


DALE HANSON BOURKE

*A Practical Guide to Helping Them Soar—  
and Creating a Better Future for Us All*



STRONG  
GIRLS,  
STRONG  
WORLD

Through a lens all of us can understand—the lives of our own daughters and granddaughters—Dale Hanson Bourke brings into focus the hardships, obstacles, and threats faced by girls growing up in resource-poor communities around the world. Some of what she shares is heartbreaking, but much of it is filled with hope. Progress is being made, and Dale points us to practical actions we can take to help lift up a generation of strong girls who will make the world stronger. With more children in crisis in the world today than ever before, Dale’s message is one we need now.

MICHAEL J. NYENHUIS, president and CEO, UNICEF USA

As I’ve traveled the world I’ve seen over and over again that girls face tremendous disadvantages, but manage to overcome them in amazing ways. So often they need just a little help. This inspiring and practical book gives us all the opportunity to invest in the future of girls.

PATRICIA HEATON, actress and advocate

Dale Hanson Bourke approaches the challenging issues facing girls today with the skill of an experienced author, the passion of an activist, the grace of a person of faith, and the heart of a grandmother. If you agree with Dale and me that the disadvantages and burdens on girls around the world are unacceptable, please read this book to find out exactly how we can help girls soar.

EDGAR SANDOVAL SR., president and CEO of World Vision

*Strong Girls, Strong World* is an important book about a simple truth: Girls face monumental challenges around the world just because they’re girls. Yet, we don’t have to sit idly by—we all have

the ability to change the world if we choose to act. Dale Hanson Bourke has created an easy-to-read guide to learn more about the issues affecting girls and discover practical ways to make an effective difference today.

MARGO DAY, CEO and cofounder, Mekuno Project;  
former vice president, US Education, Microsoft

In my travels around the world, I have seen that girls often suffer the most. And yet, when given the opportunity, they are the first to give back to others and make their communities stronger. In *Strong Girls, Strong World*, Dale Hanson Bourke offers a clear explanation of how change can happen, then presents often simple ways we can each make a difference. Her personal stories and practical solutions make this a hopeful and important book.

STEVE STIRLING, president and CEO, MAP International

When we think of the plight of girls globally, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the lack of progress toward equality and access to resources to meet basic needs. What can one do? Why should we care? My organization works to address these very concerns, but we need other truth-tellers to amplify a collective, urgent voice that this work is far from done. With compelling statistics as well as stories from her own personal life and from girls overcoming challenging circumstances, Dale gives us all the right reasons for why we should care—and why investing in a better future for girls around the world improves life for us all.

MARTHA HOLLEY NEWSOME, president and CEO, Medical Teams  
International

What would it take to create a better, safer, and stronger world for our children and grandchildren? I have come to believe that

their future well-being may depend on one simple commitment: to help girls and women realize their full God-given potential and to make them equal partners in leading our communities, institutions, and governments. Regrettably, since the Garden of Eden, we have left fully half of our most creative, gifted, and capable leaders sitting on the bench. But what if we committed to correcting that by investing in girls and women—in their education, their health, their safety, and their opportunities? Dale Hanson Bourke believes that girls can change the world, and so do I. This is a book you need to read and then buy extras to give copies to your friends.

RICHARD STEARNS, president emeritus of World Vision US;  
author of *The Hole in Our Gospel* and *Lead Like It Matters to God*

Girls around the world deserve the opportunity to put their God-given talents to full use, no matter what their birth circumstances. Dale Hanson Bourke's thoughtful book guides us all in how we can be part of creating those opportunities, thus creating a better world for us all.

ATUL TANDON, CEO, Opportunity International

Dale Hanson Bourke is well known as a lifelong advocate for women and girls. In *Strong Girls, Strong World* Dale makes the case that we must all act now to do our part to help girls reach their full God-given potential. In this beautifully written book, she also gives us practical ways to support girls and the organizations committed to making sure girls are included in every aspect of their work. This is a call to action for all of us to recommit our efforts to women and girls and thus ensure a better future for everyone.

SCOTT JACKSON, president and CEO, Global Impact



# STRONG GIRLS, STRONG WORLD

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and Creating a Better Future for Us All*

DALE HANSON BOURKE



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Published in association with The Steve Laube Agency.

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For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at [csresponse@tyndale.com](mailto:csresponse@tyndale.com), or call 1-855-277-9400.

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN 978-1-4964-5232-0 (hc)

ISBN 978-1-4964-5233-7 (sc)

Printed in United States of America

29 28 27 26 25 24 23  
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Genevieve Elizabeth, who is loved and adored,  
and for all the other girls in the world  
who deserve the same opportunities to soar.*





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## Introduction

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# IT'S PERSONAL

SHE WAS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BABY my husband, Tom, and I had ever seen. From the first image we saw of our granddaughter, we were smitten. Separated by 3,000 miles and pandemic restrictions, we carefully studied every photo and video our son and daughter-in-law sent of our first grandchild.

Her fingers moved so gracefully, we noted. Perhaps she would be an artist. Her feet kept finding their way out of every blanket. Maybe she would be an athlete. Was she smiling already? Certainly that was a sign that she was very advanced. Within weeks we had imagined various scenarios for little Genevieve's ("Evie's") future.

Our friends indulged us. We'd been through this with many of them already. Stern, no-nonsense men who had turned into cooing fools. Hard-charging women who neglected their careers so they could babysit their grandchild. We'd shaken our heads until it happened to us. Then we happily joined the club of doting, goofy grandparents.

In her book *Becoming Grandma*, Lesley Stahl says it well: "Becoming a grandmother turns the page. Line by line you

are rewritten. You are tilted off your old center, spun onto new turf.”<sup>1</sup> Even before we met her in person, little Evie had rocked our world.

The fact is, our granddaughter *is* special. Of the approximately 385,000 babies born on the same day worldwide,<sup>2</sup> little Evie was already in the top third of her class just by the circumstances of her birth. She was born in a well-equipped hospital in the United States, attended by doctors and nurses, with loving, healthy parents waiting to embrace her. Her mother had taken vitamins, eaten carefully, avoided alcohol, done prenatal yoga, and regularly saw her obstetrician for checkups. Both parents had completed birthing classes, outfitted a safe nursery, and equipped their car with a crash-tested infant seat. Evie had already won the birth lottery.

But despite my new-grandmother euphoria, I was aware of a different reality. My years of traveling overseas while serving on the boards of international development organizations, writing about global issues, and running an international foundation had opened my eyes to the brutal reality that so many babies born on the same day as Evie would face. I had just written an article that included a sobering statistic: In 2020 nearly 14,000 children under five died every single day from preventable causes.<sup>3</sup> The reality was that a tragic number of Evie’s birth cohorts would already be gone by the time she celebrated her one-month birthday.

And there was something else. I had seen how vulnerable girls are in particular. My son, a lawyer who has served as a prosecutor, confided a similar fear early in his days of being a new father. “Mom, I’m so happy we have a little girl, but I’m also worried. Girls are so vulnerable,” he said. Because of his work, he’d seen too many disturbing cases of child abuse and violence against women to ignore the harsh reality.

He was right. Girls are more vulnerable than boys. Girls are at

a disadvantage on almost every measure in almost every part of the world. Even in relatively rich countries, girls still face more challenges, are more subject to abuse, are less likely to thrive. “Gender inequality cuts across every single country on Earth. No matter where you are born, your life will be harder if you are born a girl. If you are born in a poor country or district, it will be even harder,” according to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, in some ways there has never been a better time to be a girl. Girls play every sport, set new records, and win Olympic medals. Evie will grow up seeing women lead corporations, win Nobel Prizes, and run for president. Women lead more than two dozen countries in the world, many the first female to hold the position. It’s easy to tell ourselves that girls have come a long way, because in many ways they have. But for too many girls, life is brutally difficult.

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

A few months after Evie’s birth I was attending World Vision’s Strong Women, Strong World virtual conference. We were learning about some of the challenges girls face and the organization’s work to improve their lives when a video came on of a little girl name Shemema.<sup>5</sup> Just ten years old, the beautiful little girl glowed with confidence as she began to recite a poem called “I Want to Marry.” She spoke of wanting to marry someday but not before she enjoyed her childhood and finished school. She said she wanted to wear a graduation gown before a wedding gown. “Someday, I want to marry,” she concluded. “But most definitely I’m not in a hurry.”

Little Shemema was everything

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I hoped Evie would be as she grew up—strong, confident, creative. She was simply extraordinary. But she lived in rural Ghana, and her poem was recited in the context of a society that—because she was a girl—was more likely to expect little Shemema to marry early, to drop out of school and have her first child while she was still a child herself.<sup>6</sup> Shemema’s reality was very different than Evie’s would be.

Like most of the people watching the video, I applauded Shemema. She couldn’t hear us, of course, but I was acutely aware that this little girl deserved no less than my own beautiful granddaughter did. Shemema’s poem was a work of art; her delivery breathtaking. She was clearly a talented girl who could go far in the world—if she was given a chance. But girls like Shemema face struggles Evie will never know.

This is a book about the challenges girls like Shemema are confronted with in the world, but it is also about how the decision to make the world a better place can have a profound impact. I hope this book helps educate us all about the simple, sometimes systemic obstacles girls face globally. But it also sheds light on individuals, communities, and organizations that have made a difference—and how all of us can effectively make a difference too.

Musimbi Kanyoro is a Kenyan human rights activist who has served as CEO of the Global Fund for Women. In a TED Talk she describes a principle that her mother taught her when she was growing up in a Kenyan village. She calls it *isirika* and explains that it is a word that embraces charity and service to one another. Simply put, she says, “You’re your sister’s keeper.” Kanyoro emphasizes the mutual responsibility we all share to care for one another. As her mother taught her, “Those who have more really enjoy the *privilege* of giving more.”<sup>7</sup>

If you are reading this book, you are probably privileged by global standards. You are not wondering where you will find food

to eat or shelter for the night. Day-to-day survival is not an aching concern. Of course, you have worries and wish you had more money. But the simple truth is that you have the ability to change the world. Indeed, you have the *privilege* of helping others. I hope this book will show you how.

## WE ARE ALL CONNECTED

Evie was born during a global pandemic, a time of profound connection and disconnection. Because of COVID-19 restrictions we couldn't visit her in person for months. But also because of the pandemic, we watched footage from around the world of people struggling with the disease. The butterfly effect<sup>8</sup> (the theory that a butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world can cause a tornado somewhere else) was suddenly demonstrated in real time. A localized disease could become a pandemic in months. When it came to a highly communicable disease, the world seemed suddenly very small.

The interconnectedness of the world was on display from the first days of my granddaughter's life.

The problems of the other 140 million babies born in the same year as Evie<sup>9</sup> will affect her life one way or another. How she—and the rest of us—relates to those other children will have a profound impact on her life.

And yet I knew something else from my international work and travels. The actions of one person can change the world. Evie would not just be affected by events elsewhere. She could effect change, become someone who could improve the world. Part of loving Evie is helping her grow up in a better world. And I believe that her life will be better if the lives of other girls are also better.

*The simple truth is you have the ability to change the world.*



I am not a development professional. I've had the honor of spending more than two decades on the boards of some wonderful humanitarian organizations, including World Vision, Opportunity International, MAP International, and the Center for Interfaith Action on Global Poverty. I ran a foundation that supported health care for women and children in Zambia. I have written articles for various publications about these and other groups and the people they serve. Mostly I'm a wife, mother, and businessperson, who, over the years, has become increasingly aware of the gaps between my life and those I've met in many of the countries I visited.

I wish I could say I have always been so concerned about the lives of those less fortunate. The fact is, it took a tragedy in my own life to open my eyes to the pain of the world. In my early thirties I learned I was pregnant for the second time. Our son was four, and we were thrilled to be adding to our family. Then we learned I was pregnant with twins—a boy and a girl. It was a wonderful surprise, and we went about preparing ourselves for not one but two babies. My doctor monitored me carefully. I spent time on bed rest as a precaution, took vitamins, went for regular ultrasounds, had blood tests.

All was fine—until it wasn't. A routine visit in my eighth month revealed only one heartbeat. *Our daughter was gone.* The doctors had no idea what had happened. I had done everything possible to have a healthy pregnancy, but it wasn't enough. I delivered our son—Evie's father—and our stillborn little girl. It was a time of great joy and profound heartbreak.

Months later I was still coping. We were so grateful to have our son and his older brother. But our devastating loss was still acutely painful. I kept trying to “snap out of it” without much success.

Then a strange thing changed my life. Not the kind word of a

friend or the therapy of a professional. It was a cold, hard statistic. A number I may have heard before but never truly absorbed. A number that now felt personal and represented unimaginable loss and pain: *Thirty-five thousand children under the age of five died every single day, most from preventable causes.*<sup>10</sup> Suddenly I realized that 35,000 other mothers felt the same pain I did. And even more tragic, something could have been done to save many of those precious little lives. I knew I couldn't do anything to bring back my daughter. But that day I vowed to do everything possible to save the lives of other babies.

I began to read, to study, to listen. I opened my mind and heart to the needs of the world and was astounded by what happened. The simple thought that I didn't want other women to feel the pain I had experienced helped guide me. And as I write this book, one of the things that gives me the most hope is that the very statistic that changed my life has decreased year by year. Through the work of individuals, communities, and organizations, the number of babies dying each year is one-third of what it was when I lost my own baby. In Evie's lifetime it is possible that the number will be reduced to hundreds, not thousands.

The number of preventable deaths—especially of baby girls—must continue to drop. So must the number of child brides, adolescent pregnancies, school dropouts, and other circumstances affecting too many girls in the world. It will take the will of governments, organizations, communities, and individuals to make it a reality.

This is a book about the challenges facing girls, but it is also

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about how the decision to make the world a better place can have a profound impact. It is meant to help us understand some of the obstacles they encounter. It is a basic road map toward finding ways to exhibit *isirika* in our actions, whether we get personally involved, support a charity, or become advocates. I hope it will make us all smarter about what works and what doesn't, how we can help girls, and when we need to ask more questions on their behalf. It is a starting point for further exploration.

## TAKING A FIRST STEP

One of the first times I visited a developing country, I was overwhelmed. Shocked by the needs, my first instinct was to take all the money I had in my wallet and give it to a woman who was telling us her story. I was visiting a Compassion International site, and one of the staff members kindly stopped me and explained the problems I would cause by doing so. The fact was, I felt sorry for the people I met and wanted to make myself feel better by giving them money. It never occurred to me that I might embarrass that person, cause jealousy in the community, or create more problems. I just wanted

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to do something—anything—to “fix” what I saw as a problem. It is a typical American response, and I was—and continue to be—a typical American.

At times I have been overwhelmed not only by the harsh realities of poverty but also by my own inadequacy. It is tempting to delegate the problems of the world to the professionals. There was a time when I believed in making as much money as possible and then

giving generously to those who knew best how to help. But I have also been convicted by people like Rich Stearns, who left his lucrative corporate job to become president of World Vision from 1998 to 2018. “One of the most common mistakes we can make is to believe that we have nothing of significance to offer—that we’re not rich enough, smart enough, skilled enough, or spiritual enough to make much difference at all, especially in the face of huge global problems.”<sup>11</sup>

*At times I have been overwhelmed not only by the harsh realities of poverty but also by my own inadequacy.*

We may not be able to fix all the world’s problems, but we can begin by understanding more about what they are and why they exist.

When Evie was thirteen months old, I offered to babysit for a weekend while her parents took a much-needed break. She had just begun to walk and resembled a mechanical windup toy, putting one foot forward and then the other as she lurched along. She didn’t want help. She wanted to walk on her own. But she also didn’t have enough control to change direction once she started moving forward. I soon learned to clear the path of toys and other obstacles so Evie could walk as far as possible before she fell. It was a comical scene as I rushed forward moving things out of the way while Evie marched along. But what I was doing for Evie is not unlike what I believe all girls deserve. The world needs more advocates for girls, people who will simply help clear the way for girls who want to move forward on their own.

As much as my grandmother heart wants to believe that little Evie is the most amazing little girl and will one day change the world, I know that so many incredibly talented, wise, brilliant girls will never have that chance because of something so simple as the lack of access to vitamins or a basic education or the safety net of health

insurance. I am sorry for them, but I am also sorry for the rest of us. The world is a poorer place because some of the world's most amazing girls lack simple resources that would allow them to thrive. And when I think of the contemporaries of my granddaughter around the world, I know that many were also born with talent, intellect, and drive. But for too many, life will present more obstacles than opportunities. Those living in poverty will have to be extraordinarily resourceful, determined, and fortunate to live up to their potential.

*Those living in poverty will have to be extraordinarily resourceful, determined, and fortunate to live up to their potential.*

Over the years I have gathered insights by visiting projects, attending conferences, reading books, and interviewing experts. I have been honored to serve on the boards of worthy organizations and have even worked for some of them. I helped guide the work of a foundation benefiting

those living with HIV/AIDS in Zambia. But I have learned the most by listening to those often called the world's poor.

I once heard the life of those living in poverty described as a constant game of Chutes and Ladders.<sup>12</sup> Every time they start to make progress, another event undermines them. Without access to savings, investments, insurance, or legal protection, they are always one event away from losing everything they've gained. This was one of the hardest things for me to understand when I began to listen to the stories of people living in poverty. Because I lived in a society where hard work and determination was enough to move one forward, I had made assumptions that those who didn't move out of poverty simply weren't working hard enough or didn't have enough determination. I couldn't have been more mistaken.

Once I began to meet people who worked every single day from

before sunup until they fell into bed just to make a pittance, I was shocked and ashamed. “*But it’s not fair!*” I wanted to yell. Over and over again I have had to learn that life isn’t fair if you are living in poverty. Even families who love their daughters and want the best for them often have few options when they lack resources. It is possible to love a little girl just as much as we love Evie but not be able to give her the benefits of health, education, and safety.

## OFFERING CHOICES

Evie likes to make decisions. Now two, she already has strong feelings about what she wears each day, which toy travels with her, even what banana she will eat out of the bunch. I love that her parents give her so much space to make decisions about her life while still setting boundaries. They’re not “anything goes” parents, but they are raising a girl who is already confident and has learned to trust her own choices. Sometimes when I’m with Evie I forget and “helpfully” try to pick out a shirt I think is right or a toy that is easier to carry just to hurry us along. Occasionally she’ll consider my choice and agree. But often she politely says, “No, Gaga,” and proceeds to make her own choice that seems very clear to her. It is a trait that will serve her well in life.

One of the more memorable programs I’ve seen for empowering girls was in Zambia several years ago. Adolescent girls were experiencing harassment from boys and even older men as they walked to school. The girls felt unsafe, and some had even dropped out of school. An NGO (nongovernmental organization) had brought in a karate teacher who offered free instruction to any girl interested. Classes were held outside after school in full view of passersby, and the girls soon progressed enough to chop boards in half with their bare hands. The boys looked on in fascination and then fear as the girls perfected their technique.

I saw the girls after class one day laughing at the boys' response. I asked them if the boys bothered them on the way to and from school anymore. "No way," one of the girls said, smiling. "They run away from us now." I asked if they'd ever had to use their karate training on the boys, and none had. "The most important thing is that they know we're not afraid. We can take care of ourselves now." I'll always remember the beaming faces of those confident girls who now had the power to walk freely to school.

"Our goal needs to be that every girl can see what's possible and can imagine living her life to its full potential. Because once girls see what's possible, they will rise up and there will be no stopping them," says my friend, business owner Gina Wright Buser,<sup>13</sup> a member of World Vision's Strong Women Strong World advisory council and a powerful advocate for women and girls. It is a goal to have for every girl in the world.

## FINDING BALANCE

The old woman was sitting in the dirt outside her hut, the relentless Mozambican sun beating down as she sought shade in the shadows. She slowly looked up as we approached, and her wrinkled face and clouded eyes showed no surprise, just exhaustion.

It was 2001, and the AIDS pandemic had devastated Mozambique, wiping out many of the young adults. In this culture, the elderly were traditionally cared for by their children. But here, too many of the adult children were gone, leaving the oldest villagers to fend for themselves.

I was with workers who were assessing the needs of the local villages after recent drought conditions had devastated the meager food supply. When our translator asked the woman how she was, she explained that she had found a few weeds early that morning and was cooking them in some water. It was all she had to eat.

Suddenly we heard whispers and looked up to see small faces peering out from the hut. “Those are my grandchildren,” she explained. “My children have all died, so I must care for their children.” We then realized that the woman was hoping to feed all the children with her weed soup, doing what she could to fill their empty, aching bellies.

The worker promised to come back with an emergency food supply for her and the children, and she thanked us, then stopped and grabbed the translator’s hand, saying something urgently as he nodded his head and spoke to her. Stepping back, he said, “She asked us to pray for her. She asked us to pray that she would live long enough to raise the children.” The pastor in our group knelt and prayed with her as I brushed tears away.

Evie does not need me to survive into the future, but I hope and pray I live long enough to see her soar in all the ways she chooses. My early dreams for her have been overtaken by the fact that she is her own remarkable person. When she decides it’s time for a “dance party,” she turns on the music herself and dances with remarkable rhythm and abandon. When she is done, she says, “All right!” and throws up her hands. My role is simply to applaud.

I want to imagine other girls all over the world dancing like Evie—healthy, happy, free, and safe. Some of them need help, not because they are weak or in need of our sympathy but because there is no music in their lives. It is drowned out by violence or illness or the relentless grind of poverty. They need all of us to come together and fight for the simple goal of letting girls be girls—of giving them the chance to turn on the music and dance.

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# HELPING GIRLS SOAR

MY FRIEND AND I were reflecting over coffee. She had run a successful business, and I knew she had been generous in supporting both her church and other charities. As she considered retirement, she asked me, in light of my international travel and board experience, to give her my best ideas for changing the world. “If you could invest in anything that would be world changing, what would it be?”

I had just returned from Kenya where I had seen clean water transform the health of a village and provide sanitation for a school. I had seen a small clinic offering lifesaving interventions to babies. Agricultural training was helping farmers produce more crops. I had observed faith leaders’ training sessions that were helping change long-held beliefs about gender roles. It had been an amazing trip, and I had seen many interventions that were helping Kenyans overcome challenges and take advantage of opportunities. There were many right answers to her question. But I surprised myself by saying

what I had begun to understand during this and other times in the developing world.

“Girls,” I said. She looked at me, perplexed, and I realized it was a confusing answer. But as I witnessed all the good things that had been done, I had also recognized how many times girls had stood out to me. They were the ones articulating what sanitation had meant to them and why it now gave them the opportunity to go to school. They were the ones who had come back to their village to serve as health workers. They were the ones who—given a chance—seemed to not only succeed, but also to give back to their communities.

So I started again. “There are many great organizations in the world investing in important work: clean water, access to health care, improving education, offering microloans. But in every case, it seems to me that girls are the ones who not only benefit the most from this work, but also time and time again, I see them giving back. They are the ones who so often come back to their homes after receiving an education and training.”

My friend and I talked for a few more minutes and then went back to our lives. But I realized that I had just made an observation that was becoming a conviction to me. Girls held the key to chang-

ing the world. This belief had grown in part from seeing how often girls were disadvantaged in the world.

*An observation was becoming a conviction to me. Girls held the key to changing the world.*

I had seen little girls around the world lose their childhoods because of poverty, disease, war,

displacement, and lack of protections that most of us consider fundamental. Children the world over suffer, but girls suffer even more. We often talk about gender inequality in terms of how it affects

women, but little girls face double discrimination in many parts of the world as female children.

As the mother of two boys, I used to wonder why international development experts emphasized specifically helping girls. But then I began to see that from the time of their birth, in almost every way, girls suffer more than boys. They are more vulnerable, more subject to violence, less likely to receive an education, more likely to be married off at an early age, more often give birth long before their bodies are mature.

“It’s important that we empower girls,” said Rotary International’s president, Shekhar Mehta, “as we all find that more often than not, the girl is disadvantaged. We will serve all children, but our laser focus will be specially on the girl.”<sup>1</sup> Mehta’s speech, in June 2021, signaled a shift of emphasis for the international service organization.

Here’s something I had seen clearly: Strong girls make the world stronger. When we give them opportunities, they soar—and they take those around them along. Changing the circumstances for girls is one of the best ways to change the world.

*Strong girls make the world stronger. When we give them opportunities, they soar—and they take those around them along.*

According to the UN Foundation, “Investing in girls is one of the smartest things we can do to promote a healthier, more prosperous world. More importantly, it’s the right thing to do. Every girl has the right to be in charge of her future and her fate, and we have the collective obligation to protect her rights and promote her wellbeing.”<sup>2</sup>

The World Bank sees educating girls as one of the best ways to lift countries out of poverty. It seems amazing that this sophisticated

institution analyzing economic trends has concluded that simply educating girls can be one of the most powerful and world-changing investments.

A recent World Bank study estimates that the “limited educational opportunities for girls, and barriers to completing 12 years of education, cost countries between US \$15 trillion and \$30 trillion in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.” All these factors combined can help lift households, communities, and countries out of poverty.<sup>3</sup>

When the Nike Foundation began to look for the best ways to solve the global poverty issue, they discovered that girls were the key. Talking about girls who reach adolescence, the foundation president, Maria Eitel, said, “We realized to solve poverty, we’d have to get to her before she arrived at that intersection; we had to figure out how to get her on the first path. And if we could do that, it wouldn’t just be an investment in her, but an investment in everyone around her.”<sup>4</sup> Because of those findings, the foundation

launched The Girl Effect campaign.<sup>5</sup> “The one thing that never changes is girls’ potential,” said Eitel. “Wherever you are, whatever the context, girls prove that they have the potential to rebuild their families, communities, and countries.”<sup>6</sup>

*Girls are the leverage point for the world’s future. Simply put, interventions and opportunities offered to girls help create long-term solutions and avoid long-term problems.*

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offered to girls help create long-term solutions and avoid long-term problems. Because my granddaughter has been vaccinated, she won't be debilitated by polio, diphtheria, measles, or other diseases that could derail her life and drain her family financially. Already in preschool, she will happily continue her schooling as long as she wants and use her education to contribute to society. Because laws protect her and her family loves her, she will enjoy her childhood and have a better chance of becoming a well-adjusted adult. If she chooses, she will marry and have children of her own. The investments made in Evie's childhood offer proven rewards in the future for her, her family, and the society in which she will contribute. And such is the case for other girls in the world. Contributing to health, education, clean water, safety, legal protections, and other measures for girls isn't just right, it's smart. What we invest in girls today will reap rewards for the entire world in the future.

## **IT'S A GIRL!**

The crowd stood in a field looking up at the sky. Family and friends of the expectant couple had gathered for an elaborate "gender reveal" near an airfield. As the airplane flew over, a cloud of pink smoke filled the sky. "It's a girl," they screamed, jumping up and down and hugging.<sup>7</sup> Living in our society, we can't imagine someone seeing a cloud of pink smoke and expressing sadness or condolences to the expectant mom. But news of a girl's birth is not greeted in the same way in many parts of the world.

Issues of inequality start at birth. You might expect that of the approximately 385,000 babies born the same day as my granddaughter, half would be boys and half girls. Actually, the ratio is generally skewed a bit more toward boys than girls naturally, but in recent years, and especially in some parts of the world, the ratio has

become quite imbalanced toward boys. Known as the “son preference,” it means that a baby boy gets the cheers and a baby girl may be abandoned or killed. In Chinese society, son preference is deeply rooted, including in traditionally held Confucian values, which are strongly patrilineal.<sup>8</sup> Patrilinealism is, of course, found not just in Confucianism. In the Bible, tribal membership was passed through the father, and the twelve tribes of Israel were identified as sons of Jacob.

## DID YOU KNOW?



### PATRILINEAL CULTURE

Patrilineal cultures use the father’s line as a way to define inheritance of property, privileges, titles, and social position. In patrilineal family systems, children and wives take the father’s surname, the patronym. Family property often follows the patrilineal line of descent as well. Sons inherit property from their fathers, but daughters, who marry outside the family, often inherit nothing.

The degree to which newborn girls are considered a burden—even to the point of infanticide—was shocking to me. We will discuss in later chapters how girl babies are often neglected from birth. But girls continue to have to fight for their very lives in many countries. The term *missing girls* is used to indicate an abnormal male-to-female sex ratio. “In the early 1990s, the widespread use of prenatal ultrasound scanning, coupled with a strong cultural preference for sons and policies to reduce fertility levels, increased the abortion of female fetuses in some countries. The result was highly skewed sex ratios at birth, or missing girls, something that had not happened before in human history.

“Today, five countries with highly skewed sex ratios at birth show the highest numbers of missing girls, with a ratio of 113 males to 100 females in China and Azerbaijan, followed by Vietnam (112), Armenia (111), and India (110). Over time, skewed sex ratios produce abnormal gender imbalances.”<sup>9</sup>

Why are boys preferred? In some cases, especially in rural societies, boys can simply do more manual labor, affecting both the family’s livelihood and their survival. In other societies in which a dowry is expected when a girl is married, a family incurs an economic burden with every daughter. In China, the one-child policy (1980–2016) created such a strong preference for boys that the recent official numbers show China has 723.34 million men and 688.44 million women, accounting for 51.24 percent and 48.76 percent of the population, respectively. It means there are 34.9 million more men than women.<sup>10</sup>

While girls in many developed countries may fight stereotypes, being born a girl is actually a health threat in too many countries. The birth of a boy brings congratulations. A newborn girl is greeted with “maybe next time” or “try again.” A woman who gives birth to sons is considered blessed. A woman who has only girls is considered cursed.

In her book *Home Is Us*, Kenyan Jackie Ogega tells the story of her mother, who was harassed and threatened because she had given birth to three daughters and no sons. Her own mother-in-law cursed her and urged her son to leave her for another woman who would have a better chance of producing a boy. When Jackie fell ill as a child, her grandmother urged her mother to let Jackie die.

*While girls in many developed countries may fight stereotypes, being born a girl in too many countries is actually a health threat.*



The physical and mental harassment went on until Jackie's mother was forced to take her girls and flee to her own mother's home for safety. Sadly, Jackie's story is not all that rare.<sup>11</sup>

"The status of girls is significantly less than that of boys in some countries. This makes girls more vulnerable to discrimination and neglect," says Robin Haarr, an expert on violence against women and children. "Available indicators reveal that girls are discriminated against from the earliest stages of life in the areas of nutrition, health care, education, family care, and protection. Girls are often fed less, particularly when there are diminished food resources. A diet low in calories, protein, and nutrients negatively affects girls' growth and development. Less likely to receive basic health care, they are at increased risk of childhood mortality."<sup>12</sup>

In their book *Half the Sky*, authors Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn put it even more starkly. "It appears that more girls have been killed in the last fifty years, precisely because they were girls, than men were killed in all the battles of the twentieth century."<sup>13</sup>

## DID YOU KNOW?



### INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD

The United Nations, in an effort to increase awareness of the inequality faced by girls worldwide, established the International Day of the Girl Child in 2012. It is observed each year on October 11 and helps support more opportunity for girls while raising awareness of inequality in areas such as access to education, nutrition, legal rights, medical care, and protection from discrimination, violence against women, and forced child marriage.<sup>14</sup>

These few facts show the huge divide between boys and girls and the incredible challenges girls face during childhood:

- Girls under five years old are three times more likely to suffer malnutrition than boys under five.
- In developing countries, one in three girls do not finish primary education, most often because they spend eight times longer carrying out household tasks. Consequently, there are 96 million illiterate girls aged between 15 and 24, compared to 57 million illiterate boys.
- Every day 25,000 girls are victims of forced marriage. This can mean that they are forced to leave school. Pregnancy is the number one cause of death among 15- to 19-year-old girls.
- 50 percent of sexual assaults in the world involve girls under 16 years old.<sup>15</sup>

It's easy to get lost in the statistics, but stop for a minute and think about little girls under the age of five. They are precious, playful, creative, and full of wonder. Most of us instinctively want to protect them and help them grow up. But in societies where poverty is extreme, childhood is lost. There is no time to play and no margin to spend protecting innocence. Both mothers and fathers work long hours just to survive. They are often malnourished themselves or suffering from untreated illness. As soon as a little girl can walk, she must help contribute to the household. Making the choice to send a girl to school can mean a family will eat less in order to pay the small school fee or to buy her a uniform. And when disruptions

*In societies where poverty is extreme, childhood is lost for little girls.*

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occur—drought, floods, hurricanes, war—families living in poverty sink even further.

Poverty is a powerful force. It has taken me years to understand how few choices people living in poverty really have and to understand that if I were facing the same challenges, I might make the very same choices. Most of the people I have met in the world want a better life for their children. Faced with limited options, they do what they can to help their children.

Such was the case with Jackie Ogega's mother, who left her husband and returned to her own family to protect her girls. While it took courage to leave her situation, her desire to offer her daughters more opportunities motivated her. Jackie didn't just survive because of her mother's sacrifice, she thrived, receiving an education and going on to earn a PhD. Today she is senior director for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion at World Vision, where she makes sure all girls have the opportunities she fought so hard to achieve.

## THE DANGER OF ADOLESCENCE

Girls who survive the first five years of life hit another dangerous point when they become adolescents, starting at age ten. In all parts of the world—including highly developed countries like the United States—adolescence is fraught with challenges for girls.

Once a girl begins to menstruate, her childhood is considered over in much of the world. Menstruation is difficult to manage in many settings where personal hygiene products don't exist or are too expensive, so girls must stay at home during their period. Many miss so much school that they drop out. This issue is discussed more in later chapters.

In some countries, from the time a girl menstruates (and even younger in some societies), she is considered ready to marry and have children. For families living in poverty, especially where there is a bride price—a common custom in Africa in which the groom and his family pay the bride's family—marrying off a daughter can bring much-needed financial relief. It means there is one less mouth to feed because their daughter is now the responsibility of another family. The family is paid either in money or goods, such as livestock, which is often a huge help to a struggling family. In most cases it means the girl drops out of school and begins to care for her new home and family. Even if she does not have children right away, she is now expected to care for her in-laws and other members of her husband's household.

## LIKE A GIRL

When Edgar Sandoval Sr. was in charge of overseeing the feminine hygiene product line at Procter & Gamble, he learned some startling statistics: Girls' self-esteem drops twice as much as boys' during puberty. Moreover, women never regain the prepuberty level of self-esteem. According to a study by the American Psychological Association, this is true for girls everywhere in the world. Sadly, one of the leading causes of death in adolescents worldwide is suicide, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Digging deeper into the causes of the drop in confidence, Edgar and his team realized that gender stereotypes have a big impact on girls during puberty, when young womanhood comes to be defined by certain standards of beauty and submissiveness. Society constantly dwells on gender differences, sending out the message that leadership, power, and strength are for men, not for women. Subtle and not-so-subtle messages often communicate that being a girl is

not as good as being a boy. Learning this was troubling both professionally and personally for Edgar, who has three daughters.

P & G did video interviews with boys, girls, men, and women, and asked them a series of questions such as, “What does it mean to run like a girl? Fight like a girl? Throw like a girl?” When they asked

*Gender stereotypes have a big impact on girls during puberty, when womanhood comes to be defined by certain standards of beauty and submissiveness.*

girls ten years old and under, they got a positive, enthusiastic response. When they asked older girls, boys, and men, they got a stereotypical inept version.<sup>16</sup>

The video became the basis of a social media campaign launched in 2014, #LikeAGirl.<sup>17</sup> It was viewed more than 90 million times and shared by more than a million viewers. Men and women

all over the world joined the movement to help reclaim “like a girl” as a positive statement. Before the campaign, the expression was mostly used in a derogatory way. Since the launch, it’s been attached to overwhelmingly positive sentiment, becoming a symbol of female empowerment around the globe. The UN acknowledged the power of #LikeAGirl in March 2015, awarding P & G’s campaign for the impact it had on female empowerment around the world.<sup>18</sup>

When Edgar Sandoval left P & G, he didn’t head to another corporate post. Instead, he transitioned to World Vision, where he first served as COO before being named president in 2018. His commitment to girls remains strong:

I feel a deep, personal commitment to empowering women and girls. Not just because I’m the dad of three daughters. You see, among vulnerable children living in the world’s

poorest places, girls are *even more* vulnerable. This fact continues to strike me as one of the most under-addressed issues in our world. It was the inspiration that fueled my desire, when I was a vice president at P & G, to launch the breakthrough “Like a Girl” campaign in 2014. And it’s the inspiration that fuels my desire, as World Vision president, to achieve gender equality everywhere we work.<sup>19</sup>

## FINDING SOLUTIONS

How do we make the world better for girls?

What I have learned is that some of the solutions require systemic change and take years to accomplish. But some solutions are surprisingly simple and inexpensive. It wasn’t costly to have a karate teacher show girls how to defend themselves in Zambia. In chapter 7 you’ll read about a woman who developed a way for girls to make a living by using discarded plastic bags to weave beautiful purses. And I continue to be inspired by a group of women in Burkina Faso who, without spending any money, set up listening posts, places where women could confidentially seek help and advice. A small investment has supported a movement of private schools that helps meet the needs of children who lack access to education. And just a few dollars can provide lifesaving oral rehydration therapy to children suffering from diarrhea.

All of the amazing people you’ll read about have simply chosen to make a difference. In almost every case, solutions were found by first listening and learning.

That’s the principle Margo Day used when she took a leave of absence from her job as vice president at Microsoft and spent time in Kenya, listening to girls who had run away to escape female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriage. She said, “Standing at the

rescue center talking with the girls blew open my heart and mind to the simple fact that every human has potential, but sadly the opportunity to realize it is not available for millions of girls simply by virtue of being born a girl, where you're born and your family's resources. I felt called to be part of changing that dynamic however I could."<sup>20</sup>

An open heart and mind was the first step for me, Margo, and many of the people I interviewed over the years who went on to make a difference.

After reading *Strong Girls, Strong World*, perhaps you'll choose to support one of the many worthy organizations mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Maybe you'll decide to visit a country yourself and see what life is like there. Maybe one particular issue will break your heart or spur you to act and learn more.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO



### START A STUDY GROUP

The best way to start investing in the lives of girls is to understand more about their challenges and opportunities. The sidebars in this book contain suggested resources that can help explain what life is like for girls and what they face. Consider using some of these resources in a book club or Sunday school class.

## SETTING GOALS

Who decides what's right for girls? Even in American society, families vary greatly in their standards for discipline, education, and even health.

In 2000, the United Nations set goals that all 191 member countries agreed to as a way to focus on the most pressing international

**DID YOU KNOW?****MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

The eight Millennium Development Goals to achieve by 2015 included:

1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. To achieve universal primary education
3. To promote gender equality and empower women
4. To reduce child mortality
5. To improve maternal health
6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. To ensure environmental sustainability
8. To develop a global partnership for development

Each goal had subcategories and specific targets to help focus efforts.<sup>22</sup>

development problems. They called them the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). By focusing on these specific issues and establishing targets to achieve by 2015, the goal was to bring governments, funding organizations, international humanitarian groups, local communities, and individuals to a consensus about how best to solve the world's most pressing issues.

Although some countries made great progress in achieving the goals, others fell behind. And even though the third goal emphasized gender equality, it became clear that achieving all the goals was more difficult for girls than for boys.

After evaluating the progress on the MDGs, new goals were set for subsequent years. Called the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they established a course of action to be achieved by 2030. The seventeen SDGs are:



1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation, and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequality
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice, and strong institutions
17. Partnerships to achieve the goals for sustainable development.

These goals each have additional subcategories and many of those contain specific goals relating to girls.<sup>23</sup>

The next chapters highlight specific ways girls can be empowered in many of these key areas and how you can be involved. Besides introducing people who have made a difference, there are also specific actions to take, organizations to support, and ideas to ponder.

What I've found barely scratches the surface of these important topics. But it is a first step in understanding the challenges and opportunities facing girls and the ways in which many of us can contribute to their future.