

# Helping Others: Finding the Will and the Way

**T**here is a special power that is created when a young person learns to open his or her eyes and discover, in his or her own soul, the living, pulsing, breathing dreams of another. I believe that this discovery is the key to social change for people of any age or background, and it has been my quest to demonstrate this truth to girls and to the world.

It was in the summer of 2007 that this journey began. My idea then was simple: empower girls to fulfill their potential by training them to solve community problems—from sex trafficking to unequal access to education to health services inequities. I, along with the three friends I recruited for the project, soon realized that although no set of goals could include everything we might do—no program or organization or single individual could solve all of the issues we must confront—we could focus our energies on one idea and develop it really well. So we launched our first chapter in India, then Ghana, then Nigeria. Then almost surreally, we started receiving phone calls and emails from girls in other countries, like Turkey and Bangladesh, from girls who were itching to change realities but simply did not know how.

• Sejal Hathi  
• Girls Helping Girls



All photos courtesy Girls Helping Girls



With help from Girls Helping Girls, this community in India was able to build a library to help continue the education of their girls.

**Like a viral message, our mission spread and spread and spread until it became a global movement, burgeoning with a mind of its own.**

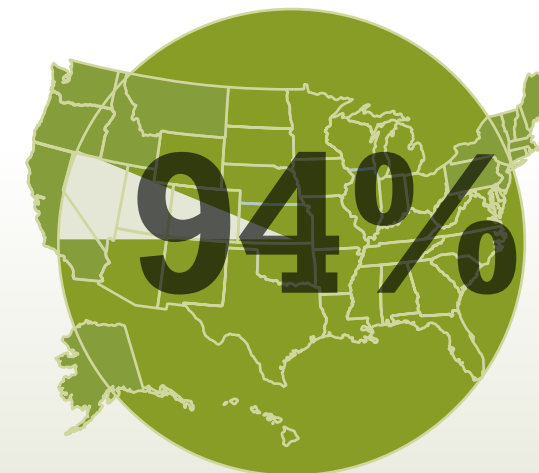
Former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan memorably declared that educating and empowering girls is the key to world peace and the most effective tool for global development. The World Bank demonstrated that investing in women raises economic productivity several-fold, empowering entire communities and countries. And Secretary of State Hillary Clinton this year insisted that the world cannot progress if women and girls are denied their rights and left behind.

And like a viral message, our mission spread and spread and spread until it became a global movement unrestrained by a single director, but burgeoning with a mind of its own. Today, less than three years after first sketching our logo on a piece of scrap paper in the high-school library, our small team has mobilized and trained over 30,000 young women to create innovative and substantive change. With no hired advisors and not even a board of directors, we have provided girls from more than 20 countries the one-on-one mentorship, toolkits, funding and support network to build their own microenterprises, advocate against human rights abuses, construct holistic income-generation programs and create sustainable development initiatives in their communities. And we have raised over \$60,000 to enable girls around the world to go to school.

Yet, seven years after Annan's statement, millions of girls across the globe are not realizing their intrinsic power: Instead of saving the world, they are eroding their potential, falling victim to over 80 percent of human trafficking cases,<sup>1</sup> over 70 percent of illiteracy cases<sup>2</sup> and over 75 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's HIV cases in youth.<sup>3</sup> I could go on and on with the statistics, but the point is that, all across the globe, girls are losing self-dominion to a culture that decrees their duty is to cater to others and to mold themselves into casts set by society. We are trying to change this culture.

Somehow, in some way, what we are doing is working, and girls are opening their eyes to their potential.

I want to tell you about Maria from California, who at age 17 belonged to an immigrant family without experience in the American education system. Maria told me that she often felt lost and hopeless and incapable of achieving anything worthwhile. Her family was falling apart, and her peers were dropping out of school in droves. Maria had become close to a schoolteacher, who showed her a newspaper article about our work to empower girls. Immediately, Maria said, "My attitude changed completely,



**Statistics show that 94% of youth in America feel powerless to make a difference.**

**Girls Helping Girls proves that anything is possible.**



**I strive to empower this movement, by helping the world realize that our strengths lie in one another. We are all a mosaic of gifts, and all of us possess the rich power to shape our globe and assert ourselves as ambassadors for change.**



All photos courtesy Girls Helping Girls



With support from Girls Helping Girls, Mumtaz escaped an abusive relationship and along with her friends, started a food catering service, which allows her to support her family on her own.

**Mumtaz taught me that when we give to others what we care about the most, we allow ourselves to rebuild all that is broken within us, and thus to redefine our own potential.**

because I finally felt like I could do something, be someone." Today, Maria is the first in her family to attend college and, through Girls Helping Girls' social entrepreneurship program, is creating her own initiative to prevent other youth from falling victim to depression and the dropout crisis in her community.

Maria showed me that every region of the world and every girl on this planet has something deep, tangible and worthwhile to offer. We can demonstrate this power to even the most battered girls by helping them to rebaptize their hardships as their strengths and leverage their challenges as their greatest assets for change.

I want to tell you about 25-year-old Mumtaz from India, who just five years ago was beaten constantly by her husband. One of our grassroots partners in India began helping her and providing free daycare for her daughter. When Girls Helping Girls visited Mumtaz's community, we worked with Mumtaz and her friends to develop a sustainable self-help group, training them in business enterprise and loaning the group \$1,500 to create a food catering service. Now, Mumtaz is preparing to move into her own home with her daughter. And to heal from the abuses she suffered from her husband, she is sharing her own story and her own lessons with

other women, thereby preventing them from falling into the same cycle of abuse she experienced.

Mumtaz taught me that when we give to others what we care about the most, rather than suffer more, we allow ourselves to rebuild all that is broken within us, and thus to redefine our own potential.

This is what I call self-transformation. And it is this spirit, this animus of collective self-awareness, that I seek to inspire in the swelling community of girls I work with every day.

I believe that all girls and all youth are a movement: a united and unstoppable force that can eradicate poverty, increase access to healthcare, reverse environmental degradation and solve the world's most pressing problems—if only they are given the tools and the opportunity. I strive to empower this movement, by helping the world realize that our strengths lie in one another and by energizing and equipping potential. We are all a mosaic of gifts, and all of us possess the rich power to shape our globe and assert ourselves as ambassadors for change. If I could do one thing to change the world, it would be to awaken this active consciousness in every individual.

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*Sejal Hathi is a student at Yale University studying biology and international relations. An avid social entrepreneur, Sejal founded the international non-profit Girls Helping Girls at age 15 and, as CEO, has since trained thousands of girls worldwide to incubate entrepreneurial projects addressing global issues in more than 20 countries. Among several other projects, she has additionally served on the boards of several international non-profits, coauthored a monographic book and spoken for and advised political leaders, corporate executives and philanthropists from around the world on youth development issues and the benefits of investing in women and girls.*

