was four to one, in favour of male candidates. Unsure of the root cause, a wise



Boys' club: Shirley Williams, front centre, was one of the few women on the Labour benches in 1976

civil servant advised her to have a look at the applications. It was here a pattern emerged. The ratio of those applying to lead each comprehensive school was four men to every one woman. With applications for deputy headships, however, the ratio inverted. It was obvious that the female candidates, despite being equally qualified for the job, were more hesitant to put themselves forward for the most senior position.

When I raise the topic of confidence with Williams, she is quick to concur the issue still exists today. "Confidence starts very young," she says. "It's something that needs to be embedded in children from a very early age. Confidence can be very hard to compensate for if it isn't present by the end of primary school. Work can be done at a professional level, but it's rather late in the day."

The role of the family, and primarily the roles of fathers, is therefore central to building the sort of confidence that will serve women throughout their careers, Williams says. "The relationship between father and daughter is absolutely

crucial," she tells me. "It's inescapable. If you look at politics and the women who make it, over and over again you find that those near the top had fathers who believed in them."

Was this true for her? "It certainly was," she says. "It was true for Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Benazir Bhutto – the list goes on and on. He doesn't have to be a famous or important man; what matters is that he puts his support and his hopes for the future in his daughter. The family structure is integral in giving women the confidence to go out and achieve."

Other factors, of course, play their part. Williams, who worked hard in the 1970s to legalise a woman's right to maternity leave, emphasises the difficulty of running "two careers side by side": that of worker and that of mother.

"No matter how much you love children, it is a huge additional time taker. If you go back to the beginning of suffrage, many women who got into parliament were not married," she reminds us. "Many were widows. Few had children. That has changed a great deal; now the majority

of women, in fact, have children. But in most countries, there is still no equal provision for maternity and paternity leave. I think this is one of the barriers to women progressing."

Voting systems have hindered progress too, she argues. The UK and the US are prime examples. "Our voting system is 'first past the post', where whoever gets the votes – and often this comes down to money – is the one who gets in power," she explains. "In countries with proportional representation, you'll find the number of women in parliament leaps from about 20 per cent to about 40 per cent." The evidence backs her up – in South Africa, for example, where proportional representation in government is a legacy of Mandela, the percentage of women in parliament is nearly half. "Voting systems are extraneous to the social factors of a country," says Williams, "but nonetheless they have an extremely damaging effect on the proportion of women in politics."

Speaking on the wider subject of women in leadership, Williams makes a final point, which is perhaps her most philosophical. It is a point about "role models" and the importance – for both girls and boys – of a national, feminine mythology learned in childhood.

"Why aren't more women in positions of seniority? Think of the myth structure in the US," she begins. "It's a myth structure that is largely male. The cowboy, the lone warrior, the founding fathers. I've noticed that women do better in monarchies than they do in republics. Every little French boy has heard of Marie Antoinette, every little British boy has heard of Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Elizabeth II. These nursery-story women, these mythical role models are part of the fabric of so many countries."

"It may seem like a strange remark to make," she continues, "but in fact these female role models are very important. By the age of four, children have begun to absorb the idea of a woman in power. It makes an equal impact on men and women right across a society."

Her insight into the early years of life speak to her great experience in the world of education. It seems that confidence sown in the mind of a young woman, whether by her family or her country, will be the roots of growth the world wishes to see. |

Body positive

Access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is the equality agenda of our time, says *Sivananthi Thanenthiran*

I first came to the Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women, the women's health, sexuality and rights NGO of which I am now director, as a communications consultant. It was my job to take over project reports that didn't quite make it to the publications stage. I have a flair for the unfinished.

My first piece of work was to help complete a project comprising five different research reports involving many themes and regions in Indonesia. As I combed through the chapters, which covered everything from maternal mortality, contraception, unsafe abortion, HIV/Aids, and young people's access to sexual and reproductive health services and information, I was shocked by the data, the findings and the stories I encountered.

This was 2006. At the time I had assumed the battles over fertility planning and regulation had been fought and won in the 1960s. This work made me question that premise.

My second project was a regional report focused on maternal health and mortality, and young people's access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) across Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and India. Again, the underlying issues were very similar to those in Indonesia.

Clearly, these women's experiences were not limited to a particular village or region, or even a country: this was the narrative of the collective. I was outraged that women were being denied the most basic right to control their own bodies.

Why are sexual and reproductive rights a prerequisite for gender equality? Three core elements are integral to individual autonomy. First, the right to freely decide on matters of sexuality and reproduction. Second, to have the right to consent; and third, the right to have bodily integrity.

Women and girls must have the power to decide whom they can love, and with whom and when they have consensual relations and/or enter into marriage.

They must have the right to decide how many children to have, if at all, and when to have them. They must have the right to a life free from all forms of violence.

Sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls are often dismissed as "secondary" rights compared to their educational and economic rights. However, these rights are fundamental to the core of how a girl or a woman perceives herself in relation to her partner, her society and her government. If control of her body is in the hands of another (be it

A woman's basic right to her own body is a pre-requisite for equality

her husband or her prime minister), is she really a free and equal human being? Even if she graduates from university or runs a successful business, if she is beaten, raped or forced to bear children beyond her capacity, is she really empowered? Sexual and reproductive rights are fundamental women's rights because they make concrete the paradigm that a woman's body is hers, first and foremost.

More importantly, SRHR issues are, worldwide, issues not only of gender inequality but of socioeconomic inequality, too. In every country around the world, women who are poorer, less educated, or belong to marginalised groups (indigenous, disabled, ethnic minorities) suffer from poorer sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Compared to their better educated and wealthier sisters,

citizens, these outcomes are proven to include: less access to contraception, more frequent pregnancies or pregnancies at younger ages, less capacity to protect themselves from HIV and other STIs, more frequent death in childbirth and worse maternal health.

Hence, the sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda is also the equality agenda of this century.

This agenda must be both total and inclusive. Those who are hesitant to defend an adolescent's access to comprehensive sexual education, gay women's rights or a woman's right to access a safe abortion, might be the same people who would decry early marriage, violence against women, honour killings and female genital mutilation. The key point here is that we cannot pick and choose among rights, nor can we pick and choose the recipients of those rights.

Some successful strategies are changing and helping amend laws, though in my part of the world, the Asia-Pacific, we very often find that changing the law alone is not adequate. There needs to be widespread advocacy to create awareness on what this law entails and the rights of citizens under this law.

It is also critical to ensure that the public, private and voluntary sectors implement services in accordance with the law. This may mean building capacities of citizens to hold their governments accountable through grassroots mobilisation, for instance. And just as we ask governments to put people at the centre of development, the onus is also on donors and philanthropists to put people at the centre of their projects and funding priorities. | *Sivananthi Thanenthiran is the director of the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (Arrow)*

My journey to freedom

By *Masooma Maqsoodi*

Looking on the rooftop of an old house located in a small town in south-west Iran, I stared at the starry, summer sky and dreamed of a future that seemed as far away as the blinking stars. How would I make those dreams come true? I still remember those dreams: becoming a computer software engineer, starting a software company and creating jobs for many people. I dreamed of becoming rich enough to buy a house and a car, taking my parents on trips around the country. I wanted to prove to everyone in my community that a young Afghan refugee girl could be a successful, educated and independent person whose priority was not getting married and washing the dishes.

I have come a long way, and mine has been a journey about freedom of choice. Being a woman from a low-income family, a refugee and from an ethnic minority, I had very limited choices. Now, however, a decade later, I have been to five countries and three continents. I have met inspiring young people from around the world from different cultural and religious backgrounds who share a passion for understanding the world and all its complexity. I have received advice on my projects from great social entrepreneurs and feedback on my research papers from my passionate professors and mentors. I have attended many conferences and seminars on a variety of social issues, from environmental sustainability, to violence against women, to LGBT rights. I have participated in and organised campaigns about children's education, street harassment, and minority rights.

How did an Afghan refugee, who worked in a small carpentry business to pay for her computer courses, end up at the Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh? A generous scholarship

has given me a world-class education and the chance to dream about changing the world. Now I am majoring in politics, philosophy and economics (PPE), with a focus on development studies.

Growing up with education systems based on rote memorisation, new students at the AUW find it very challenging to think critically and analytically, be creative and original, and communicate effectively. However, my teachers and professors at the AUW have created an inspiring and supportive environment that made this transformation a precious experience. Here at the AUW, we learn that our ideas matter, no matter how big or small, sophisticated or simple. We learn to express our ideas and respect others' opinions. We learn to assess our values and stand up for our rights. Most importantly, AUW students are vocal human

My goal of financial independence is not a dream. It's a possibility

rights advocates in their families, communities, and societies. We have gained self-confidence and courage to speak out. We strive to empower other women, or any marginalised group, through means such as blogging, performing arts, awareness campaigns, and voluntary activism.

The passion for bringing positive change and transforming obstacles into opportunities is prevalent among AUW students. Unemployment is a big concern for every current graduate around the world, and AUW students are not an exception. However, we are getting the quality education that makes us competent enough to find our way in that world.

In addition, the AUW's summer projects, internships and fellowship programmes prepare us to face real social challenges. If the market has nothing to offer to us, we'll either make the market work or build our own jobs. I believe we have been empowered with the vision, thoughtfulness, skills, innovation and energy to create jobs and be our own employers.

I enjoy witnessing scenes of solidarity whenever I see AUW students share their ideas in their group projects, help each other prepare for another cultural event or party, or sit in AUW Lane laughing and chatting while drinking their afternoon tea. Being part of a community of talented students from diverse cultures and backgrounds makes me feel privileged. Regardless of the stress and pressures of academic life, I feel safe and happy. I wish all Afghan women could have the opportunity to enjoy such a quality education.

What are my dreams now? Well, I still want to be financially independent, but that is not a dream. It's a possibility. Now, I want to be a social entrepreneur and to improve the education system in Afghanistan. I dream of creating a system where Afghan students are encouraged to build up their creativity and unlock their talents and potential in a supportive environment. I want Afghan students to practise tolerance and appreciate diversity through an educational curriculum that teaches them to think critically. I want to see the day when seeds of peace are planted, protected and harvested by all Afghans, especially students. I have many dreams, but more important than that, I have hope. I believe in my values, and I have confidence that I can bring my dreams to reality. |

Masooma Maqsoodi is a PPE student at the AUW



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The Asian University for Women seeks to provide a rigorous liberal arts education to talented and promising women from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to prepare them for ethical and innovative leadership, service, and scholarship. Every student at AUW was admitted based on merit, providing the opportunity for students from all socio-economic backgrounds to gain a world class education at the preeminent liberal arts university for women in Asia.



At AUW, students learn in a unique multi-cultural environment. With 500 peers from 16 different nations, students at AUW learn from the course material as well as the perspectives of their peers. The courses themselves are taught by professors from 14 different countries, providing a further mix of insight to the curriculum. The diverse faculty and learning community also present opportunities for students to further delve into topics of interest and interact directly with members of the interested communities, right on the AUW campus.



Studies at AUW consist of the Access Academy, a pre-collegiate year, and the undergraduate program, which constitutes the following four years. Students graduate with either a bachelor in arts or sciences with the option of choosing from seven different majors and can complement their studies with a selection of 13 minors. Starting in the Access Academy, all classes are taught in English.



Students at the Asian University for Women are immersed in a world of logical reasoning, critical thinking, and problem solving. With a vast majority of students living on campus the AUW is able to create an invigorating environment in which students can build the foundations for their post-collegiate careers. These careers vary from community non-profit work to work with large inter-

national corporations. In addition to gaining a well-rounded educational experience, which enables them to adapt to different learning environments, students become a part of a diverse community of talented, highly motivated peers and dedicated mentors: they begin building a network that will extend well beyond their years at AUW.

This network will help AUW graduates in their personal pursuits following graduation. There is an emphasis placed through all levels of the curriculum for students to be change makers in their communities. Students study regional conflicts and engage in summer projects and senior theses to learn about issues facing communities both locally and at home. The work doesn't wait until graduation, though. AUW students are involved in an impressive range of service projects and activities that work to make concrete change in the lives of the underserved. Their volunteer efforts stretch from within AUW's walls to communities across Asia.

Students at AUW are positioned for success academically as well as through student programming and departments of excellence. Student life programming, integrated throughout the AUW experience, enables students to form clubs and engage with each other outside an academic environment. Students are able to explore their interests and develop as a well-rounded individual. The Career Development Center enables students to market their skills beyond the classroom and gain experience working in industries ranging from banking to public health.

The Asian University for Women goes beyond usual practices and breaks the mold of university education in Asia. Its students are poised to be leaders in their communities and the world.