

WORLD AFFAIRS COMMENTARY

by Rahim Kanani

[Interview with Pamela Shifman of the NoVo Foundation on Advancing Women and Girls Worldwide](#) Today through Friday April 15th, the [2011 Global Philanthropy Forum](#) takes place Redwood City CA, for which I interviewed Pamela Shifman, Director of Initiatives for Women and Girls at the NoVo Foundation. Shifman discussed the evolution of the NoVo Foundation, the status and progress of women and girls around the world, risk and philanthropic investment, her advice to President Obama, and much more. This interview is part of a series with participants at the 2011 Global Philanthropy Forum, which can be [found here](#).

Rahim Kanani: What motivated the NoVo Foundation to explicitly focus on the advancement of women and girls around the world?

Pamela Shifman: The NoVo Foundation was founded with the overall mission of creating a more just and balanced world. Jennifer and Peter Buffett, founders and Co-Chairs of NoVo created the NoVo Foundation with the understanding that our current social environment is out of balance—discrimination, inequity and violence are preventing individuals and society from reaching their full potential. As they determined where NoVo would focus its resources, Jennifer and Peter felt strongly about entering a field that was both under-resourced and had significant potential for impact. They saw that girls and women in particular are undervalued and mistreated—but hold untapped potential for creating positive, lasting change in the world.

The NoVo Foundation explicitly focuses on the advancement of women and girls around the world, motivated by the belief that investing in girls and women will help achieve the larger goal of transforming a world out of balance—bringing about real and lasting change for women, men, girls and boys.

Within its two initiatives dedicated to empowering girls and women, NoVo focuses on ending violence against girls and women globally, including in the US and together with the Nike Foundation on empowering adolescent girls living in poverty. In addition, NoVo Foundation supports efforts to build the field of social and emotional learning, to help all children to grow into caring and compassionate adults who have the skills and abilities to work together in an uncertain world.

All of NoVo Foundation's work is dedicated to creating fundamental transformation in society, rather than quick fix solutions.

Rahim Kanani: How would you characterize the global trend in awareness, advocacy and action towards the social, political and economic empowerment of women and girls around the world?

Pamela Shifman: It is encouraging to see increasing awareness, advocacy and action dedicated to girls and women's rights around the world. Organizations such as the Clinton Global Initiative, the United Nations (through UN Women), G(irls) 20, the Nike Foundation, and Women Moving Millions have all made the social, political, and economic empowerment of girls and women a priority in their work. For example, the Clinton Global Initiative made

empowering women and girls a central track in its 2010 annual meeting and recently announced it will do the same in 2011. In creating UN Women, (the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women) in July 2010, UN member states took a historic step to meet the UN's commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women.

While these developments are significant, the fact remains that the situation for the world's girls and women remains dire and the commitment to addressing inequality, precarious. While girls and women comprise more than half the world's population, we are not even close to seeing the levels of commitment and dedication that are required to truly bring about lasting change for the world's most marginalized girls and women.

Violence against women is a good example of a problem requiring vastly more attention, resources and dedication. We know that an estimated 1 out of 3 women will be beaten, raped, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. This problem crosses geography, class and community. In no country are girls and women able to live free from violence. And not only does violence have an impact on every girl or woman who survives it, we also know that the mere fear or threat of violence shapes a girl's or woman's access to opportunity and self-determination.

Despite increased attention to this problem, the numbers of victims remains staggering. Moreover, the official government response remains insufficient at best and harmful at worst. For example In 102 countries there are no specific legal provisions against domestic violence, and marital rape is not a prosecutable offence in at least 53 nations.

While increased attention is an excellent step in the right direction, we need to be vigilant in asking the tough questions: how much have budgets been transformed so that girls and women are at the center of investments? Are the most marginalized girls and women being reached or simply ignored? Are governments meeting their international obligations to gender equality? Are funding institutions prioritizing adolescent girls? And in particular, we need to ask ourselves if we are supporting efforts that position girls and women as change agents who will lead the movement to empower themselves and their communities.

In summary, the global trend of increased awareness, advocacy, and action to empower women and girls signifies great progress. However, it is only the beginning of fundamentally changing how societies and institutions value girls and women. As the great Bella Abzug, former US Member of Congress and leading activist for women's rights once said, "We have the words, now we need the music- and the music is action."

Rahim Kanani: In terms of organizational distinctiveness, what role does the NoVo Foundation play within this movement that pays special attention to women and girls?

Pamela Shifman: As one of the largest private foundations whose explicit mission is to empower girls and women worldwide, NoVo sees its role as one of a catalyst and risk taker. NoVo is willing to invest in yet-unproven, but promising initiatives at the grassroots level. Equally important we do not expect progress to happen overnight. The efforts of much of the work we support may only show results over the long term, but each of our grantee partners is working towards achieving lasting and true transformation in society. We support our partners in

being innovative and forward thinking as they seek to change political and social structures that prevent girls and women from reaching their full potential.

We are also very dedicated to building partnerships with funder colleagues and leveraging our respective resources and expertise in order to achieve advances for girls and women. For example, the NoVo Foundation has invested more than \$100 million in a long-term collaboration with the Nike Foundation to support the “Girl Effect”. It is highly unusual for a private foundation to invest in a corporate foundation. However, the NoVo Foundation entered the partnership confident that our impact on the lives of women and girls would be greater if we consolidated our resources and developed a shared strategic vision for the world’s girls.

Together with the Nike Foundation, we work with partners to build the case for why multi-lateral organizations, private donors, and government agencies should prioritize girls. This partnership draws on our shared passion for the girl effect; it leverages the strengths of our individual organizations; and consolidates complementary efforts so that we can focus even more resources where they are most needed.

Finally, NoVo has made the choice to invest both locally and globally because we know that gender inequality and violence against girls and women are problems that plague countries and communities in the global north as well as in the global south. We know that the world is interconnected and that the marginalization of girls is intolerable wherever it occurs. At NoVo, we believe in thinking globally and locally; and acting globally and locally.

Rahim Kanani: As an important global voice on philanthropy and development, are we moving in the right direction, or is the sector by and large too risk-averse to experiment with new, innovative, and perhaps more effective development models?

Pamela Shifman: NoVo’s approach to philanthropy is greatly influenced by Peter’s father, investor Warren Buffett. His advice to Jennifer and Peter was to invest for the long term in logical and practical ways, but not to be overly focused on the most popular strategies. He advised Jennifer and Peter to look for “undervalued assets” as solutions – places where tremendous value is held, but not necessarily recognized.

With this advice, Peter and Jennifer decided to invest in the “undervalued assets” of women and girls. They see their focus on women and girls as an overlooked area in philanthropy, but ripe with opportunity to achieve deep, systematic change. Even the name of the foundation – NoVo – suggests a different philosophy. NoVo is Latin meaning to change, alter or invent, and the idea behind it guides the foundation’s work to create transformational change in the world. We support grantee partners with ideas that show unusual promise for positively impacting the lives of girls and women. We also seek out change agents who constantly challenge themselves and others to envision a better world for girls, women and their communities.

More than anything else, however, NoVo is committed to thinking differently about measuring impact and achieving lasting social change. NoVo Foundation’s ultimate goal is to support a transformation in society from a culture of domination and exploitation to one of equality and partnership. Given this aim, NoVo Foundation thinks about its work in the long-term, rather than

over short grant terms. We recognize that one cannot instantly measure social change progress, or attach numbers to work that seeks to create deep changes in the fabric of our society. Our approach to philanthropy and our investments in individuals and communities (who are the ones who make the changes and know their needs and solutions best), allows for gradual, yet systematic change, and understands that achieving true transformation is not necessarily a linear process and that long term support is needed.

Rahim Kanani: What are some of the ways in which we can, and should, include men and boys in this conversation about women and girls?

Pamela Shifman: It is crucial that boys and men are engaged as full partners in the conversation about empowering girls and women, and in particular, ending violence against girls and women. Men and boys have a critical role to play in this area. In fact, until boys and men take responsibility to end violence against girls and women and to create a world based on equality, we will not be successful in our work.

The important role of men and boys in advancing gender equality is becoming increasingly clear to activists and donors alike. Many donors have made “male involvement” programs a centerpiece of their efforts to end violence against women internationally. While this focus is critically important, it is vital that efforts be done in a manner, which truly promotes gender equality and does not reinforce existing gender hierarchies. It has been disturbing to see programs around the world spring up which have supported men to organize with virtually no consultation by women in the process, in a manner which has contributed to the ongoing disempowerment of girls and women.

While there are some problematic initiatives, there are also some excellent initiatives and organizations that are focused on involving boys and men in ending violence against women, that are girl and women-centered and focus on accountability, equality and inclusion. A Call to Men, International Rescue Committee and Family Violence Prevention Fund for example, have developed innovative programs designed to fundamentally address inequality of women and girls through engaging boys and men as part of the solution. I recently visited IRC’s program in West Africa, Women and Girls’ Rebuilding Nations, where I saw firsthand the impact of creative, thoughtful rights based programming that engages boys and men as partners in the struggle to end violence against girls and women. The IRC programmatic work with men is not done on *behalf* of women, but in *partnership* with women. This has made all the difference.

As men and boys take a more active role in creating change, girls and women must remain at the center.

Rahim Kanani: If President Obama granted you an audience for ten minutes and was seeking counsel on the most effective model to empower women and girls as primary agents of change around the world, what would be your advice?

Pamela Shifman: My advice to President Obama would be to look to the “Girl Effect” as a powerful approach to empower girls and women as primary agents of change around the world.

I would tell President Obama that putting adolescent girls at the center of development policies would change the fate not only of girls themselves, but their communities, countries, and the world. The Girl Effect focuses on adolescent girls, believing they are the most powerful force for transformative change.

The girl effect is the unique potential of adolescent girls to break the cycle of poverty and create a more just and balanced world. In impoverished communities, lack of resources drives girls out of school and into early marriage, childbirth, and HIV infection at rates dramatically higher than boys. The results are irreversible for girls, and devastating to communities caught in intergenerational cycles of poverty. Yet when girls gain a different path—supported, educated, and empowered—everyone benefits. Improve a girls' life and many more lives benefit: her brothers, sisters, future children and grandchildren. As an educated mother, an active, productive citizen and a prepared employee, she can break the cycle of poverty for families and nations.

I would call President Obama's attention to the fact that despite their potential, girls today face overwhelming invisibility, ignorance and inaction. In fact, less than two cents of every international development dollar is directed to her; 98 percent of funding goes elsewhere. The girl effect supports innovative programs that demonstrate the positive impact on communities and countries when resources are driven towards girls. By supporting girls in areas such as health education, rights-based participation, and as economic agents, the girl effect is proving the belief that if we "invest in a girl, she'll do the rest."

President Obama may already be familiar with the Girl Effect from Malia and Sasha but I would definitely advise the whole first family to check out: www.girleffect.org for more information.

Rahim Kanani: As you look ahead into the next decade, what challenges and opportunities are on the horizon with regard to not only empowering women and girls around the world, but also the field of international development more broadly?

Pamela Shifman: As Secretary of State Hilary Clinton recently said, "I believe that the rights of women and girls is the unfinished business of the 21st century."

I agree with Secretary State of Clinton. We have a unique opportunity before us. The dialogue has shifted so that the importance of empowering women and girls has a much more prominent place in the field of international development. Now we must ensure that empowering women and girls does not become a "trendy project of the moment," but rather an ongoing effort that places girls and women at the center of global development.

Putting girls and women at the center of development requires us to question our assumptions about how we do development. Putting girls at the center requires us to look deeply at our systems and how we make them work for the most disadvantaged. Putting girls and women at the center presents an opportunity to bring in new partners, create new modes of collaboration and invest in sustained efforts to create the kind of world in which every girl, boy, man and woman can thrive. The opportunities are endless, but we need the political will, energy and determination to shift the paradigm from domination and exploitation to partnership and collaboration giving credence to half the world's population- women and girls.

If the International Development community truly listens and supports girls and women's voices, knowledge, involvement, safety and self-determination to lead the world in new directions we will see and realize enormous gains and sustainable progress. We're betting everything on it.

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- Pamela Shifman
Director, Initiatives for Women and Girls

NoVo Foundation
Latin: change, alter, invent

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