

Oprah Winfrey School for Girls Policy Brief

PLCY201

28 September 2020

Is the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls inspired or misguided?

Philanthropy. A powerful tool for modern-day celebrities to make a positive mark in society that stems from its earlier equivalent, noblesse oblige, now rare. While many acts of philanthropy have now devolved into glorified photoshoots with no real impact, others shine through as beacons of hope for the communities they serve. Oprah Winfrey's Leadership Academy for Girls is one of these beacons, guiding future generations of South African girls to a secure future in a country stricken with high rates of gender-based violence and sexual assault (Applegarth et al. 1). In a Harvard School of Business case study, Applegarth et al. explore Oprah's ambitious vision for a girls school to benefit disadvantaged South African girls and the mixed reviews it garnered from an international population. South Africa was one of the last countries to end racial inequality, only ending apartheid in 1994. Since then, it has tried to pick up the pieces and create a better future but has run into many issues. The most troubling of these has been the rise in gender-based violence that permeates many aspects of society. Oprah, in 2000, decided to put her power to use by promising Nelson Mandela that she would create a boarding school to provide opportunities for underprivileged girls (Applegarth et al. 1).

In 2007, the school finally opened after a road to creation littered with potholes of criticism. However, these were not deserved and often spurred out of ideas of classism. Oprah's school was a well thought out investment that ensures continued success for South Africa, rather than a short term benefit. Educating future generations is valuable to countries dealing with a variety of societal issues. Oprah also created a haven for girls, protecting them from the problems of sexual violence that followed them even into the classroom (Applegarth et al. 4). Oprah also helped provide basic necessities fulfilling Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Since these girls now do not have to worry about physiological and safety needs, they can focus on love, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. In the long run, these girls will see positive impacts spring from having a community they can rely on and will come out as empowered leaders ready to build up their country. In the same vein, educating girls has been proven to be one of the most essential factors in ensuring future success. Applegarth et al., citing a University of Munich study, explain that, "studies showed that when a nation's girls were not educated, the country experienced a slower rate of economic growth, and higher rates of fertility, child mortality and malnutrition" (2). This issue has even been acknowledged at an international level when "Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General, and Lawrence Summers, former World Bank Chief Economist, both publicly called for the increased education of girls in developing countries, proclaiming that no other social investment yielded so high a return" (Applegarth et al. 3). This school is a necessary institution for South Africa's future as it aims to make education accessible and therefore helps diversify the future workforce of South Africa by introducing gender, race, and socioeconomic diversity.

Oprah's school was met with a barrage of criticism, despite the many benefits it claimed to have. The most common critiques, Applegarth et al. present, are that it was too "extravagant" (8) and that Oprah was "doing too much" (6). Others criticized it on separating the girls from their community and not doing enough for the rest of the country (Applegarth et al. 8-9). The criticisms echo Dambisa Moyo in her talk with the Hoover Institution, talking about how celebrity aid doesn't have an impact on Africa (Moyo, 0:35 - 0:48). However, this same talk also supports Oprah's vision. Moyo advocates for helping make African countries less reliant on foreign aid (4:40 - 5:30), which is exactly what Oprah's school achieves. By educating future citizens, Oprah helps them contribute back to their own communities and, in the future, creates wealth in South Africa and negates a need for future foreign aid. To assume that gaining a well furnished education would cause a disconnect between the girls and their family is exceptionally misguided as there are many examples of successful figures giving back to their underserved communities, including Oprah herself. In fact, by using the money for the school for helping a larger range of students doesn't have the concise impact that Moyo explains and perpetuates the "vicious cycle of aid" (Moyo). Criticisms of extravagance come off as rude and tone deaf. Oprah, as cited by Applegarth et al., summarizes it well by saying, "why would I build tin shacks for girls who come from tin shacks" (6). To believe that these girls don't deserve the best that Oprah can give them is flawed; there is no background requirement on how much luxury one is allowed to experience in their lifetime. Providing the basics to these girls is exactly as it sounds, a base level expectation, and Oprah is here to give them a specialized education. Why can they not receive one in accommodations similar to other elite boarding schools? The school also provides high quality and well designed aid which has been proven to be more effective (Sachs). As pointed out by Jeffrey Sachs, "The issue is how to deliver high-quality aid to the world's poorest and most vulnerable people," something Oprah achieves. Oprah's school also helps bring the issue of education to an international audience and often encourages others to donate. Fellow American icon Madonna, inspired by Oprah, pledged to build a similar school in Malawi, and "Winfrey's school, which received extensive media attention, received significant third party donations" (Applegarth et al. 9). Critics have well intentioned arguments, that simply do not stand up to the test and discount Oprah's own experiences that give her a unique perspective into the power of education.

This ambitious initiative is a properly inspired initiative that helps foster a much needed environment to advance girls' education in South Africa. Oprah may have been met with many obstacles and critics, but in continuing with her vision, she sends a strong message about how philanthropy is more than just a photo and a check. Her involved attitude and perseverance shows that she is serious about helping these underprivileged girls and helping them reach their full potential in a country where they have little to no opportunity to succeed. Education will have a long term impact on South Africa that may not be seen instantly, but once these girls start to enter the workforce, they will bring about much needed change for their communities that will, in the future, remove the need for such foreign aid. Critics of the initiative choose to ignore the positives impacts pointed about local educators and Nelson Mandela himself (Applegarth et al. 10). Embracing the core lessons of her own education and experience, Oprah's philanthropy will remain a beacon of hope for generations to come.

Works Cited

- Applegarth, Claire, et al. An Inspired Model... or a Misguided One? Oprah Winfrey's Dream School for Impoverished South African Girls. Case Study. Boston. Harvard Business Publishing, 2010. Web. 28 September 2020.
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