



Global Girl Leading: Investing in Girls' Education

By Dr V J Ogden, CEO, Mulberry Schools Trust

**“Investing in girls’ secondary education
is one of the most transformative
development strategies.”**

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Global Girl Leading: Investing in Girls' Education

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Global Girl Leading is a Mulberry Changemaker programme for girls aged 11-18. It is dedicated to promoting equality for girls through rich educational opportunities that connect girls across the world, bringing them together as a sisterhood, advocating for each other. Global Girl Leading is a leadership development programme 'by girls, for girls'. Supported by teachers, girls together learn to lead change. They co-create learning activities which include negotiation skills, teamwork, risk-taking and campaigning. They are given platforms and coaching to make their voices heard. Through this programme, they experience the power of successfully influencing change, learning resilience and finding self-confidence.



Context

Global Girl Leading exists because of the misogyny and inequality faced by girls and women across the world. The challenges range in their character and shape in every country: from casual sexism, financial inequity and career barriers to physical abuse including rape, violence and femicide. These challenges intersect with other forms of discrimination, such that for some, the ‘glass ceiling’ becomes double and triple glazed. Investing purposefully in the education of girls, equipping them with the skills, experience and confidence to navigate powerfully the obstacles, is transformative for individuals, communities and countries.

There is a well-rehearsed hypothesis¹ that argues educating girls well improves economic prosperity and security. The business case is strong. McKinsey & Co pointed this out in March 2016, in an article entitled ‘*How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*’². Empowering women improves international health, security and prosperity. Yet, worldwide, the UN states “Gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched in every society”³. Spheres of work, home, healthcare, political voice and basic education all reflect this. Violence against women is prevalent. The human rights of girls are violated in many ways, including sexual abuse and the withholding of education.

One in five girls (over 100 million) currently experience child marriage (child marriage among boys is one sixth that of girls)⁴. Four million girls annually are at risk of FGM (female genital mutilation)⁵. One in twenty girls (13 million) have experienced forced sex in the last year⁶ and 132 million girls are currently out of school with only 49% of countries having achieved gender parity in primary education, the gap widening to 24% in upper secondary⁷. These are just a few of the myriad ways in which girls and women experience discrimination and harm in contemporary global life.

1 www.unicef.org/education/girls-education 2/3/23

2 <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

3 www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women 2/3/23

4 www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage 2/3/23

5 www.unicef.org/protection/female-genital-mutilation 2/3/23

6 www.unwomen.org/en/node/36060 2/3/23

7 www.unicef.org/education/girls-education /2/3/23



In the UK, the issues for girls are still widespread, despite better protections than in many places. Whilst there is textual difference in girls' situations globally, often linked to the economic and political context in different countries, nevertheless concerning inequalities remain. Even in some schools.

The 'Me Too'⁸ grass roots movement concerning sexual violence against women went viral in 2017, sparking a range of high-profile responses, including 'Everyone's Invited'⁹, founded by Soma Sara in 2020 in the UK. Everyone's Invited published the testimonies of girls' experience of a normalised culture of sexual abuse connected to schools, colleges and universities. The extent of the problem that was revealed caused some shock. Several well-known school communities were exposed by girls publishing their experiences of abuse, generally in spaces unsupervised by teachers or parents, at parties for example. Girls made the point that such behaviours were known by adults and yet no action was ever taken because wider society had normalised a climate of sexual harassment and assault.

Ofsted in 2021 carried out a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges¹⁰, publishing findings of significant concern about the experience of girls. 90% of girls surveyed said that being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they did not want to see happened a lot or sometimes. 92% of girls said that sexist name-calling happened a lot or sometimes. Sexual violence occurred and when it happened, it usually took place in unsupervised spaces outside school, although some girls experienced unwanted touching in school corridors. It is noteworthy that it took the widespread social media exposure of high-profile schools to trigger a response when the problem had been long-standing.

8 <https://metoomvmt.org>

9 www.everyonesinvited.uk

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges/review-of-sexual-abuse-in-schools-and-colleges>

'It's Just Everywhere' was published by the NEU and UK Feminista in 2017. It was a study of the prevalence of sexual abuse in schools involving 1058 girls, with over a third of female students personally experiencing some form of sexual harassment at a mixed sex school. Girls in the report describe an environment of abuse ranging from use of sexist language to unwanted touching. This is despite a raft of statutory requirements on schools to safeguard children and young people which includes sex and relationships education, PSHEE (Personal, Social, Health, Economic Education) and legislation.¹¹ The normalisation of the sexual abuse of women has meant that girls' experience of this in co-educational (mixed sex) school settings has been overlooked.

The Children's Commissioner, Dame Rachel De Souza¹², has recently taken on tech companies about the experience of girls and online pornography, which they receive unsolicited. Sexting, grooming, revenge porn, sexual exploitation and abduction are all issues that girls variously encounter. As a Headteacher of a girls' school, I have dealt with so many situations where girls have been targeted in this way by boys and older men. Whilst there are some good officers, the police response has often (until recently) been poor. I had to fight hard to retain a dedicated schools liaison officer simply because – I was told – boys were the priority. Sexual abuse – and the lack of protection from sexual abuse because of a culture in which it is normalised – is only one element of a social structure that discriminates against girls, although it is the most disturbing.

Returning to the global picture, income divide, economic and social infrastructure, climate, technology and security influence different manifestations of entrenched sexism but there are common international trends. Thematically, these trends are consistent with:

- Unequal access to education and healthcare
- Harms from abuse and violence, including femicide
- Barriers to economic rights and decent employment
- Under-representation in leadership
- Disenfranchisement in governance
- Restrictions on self-determination

¹¹ Keeping Children Safe in Education

¹² <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/Evidence-on-pornographys-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children.pdf>

The spectrum on which UK girls encounter these issues is different compared to many of their global sisters. However, they are common live matters, and the shared lived experience of the challenges creates a unifying force against them. Global Girl Leading is built on the belief that girls are powerful voices for each other when given the platform, the visibility and the support to lead and make lasting change for themselves. Through a variety of activities and experiences built into a coherent programme of work, Global Girl Leading feeds the intellectual capital of girls on these issues. It promotes girls' agency, providing space for rich engagement and deep learning from each other. It invests in the specialised education of girls, teaching them how to navigate the challenges in the interests of a true partnership of equals - girls with boys, women with men - creating a healthier, more secure and more spiritually and materially prosperous world for all.



The Origins of Global Girl Leading

Global Girl Leading has its origins in a successful student-led project called 'Girl Leading', founded in 2016 by girls at Mulberry School for Girls in response to the visit by First Lady Michelle Obama in 2015 to the school and the invitation subsequently to visit her at the White House. It was a legacy project to spread the privilege of those visits beyond the school's own community.

Girl Leading was funded by Children in Need and was led by girls experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. A year-long programme centred around a leadership camp, it brought 60 girls together from 10 schools across the UK, all entitled to the pupil premium. Supported by school staff, a working party of girls wrote curriculum and training materials and organised workshops for students prior to a three-day residential experience at Kilve Court in Somerset. Away from distraction and working collaboratively, girls learned a variety of leadership skills from different women from a range of business and third sector organisations, and they undertook activities to develop voice, confidence, critical thinking, negotiation skills, campaigning and teamwork. Girls reinforced the skills they learned by leading a campaign of their choice for six weeks, presenting the results at a plenary conference.

The evaluation and impact report¹³ showed real successes, not least improvement in girls' confidence, capacity for leadership, increased awareness of the wider world of adulthood for women and how to navigate challenge. Girl Leading was focused on the UK, but participants became quickly aware that the issues spread beyond national boundaries and that there were common experiences for girls across the globe.

¹³ <http://www.mulberryschoolsfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Girl-Leading-Impact-Report-2017.pdf>



The power of digital connectivity presented an opportunity to go global in 2018, bringing girls together on these issues from across the world. Global Girl Leading went first in October 2019 to Southeast Asia, following visits by the Headteacher to Singapore and Malaysia in 2017 and 2018 to speak on girls' education. The students took a version of Girl Leading to the schools they visited and worked collaboratively with girls in those countries. During the Covid pandemic of 2020, Mulberry girls followed up by convening a digital experience for their UK and global sisters. The first online, live streamed global summit for Global Girl Leading took place on International Day of the Girl 2020 and was attended by girls in schools in the UK, Singapore, Malaysia and Israel. The Director of Mrs Obama's 'Girls' Opportunity Alliance', Tiffany Drake, also attended as did Jude Kelly, founder of WOW (Women of the World). A second online summit followed a year later in 2021 with similar patterns and attendance.

In 2022, Mulberry commenced partnership work with Her Excellency, Josefa Gonzales-Blanco, Ambassador to the UK for Mexico focused on their shared interest in the education of girls and women. Now the Covid pandemic has been declared over, it is possible to renew Global Girl Leading and strengthen the mission to create lasting positive change for girls and women. Indeed, in view of the 2021 Ofsted review and the other reports referred to already, the need is urgent.



Purpose and Theory of Change

It is important to set out what Global Girl Leading is purposed to do and how it expects change to be achieved. The purpose of Global Girl Leading is:

1. To empower girls with the knowledge, skills, experience, and capacity to deal constructively and powerfully with gender inequality and discrimination when they encounter it. Global Girl Leading supports girls' intellectual and personal development so that, as far as possible, they can achieve self-determination and autonomy, having the power of choice in their lives and the ability to live as they should wish.
2. To build a global sisterhood of girls advocating for each other on the issues that affect them across the world. Girls will lead the change they want to see in context-responsive ways, with an ethos of mutuality and reciprocity at the heart.

Global Girl Leading is led 'by girls, for girls' on the issues that matter to them, supported and scaffolded by school staff. It has a theory of change that works towards gender equality through investment in girls and their agency. Whilst cultural change can be glacial, equipping girls to be changemakers themselves will benefit them individually, and collectively lots of smaller changes can add up to a bigger shift. Global Girl leading's theory of change is as follows:

The Problem: Girls' well-being, autonomy and power of choice are negatively impacted by a global social framework that preferences males. This not only places limitations on their freedoms and rights, but it also affects their safety and security. Change – equality for girls and women – must happen but it is slow and fraught with institutional barriers. In the meantime, the negative impact on girls' lives is considerable. Through education with targeted activity, girls can be given the tools both to encounter, challenge and overcome many of the obstacles to their freedoms. Girls can also be empowered to lead the change they want to see for themselves, and for other girls, across the globe.

Inputs: A year-long programme of learning and training led by girls, for girls, co-constructed with school staff, and which has an educational framework focused on developing:

- Confidence
- Creativity and critical thinking
- Leadership capacity
- Learning about the issues that affect girls and women worldwide and how others have met and overcome the challenges

This model of education is based on that used successfully at Mulberry School for Girls for over a decade and a half to enhance formal curriculum provision. Activities include:

1. A year-long programme of training and development led by girls, for girls from participating schools. The training is focused on preparation for a summit – in person and virtual – on International Day of the Girl. The summit brings girls together from several countries to consider the world issues that affect them.
2. A visit to another country to build relationships with partner schools and community groups for girls and women. This is to create understanding of context and to cement a strong relationship between the organisations in question. There is then an exchange visit between girls in the UK and those abroad.
3. A final plenary summit, streamed live online from a prestigious venue at which 400 girls from participating schools can be present. It has access to other girls at delegates' base school back home and to girls who may switch in independently from anywhere in the world. There is an associated web-based resource, available freely to all so that the programme can be replicated by those who want to use it with girls, thereby multiplying the possibilities for dissemination.

Immediate Outcomes: Girls who participate in Global Girl Leading will have:

- Better knowledge of the barriers facing girls and women across the world, as well as a better understanding of how others have successfully dealt with the challenges
- Developed a range of attributes, skills and capacities to help them encounter discrimination and handle it confidently, powerfully and constructively
- Used the platform of Global Girl Leading to make their voices heard on human rights for girls and women

- Become agents of change in a variety of ways, negotiating the best outcomes for themselves and other girls and women
- Participated in a global sisterhood of girls, advocating for each other's rights and equalities in an ethos of mutuality and reciprocity

Long-term Outcomes: Global Girl Leading will have:

- Raised awareness of the need to invest in girls' education – that girls' needs require a specialised response rather than being subsumed into a school culture that reflects the male generic
- Supported cohorts of girls to develop the attributes, skills and capacities that they need to become leaders of change for themselves and others
- Helped more women into key positions of leadership in national and global institutions, so they have decision-making power and control on key issues affecting girls and women
- Achieved a decrease in sexual abuse and violence against women and girls
- Achieved an increase in the number of girls in secondary education across the world

The Overall Outcome: To contribute to the creation of gender equality by ensuring girls have the power of choice in their lives, the personal resources to use it and are empowered to lead change for themselves and others.

The education framework referred to in this theory of change has been tried and tested over many years in East London at Mulberry School for Girls. It is fundamental to the approach of Global Girl Leading.

The Mulberry Education Framework for Girls

The education framework is built on the development of four key attributes that, when combined, create a powerful set of tools upon which to draw when effectively navigating the challenges of adulthood.

Confidence: Confidence to navigate challenge is important. Girls must be resilient, secure in their identity and able to advocate for themselves and others. Girls must have voice and visibility. They must have opportunities to practice self-expression, to define who they are and how they relate to family, community and the wider world. They must be able to explore for themselves the intersections of ethnicity, faith, class, gender and other aspects of identity that help them to develop their sense of self in the context of the social roles and responsibilities they want to take on. Global Girl Leading provides a supportive environment in which girls can do this safely, learning to know who they are and develop constructive resilience to challenge.

Creativity: Being creative allows girls to manage many different situations effectively. Having the capacity to imagine helps you to become self-aware and aware of the lived experience of others. It supports the development of criticality, promoting the ability to be analytical and inventive. These capabilities underpin negotiation skills – essential to successful adult life in all sorts of scenarios concerning rights and power. Creativity allows girls to be adaptable, empathetic, open to change and willing to work constructively with others. Global Girl Leading provides opportunities for girls to work in teams and to problem solve, with the ability to be enterprising and the capacity to unpack arguments and respond quickly.

Leadership: Leadership takes many forms. It is important that girls know this – and that they know which situations require different kinds of leadership response. They also need to know their strengths in leadership and to have the opportunity to practise. Knowing the distinctions between hero leadership, co-leadership, collective action and service leadership allows girls to see how leadership operates in a variety of ways and that each leadership type requires different strengths. Leadership takes place in personal, community, national and international spaces so girls need scaffolded opportunities to test their capabilities in different ways. Global Girl Leading makes this possible through its programmes.

Love of Learning: Qualifications provide part of a route to economic independence. Reading, writing, mathematics and other forms of knowledge – agriculture, technology, economy, healthcare, business, finance, law, engineering, arts and media and industry – all are important channels to autonomy. A good education for girls should include school curricula which teach these areas. Global Girl Leading takes in elements of these subjects thematically within its programmes, providing some level of access. However, it cannot replace the importance of formal schooling for girls to become well-qualified and so Global Girl Leading campaigns for universal access to learning which allows girls the means for self-support.



The first three areas are focused on personal development, but they support the fourth, which is about knowledge and understanding of the world and how to become economically independent – a key issue for women. Each of the four elements supports the other – it is the combination that is so powerful. For example, girls gain confidence from developing their capacity for creativity, criticality, and leadership which in turn helps their achievements in learning. Learning enhances confidence and teaches creativity – and so on. The approach has seen longitudinal success at Mulberry School for Girls over time, with many alumni now in leadership positions of all kinds. A 2023 government report on outcomes in the labour market shows the fastest trajectory of socio-economic improvement for communities like ours¹⁴. This is attributed in significant part to education.

It is important to acknowledge that Global Girl Leading programmes can only achieve so much if they are standalone. The model is most effective when it is nested within school settings that promote equality for girls and cater for their specific needs. This means reviewing the culture and structure of school systems, root and branch. In the UK, leaders need to examine:

- **Pedagogy:** Curriculum planning needs thought about content, learning activities, teaching style and teaching method. For example, the teaching of Jack the Ripper in the History curriculum must be questioned. It is voyeuristic, its focus on Victorian policing framed in violence against women and girls to make it attractive. Jack the Ripper tours of the East End to see where he raped and murdered women are used by schools as learning activities. Other questions to raise concern the visibility of women in curricula and how they are characterised. What teaching methods are used – how often compared to boys are girls given visibility and voice in classroom spaces through questioning, presenting or leading discussion? Does display create an equal learning environment? How are dance and PE (physical education) conducted to avoid objectification or the creation of a male preserve?

14 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/outcomes-in-labour-market-for-ethnic-minorities-by-immigrant-generation-status/outcomes-in-labour-market-for-ethnic-minorities-by-immigrant-generation-status?mc_cid=0faa1818b3&mc_eid=e6c8bff870#main-points

- **Pastoral Care:** The emotional, social and mental health support available to girls – routinely throughout school structures and in specialist services – is very important. What gets taught, by whom and how in PSHEE needs review. Consent education, for example, should be prominent and well-taught. The ‘hidden curriculum’ – the way girls and boys occupy and interact within school space, the way staff model equality in their behaviours and working relationships, the leadership culture, policies like ‘no touch’ policies, what kinds of school productions are mounted (do they reinforce stereotypes and if so, how is this unpacked), how important current affairs issues are dealt with – all need a thorough level of critical analysis through the lens of sex discrimination. Participation in extra-curricular activities needs monitoring – a charter of entitlement is helpful. How are girls’ voice and visibility managed in student leadership opportunities?
- **School Leadership:** School leaders, in particular Headteachers, create the culture of a school through the vision, values, ethos and behaviours they instil into its daily operation. Curriculum, teaching, pastoral care, support for learning and inclusion, policies, staffing and training, interaction with parents and the community and extra-curricular activity – all are heavily influenced by the priorities, choices and decisions school leaders make about everything. If girls and the environment they need to thrive are not carefully considered in every part of the way a school runs, they become invisible and male privilege becomes normalised. How staff pay and progression are managed, for example, have a subconscious effect on students about who is valued. Analyses of gender pay gaps combined with ethnicity and social class in schools often tell a story about women, support staff roles, low pay and poor opportunities for career progression. How school leaders visibly tackle sex discrimination in every aspect of school life sends important messages that have a wider social effect.

Global Girl Leading campaigns for schools to tackle these areas systemically as they will help to achieve equality. In the meantime, Global Girl Leading operates its programmes as extra-curricular experiences alongside girls’ formal schooling.



To achieve the development of confidence, creativity, leadership and love of learning, Global Girl Leading programmes have the following characteristics:

- They are student led, co-constructed with, and supported by, school staff
- They consider important global themes affecting girls and women
- They involve writing curriculum and training materials for participants, as well as for the school staff who are supporting the delivery of Global Girl Leading in each participating school
- They work towards a culminating summit lasting one day which covers different areas of women's leadership on global issues
- They include online preparatory workshops dealing with the themes of the summit, as well as workshops on leadership skills and personal development
- There are creative arts projects on which students collaborate from amongst the schools involved, which then form part of the final summit. These can be films or documentaries, published performance poetry, a theatre or dance piece, a 'speakers' corner' piece, student essays, student speeches, the creation of an exhibition
- A visit to each other's schools may take place, sometimes internationally
- There may be a residential camp
- The final summit will include speakers and panellists who are women from a variety of different backgrounds as well as young voices from amongst the girls involved
- There will be a celebration of all the work of those involved, supported by a significant social figure

All activity is designed to ensure that girls have had many opportunities to practice leadership confidently, creatively and in an informed way. Developing your 'voice' and having a public platform to make that voice heard in a variety of ways using the arts, literacy and oracy is part of the experience, as is enhancing the capacity for reasoning and critical thinking. Knowing how to 'own' your space and to do your best, without diminishing those around you but bringing them with you, is also fundamental to the learning in Global Girl Leading.



There is rigour in the knowledge acquisition that Global Girl Leading expects, too. The areas covered require participants to tackle challenging world issues that affect women within the six themes set out at the beginning of this paper. There is a range of world issues within these themes where women are active agents of change: climate change, healthcare, digital inclusion, armed conflict, migration and human rights, to name just a few. Scaffolding allows access to this knowledge at a variety of different levels so that everyone can participate but learning how to research issues thoroughly, prepare a reasoned argument and to engage in debate about it underpin a confident presentation and are an important part of the learning.

Underneath it all is the expectation that girls will engage with other girls in the spirit of mutuality and reciprocity, seeking to know and understand each other's contexts and to build constructive relationships.

Next Steps

Achieving equality for girls and eradicating misogyny requires investment in girls' education. The business case for this is strong – the moral case even stronger. Global Girl Leading, as a Mulberry Changemaker programme, seeks to do the following over the next 18 months in response to the issues raised in this paper:

- 1.** To argue for a commission on girls' experience in schools in the UK, building on the findings of Ofsted's rapid review of peer-on-peer abuse in 2021 and the more recent findings of the Children's Commissioner on pornography. We need to know more about the reality for girls in school and explore opportunities for systemic changes.
- 2.** To learn more about the experience of girls in schools in other countries, building strong collaborative relationships between girls, sharing common themes and developing constructive ways to make change. The new partnership with Mexico, the existing partnership with Southeast Asia and the possibility of building partnership with Australia will create exciting new possibilities for girls globally.
- 3.** To run a new 18 month Global Girl Leading programme in partnership with Mexico, using the framework set out in this paper and culminating in a summit on 11th October 2024 at the Queen Elizabeth II conference centre, streamed live online.
- 4.** To consider what might be achieved in the following year in partnership with Australia.

Whilst the culture may be hard to shift, doing nothing is not an option when the well-being and human rights of girls are at stake. Girls themselves can be a powerful force for change – Global Girl Leading can provide the platform for their voice and visibility.





Mulberry

Schools Trust

Richard Street
Commercial Road
London E1 2JP
United Kingdom

T +44 (0) 20 7790 6327

✉ exec@mulberryschoolstrust.org

🌐 www.mulberryschoolstrust.org

🐦 [@MulberryTH](https://twitter.com/MulberryTH)