



STEM Education for Women and Girls: Hope In the Face of Reality

by Onyema Benigna Ajuogu

(New York City, 5 October 2015) --- World leaders are here at the United Nations to approve a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that address fundamental challenges for the world in the coming years.

The empowerment of women and the eradication of poverty are among those goals. These two goals are linked by a common solution: access to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics education, also known as STEM.

In general, education for women and girls is one of the fundamental challenges of our generation. Today, more than 62 million girls are not in school.

In poorer societies, women generally have a hard time realizing their potential. For young women in developing countries, STEM education has proven to be a remedy to barriers that stymie equality and perpetuate poverty. Bridging the gap in inequality between men and women can be solved by implementing STEM fields for young women around the globe.

To help expand opportunities for female students in the developing countries, I made a global call to action in support of STEM education for young women and girls in developing countries through the Benignant De Eagle Foundation. My call echoed the words of U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama, who said:

“We can't afford to leave anyone out. We need all hands on deck. And that means clearing hurdles for women and girls as they navigate careers in science, technology, engineering, and math.”

By itself, education – believed by many to be the answer to the plight of starving millions – isn't actually achieving the “promised joy” that many had hoped. Cultural attitudes have to change and systemic barriers have to fall, too.

Cultural taboos regarding educating their girls and some countries lacking basic science and technology opportunities (for anyone) present a challenge. A reluctance to adopt what some see as dangerous modern ideas and discouraging women from working outside the home or farm have become obstacles to the success of well-educated students, female students in particular, who come home to their developing nations.

Too often today, highly-skilled young women and girls return to their homelands eager to use the skills they have learned through solid training and education in useful fields of endeavor, but they find themselves under-employed and unable to use the very skills they have worked so hard to obtain.



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Proudly earning degrees in physics, mathematics, engineering, or computer technology, these high-achievers find themselves stuck working as bank tellers, secretaries, and clerks instead of holding positions worthy of their accomplishments.

Female students, whatever their credentials, face powerful cultural challenges and gender stereotypes that block them from finding employment when they return to their homelands; even in STEM fields – even where there is a severe shortage of skilled labor in the very fields in which they are highly-trained.

So how do we solve this cultural conundrum?

The task in developing regions is not just educating students and placing degrees in their hands. The task of upgrading the workforce in developing nations is also about changing the economic culture in those nations and opening up opportunities for all people – male and female – to take advantage of what they studied at school.

Financing the education of students in STEM fields, and returning them to their home communities will help fill the shortage of skilled workers that developing countries are facing in health, telecommunications, infrastructure and growing tech industries.

Inspiring female students to earn degrees in STEM fields will reduce poverty when they are able to gain better-paying jobs in the booming tech, computer, medical, and engineering sectors.

Look at the advantages women professionals with STEM skills have: (1) They can promote innovative thinking and empowerment. (2) They provide new opportunities for making a difference in their communities. (3) They help build needed infrastructure (roads, railroads, bridges, telecom networks) and new industries (mobile banking, online education, computer coding). (4) They contribute to educational institutions in their home countries to benefit the next generation, and those that will follow.

It's time to promote more STEM degrees for young women and girls and began turning out women in leadership with technical, engineering, and science skills and actually put them to work where their skills best fit in.

The Benignant de Eagle Foundation (BDE) is an innovative non-profit organization dedicated to promoting increased participation in post-secondary education in STEM fields by young women and girls from developing countries around the world.

The Benignant De Eagle Foundation will be raising awareness of the need for post-secondary educational opportunities in STEM for young women and girls in developing countries and will launch a new book, "When Eagles Soar," at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., November, 2015. Watch for more news and information about this event on our web site at <http://www.benignantdeeeagle.org/>.

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