

an
audacious
idea





education *for* every girl, everywhere

At the end of September, Emma Willard School sponsored an ambitious forum in New York City that drew over one hundred men and women from around the world to discuss girls' education. Called AUDACIA, the conference took place at the U.S. headquarters of Credit Suisse, which was a co-sponsor of the event along with the Hearst Corporation and Ted Turner.

"AUDACIA is the 21st-century idea of Emma Willard's vision," said Trudy Hall in welcoming the participants. "Educate a girl, transform the world. This room is filled with bold thinkers and activists who are confronting an audacious idea: We must provide quality education to every girl, everywhere."

The speakers included people who came from well-known organizations including UNICEF and the Nike Foundation, the Ms. Foundation for Women and the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, and from dozens of NGOs and lesser-known agencies providing aid to communities around the world.

Participants were helping orphans in Malawi, bringing literacy skills to the Dalit in Nepal, providing scholarships to Mayan girls in Guatemala, and building libraries for the Makulele Community of South Africa. Their ranks included educators and activists, filmmakers and physicians, grant makers and marketers. In addition to education, the organizations dealt with such issues as energy, new technology, gender, and leadership development.

Photo by Mark Tuschman, international freelance photographer, who spoke at the conference about marketing programs with high-impact photography.

“The potential within these walls for real change is inspiring,” said Dr. Donna Blackwell, executive director of AUDACIA. “Exchange ideas, allow yourself to be surprised by new ways of doing things. I’m not going to preach to the choir, but I’m going to ask the choir to sing, together.”

Connections were made rapidly and people grouped and regrouped throughout the breaks, lunches, and after the sessions to network, compare notes, and exchange ideas. Much discussion had to do with best practices and how to measure results, and participants were eager to see how they could learn from each other.

Collaborations were sought between nonprofits and the philanthropic community because finding sources for financial support is such a critical need. Yet as many testified, that support can come with strings attached.

“Philanthropy has become impatient,” said Gayle Peterson of the Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford. “People are looking for impact, and they want it today.” When the desire of the corporation or foundation for measurable results takes precedence over the needs of the local community, the future of a program is in doubt.

Dressed in her native Afghan clothing and a headscarf, Sakena Yacoobi, executive director of the Afghan Institute of Learning, stood and implored the assembly to listen to the local community. “Ask the girl what she needs. If you implement that, you will be successful.” Yacoobi is a respected figure among the leaders in this field, and her words brought applause from the audience.

As the participants made abundantly clear from their own perspectives and with their own on-the-ground experience, getting a girl to school involves a whole host of cultural and social issues that go far beyond providing a book and a roof and a teacher.

There are basic needs like electricity, toilet facilities, and even sanitary pads that if unmet can make going to school an impossibility for a girl. Many girls, even young girls, are responsible for so much of the family support that families are loath to let them leave for school. Then there’s the issue of sexual abuse—there are very real threats to girls’ safety if they leave their homes, threats from boys and men in

cultures where sexual assault on very young girls is common and accepted.

Journalist Katie Couric moderated a panel devoted to the use of communication for social change. One of the panelists, Dr. Abigail E. Disney, a filmmaker whose documentary *Women, War and Peace* was due to air on PBS in the fall, spoke with emotion about the subject: “We have a culture aestheticizing violence, romanticizing war, making violence the meaning of being a man. This culture of violence is actually pushing the agenda, making conflicts and wars happen, with all those repercussions for women and families.”

While everyone agreed that access to an education was a fundamental right, some thought-provoking ideas and paradigm-rattling questions were raised. Kavita Ramdas, executive director of Ripples to Waves: Program on Social Entrepreneurship at Stanford University, questioned the economic rationale for improving girls’ access to education. If educating a girl can improve the conditions of not only her immediate family, but also her community and even her nation, Ramdas wondered if this placed an undue pressure on girls, who are already working, helping raise siblings, and caring for others. “I am worried we are asking too much of these young women,” she said. “We as educators are beginning to ask of them to end poverty.”

And Dr. Nahid Toubia pointed out that education was well and good, but if there were no jobs for an educated girl to move into, what was the point? Women might have a voice, but they can’t get a seat at the table.

But Meera Gandhi, founder of The Giving Back Foundation, was an optimist. She gave multiple personal examples of small interventions that had large, transforming economic results. “When we have women leaders they are pushing the dial in the right direction.”

The consensus, as the forum began to break up on the second day, was that it had been an enormous success, for the participants and for Emma Willard. Colleagues from across the globe had connected, friendships were forged, avenues of collaboration were explored. As Wendy Lesko, with School Girls Unite, put it, “In the face of all these well-established CEOs, that Emma Willard could say, ‘We will be the convener,’ well, it’s audacious!” e

Katie Couric, who moderated a session on communication for social change, meets Emma Willard students.



Photos by Lily Kesselman



This is a systemic cultural problem rooted in ideas of cultural gender roles and race-based classification. Education must be accompanied by broader global change.

Anika Rahman, president and CEO of Ms. Foundation for Women

When they tell us to do it this way, we cannot take the money.

Sakena Yacoobi, Afghan Institute of Learning



Participants and organizers included, left to right: Emily Leys, Room to Read; Trudy Hall; Carol Jenkins, Women's Media Center; Dr. Donna Blackwell, Executive Director of AUDACIA; Kristine Pearson, Lifeline Energy; Jensine Larsen, World Pulse.



If in fact girls' education is such a marvelous tool to get rid of violence, why is it in a country like the United States, every six minutes a woman is sexually assaulted?

Kavita Ramdas, executive director of Ripples to Waves: Program on Social Entrepreneurship at Stanford University



I believe if we educate a lot of girls and don't give them another means to do something with that education, we might be torturing them.

Dr. Nahid Toubia, physician

