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Open for Business!

For the past six months, our series has circulated working papers and policy briefs on a variety of topics, from the role of gender in artisanal and small-scale mining, to the impact of child care subsidies on African women's labor market outcomes. All of these works published to date have showcased the results of research funded by the [Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women \(GrOW\)](#) program. Starting September 1, 2017, our series will accept working paper submissions from authors outside of the GrOW program!

We invite manuscript submissions on a variety of topics related to women's economic empowerment and economic growth. Submissions must be well-written and concisely formulated, and should be of interest to researchers and policy makers. There are many benefits of submitting a working paper to our series. Authors will receive:

- Support for copy-editing, including: proofreading, formatting and bibliographic checking
- Assistance with paper presentation and data visualization
- Optional double blind peer-review process
- The opportunity to showcase your research in an online, open-access platform and get visibility before the paper appears in a scholarly journal

For more information, visit: <http://grow.research.mcgill.ca/?page=submit>

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Feature Piece

Girls' Education - Of Course!

By Wanda Bedard

What can claim to decrease infant and maternal mortality rates, decrease child marriage, increase labour outcomes, decrease the incidence of HIV/AIDS, malaria and more, help mitigate the impact of climate change, promote more stable and democratic societies, increase a country's GDP and ensure the next generation of children goes to school? Girls' education – of course! This is why the [60 Million Girls Foundation](#) is dedicated to supporting girls' education in developing countries.

Access to school has dramatically increased in the 11 years that our foundation has been operating, with close to 90% of children around the world now enrolled at the primary level. Of course, the last 10% of children will be the hardest to reach.

So while access has dramatically increased in the last 15-20 years, one important part of schooling has gone badly missing: *learning*. Improving learning outcomes is part of the Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning.

The low quality of education in many parts of the developing world is well documented: lack of trained teachers, lack of basic school infrastructure, very high student/teacher ratios, lack of textbooks and classroom teaching aids. A field visit to northern Sierra Leone in 2013 made it abundantly clear: the majority of students in grade 5 and 6 that we met still couldn't read or write a complete sentence. Without literacy, all other subjects suffer. That visit became a turning point for us.

We set up a research and development group within the foundation to scour the world for best practices to improve learning at the primary and secondary levels for children in rural areas. Starting with the work of Dr. Sugata Mitra and his 'Hole in the Wall' educational approach, which combines technology and self-directed learning,

we spent four years researching practices where technology was being used to educate girls and boys, to see if this could be implemented in the isolated rural areas we work in with our partners.

The challenges for using tech in a non-tech world? No electricity, no IT specialists, no internet access, no tech hardware, dusty and humid conditions - and cost.

Ultimately, we developed a model that is low cost, easily implemented and customized to the community's learning needs: the Mobile Learning Lab (MLL).

The MLL is comprised of three elements: a solar charging system, 7" tablets and a wifi server called the Rachel Plus (by World Possible). The Rachel Plus can be custom loaded with up to 500GB of open source academic content. Each child is given a tablet to use in an afterschool setting coordinated by a local community member who charges the equipment and distributes the tablets to the students. Then the students are on their own to work on whatever academic subject, game, video or interactive program they like.

Our initial pilot projects and pre-trial have shown an enthusiastic reception by the students who use the tablets to complement their classroom learning. The students receive the tablets but no instructions – hence no need for teachers or IT specialists. Our studies have shown that it takes a student from 1 to 3 minutes to learn how to turn on the tablet and start using the programs for the first time. It then takes about 15 minutes for students to figure out how to connect to the Rachel Plus content – due in great part to the peer learning effect of the students working in small groups. And then they're off! Learning what is of interest to them: English, math, science, music, geography, history, agriculture, health and more – through videos, books and interactive programs.

Since all the content is pre-loaded on the Rachel Plus unit and it operates on wifi, an IT specialist is not needed to oversee and operate the MLL. Content can be updated and customized at any time by taking the Rachel Plus to a site with

internet connection and simply downloading new content in the field.

We have done baseline testing for math, literacy and non-cognitive skills like intrinsic motivation, self-confidence and level of aspiration, to evaluate the impact of access to the MLL on grade 5 and 6 students. Beyond the academic content learned, we feel strongly about the medium and long term potential impact the MLL can have on students' non-cognitive skills. It is those skills along with improved literacy which may keep them engaged and interested in learning beyond the limits of what is available to them only in school.

The MLL is a great complement to the traditional school system to improve learning outcomes in a fun, meaningful, customized and cost effective way, in those areas where it is needed most. It also has the potential to support teacher training and be a valuable source of information for women and the whole community. The possibilities - like these children's potential - are endless!

To learn more, visit: www.60milliongirls.org



Wanda Bedard is founder and president of the Montreal-based 60 million girls foundation. She is a McGill graduate and a member of the Institute for the Study of International Development's advisory board. Apart from her volunteer work for the foundation, Wanda is an entrepreneur in the manufacturing sector.

Q&A with the Editors of *Obligations and Omissions*

By Kate Grantham

I spoke with Rebecca Tiessen (RT) and Stephen Baranyi (SB) about the motivation and process behind their new edited collection, *Obligations and Omissions: Canada's Ambiguous Actions on Gender Equality* (2017). The book examines the erasure and instrumentalisation of gender in Canada's international policy approach under the Harper government.

Q: How did this collection come about? What was your motivation for putting it together?

RT: Stephen has influenced my thinking a great deal over the years, reminding me of the importance of insider activists within government who continue to push for gender equality programming even when some of the official policy and approach (under the Harper government) shifted away from gender equality and toward a 'women as vulnerable victims' rhetoric. From these discussions, Stephen and I concluded that case studies were needed to show (more empirically and in a more nuanced way) the range of issues and considerations for deconstructing successes and failures in gender equality programming - thematically and in particular country contexts.

SB: One of the great things about this collaborative project is how we have learned from each other along the way. Rebecca certainly sharpened my concerns about the erasure of "gender" from the official lexicon during the Harper years. Drawing on our respective networks, we pulled together a diverse group of authors to look at these issues through different (critical feminist) theoretical lenses, using different research methodologies, from looking at big data to doing deep case studies. All this on a minimal budget, in a tough policy environment.



Q: Speaking of policy, in the book you focus on the role of gender in Canada's foreign and domestic policy in the period from 2006-2015. What were the challenges and opportunities associated with writing about the Harper government's approach at a time when they still held power?

RT: I would say that writing about this during the Harper government was easier (an opportunity rather than a challenge) because the impact was so readily apparent. So much has changed (at least rhetorically and in terms of policy framing) under the Trudeau government. In some ways, it is hard to believe that we suffered such significant setbacks in official policy approach for that 2006-2015 time frame. The challenges of writing critically about government policy, thankfully, are possible for academics and when NGOs, CSOs, and other groups felt muzzled out of fear of losing funding, academics had to step up. I feel fortunate to be in a position where I could write critically about the missed opportunities and problematic discourse, and also to celebrate those practitioners who continued to push for gender equality when it was difficult to do so.

SB: Rebecca is absolutely right that we were able to pull this off during the Harper years because our universities have maintained a degree of financial and political independence from the federal state. Nonetheless, several chapters document how authors faced enormous difficulties in accessing reliable data due to the government's overly restrictive access to information practices. That is one of the areas flagged for policy change in our conclusions.

Q: Can the framework of "obligations and omissions" be applied today with respect to the Trudeau government's actions on gender equality?

RT: The language of obligations is of particular relevance under the Trudeau government at this juncture. The introduction of a feminist international assistance policy very squarely puts the idea of obligations on the table.

With such a powerful rhetorical commitment, all eyes are focused on ensuring these sentiments translate into practice and to ensure gender equality remains central to development, peace and security efforts. In other words, the obligation to translate rhetoric into reality has never been more real and the possibility for transformative gender equality programming has never been more possible. The question of omissions remains to be seen and it may be too early to evaluate. Under the Harper government (as many chapters in our book show) there were several important missed opportunities (such as the maternal health platform as an opportunity to provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and gender equality programming to facilitate women's empowerment and improved decision-making power). Such omissions serve as useful resource for the present government – a type of 'lessons learned' that can guide future practice and hopefully avoid ongoing challenges, while building on effective practices.

SB: It is fortunate that our book came out during the summer the Trudeau government announced its feminist foreign policy. The immediate opportunity and challenge is to ensure that our analyses and recommendations are heard and maybe even taken into account by Global Affairs Canada. We are working on that right now. As Rebecca says, we also need to continue this research to track what happens in practice -- including the possible risks of a new feminist conditionality, which our colleague Stephen Brown is already blogging about.

Q: What new research or projects are you working on now?

RT: I continue to work closely with the Women, Peace and Security Network in Canada to encourage policy-makers to develop a strong Canadian National Action Plan (CNAP) on Women, Peace and Security. I have had several opportunities to meet alongside civil society organizations and to consult with policy-makers in the development of this very important policy

document. I look forward to reviewing and evaluating the CNAP when it is made available (probably in the fall of 2017). In related work, I am documenting some of the opportunities (and challenges) of scholar-practitioner collaborations in Canada as they pertain to gender equality programming. These studies highlight the importance of next generation training and the role of students in advancing scholarly and policy-oriented feminist debates.

SB: My follow-up work complements Rebecca's policy work. First, I am working with certain Global Affairs Canada country programs, namely Haiti and South Sudan, to help them sensibly strengthen the gender dimensions of their programming in those fragile environments. Second, I continue working with a variety of stakeholders in Haiti, to revive the implementation of the 2015 National Policy and Action Plan for Equality between Women and Men (which Canada supported, under the Harper government ...) and link it to initiatives in other sectors - such as the new Police Development Plan and the Law for the integration of persons with disabilities. Several of our graduate students are involved in this work but there are opportunities for others to get involved where it matters most, on the ground in these fragile but dynamic contexts!

Obligations and Omissions (2017) is available now, and can be purchased online through the McGill-Queen's University Press website.

Rebecca Tiessen is an Associate Professor and Deputy Director in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa.

Stephen Baranyi is an Associate Professor in the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa

Insights from McGill's Global Need for Formal Childcare Conference

By Kate Grantham



On August 11, 2017, researchers and practitioners gathered in Montreal to discuss the 'Global Need for Formal Childcare' as part of a one-day conference hosted by McGill University's Centre on Population Dynamics. The conference was part of the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program, jointly funded by IDRC, the Hewlett Foundation, and the UK Government's Department for International Development.

Shelley Clark, Director at the Centre for Population Dynamics (featured above), delivered the opening remarks at the conference, which was organized into panels centered on the themes of child care use and alternative arrangements, the influence of child care on women's labour force participation and economic empowerment, and the impacts of child care on child and maternal health.

Conference participants shared results and recommendations from research on child care being conducted around the world, including in Canada, China, India, Kenya, Nepal and the United States. Among these presentations were two McGill-led GrOW studies, including one study on improving childcare options to promote maternal



employment outcomes in Nairobi slums, and another on the influence of affordable daycare on women's empowerment in India. Findings from an IDRC-supported project on China's care economy were also shared.

Presenters analyzed the need for affordable and quality child care through the lens of equity, highlighting that it is marginalized groups of women – indigenous women, recent migrants, and women living in low-income contexts or informal (slum) settlements, for instance – who disproportionately lack access to services. Even when there is some form of government or NGO subsidized child care in place locally, cost continues to be the most significant barrier for these groups. Presenters argued that carefully designed empirical research is crucial to address the issue of formal child care, and called for the creation of better research instruments and data sets to study this topic.

In the final panel of the day, policy implications were addressed by practitioners from Canadian and international NGOs and research centers. On the question of how to move the child care agenda forward, presenters again emphasized the need for empirical research on women and child care to provide the basis for policy making, rather than false assumptions about, for instance, men's roles in child rearing, or the availability of kin support for childcare in developing countries. On the question of how to improve outcomes for women's access to child care, labor force participation, and maternal and child wellbeing, speakers argued that improved research-to-policy translation was essential, and could be helped by increasing the capacity of policy-makers to understand and interpret scholarly research and results.

For more information on this event or to watch a video of the entire conference proceedings, visit: <http://www.mcgill.ca/popcentre/research/cpd-team-research/conference-global-need-formal-child-care>

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*The **GrOW Research Series** brings together scholarly research on women's economic empowerment and growth in low-income countries, and provides a conceptual and empirical basis for policy-making. It is also the official research platform for the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) program. This series is housed at the Institute for the Study of International Development (ISID) at McGill University in Montreal.*

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