CA Online Branch Program Listserv Discusison March 2014: “Silk”

**Program Announcement/Invitation:**

In honor of International Women's Day, and Women's History Month, there is an interesting short video (17 minutes) that highlights a very important human rights violation: Child Marriage.

When a girl is forced to quit school and marry an older man, she often experiences physical and emotional abuse.

Early marriage before age 18 is practiced in many parts of the world. In 9 countries, at least half of women, ages 20-24 have been married by age 18. And in the poorest regions of the world, the proportion is more than 35%, with levels ranging from 45% in South Central Asia to nearly 40% in sub-Saharan Africa, to 25% in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The movie is entitled "Silk", by Catherine Dent.  It was brought to my attention by an online member, Sherry Ludwig, who did a review of the movie for Women Graduates-USA and I hope she will join in the conversation.

I hope you will take a little time to watch this short, but profoundly poignant film.  It is a story told through the eyes of a middle-aged woman of mid-eastern descent and the story is based upon a real woman who currently lives in Glendale, CA. She is looking back on her life, having been given away as a child bride.  Here is the link to the video: <http://vimeo.com/70002007>.

If you haven't joined program discussions before and this topic looks intriguing, please email me so that I can add you to the program listserve.  If you are currently on the program listserve but aren't interested in this topic, email me as well, so I can remove you from this program list.

We can begin a discussion of the topic on March 15.

Krys Wulff, Program VP, CA Online Branch

**Program discussion, led by Krys as moderator:**

The director of this short film, Catherine Dent, was inspired by the Pulitzer Prize winning photo essay in National Geographic by Stephanie Sinclair.  Check it out:

 [www.stephaniesinclair.com](http://www.stephaniesinclair.com/) and it should open to tooyoungtowed.org/#/explore.

I found the movie haunting, poignant, disturbing and those are just a few of the emotional adjectives I would apply. The photo essay had even a bigger impact upon me.

Let's begin our dialogue by sharing our feelings after watching the film.

**Did you feel disturbed, angry, or have some other emotional reaction?  Why**

Member responses:

[Member #1]:

Krys, you are so right. I found both the movie and the photo essay most disturbing, haunting, and poignant. In reading about child brides it's so easy to gloss over it, but seeing the faces of those children really sticks with me. I can't forget them. It does make me feel helpless to do anything about them.

The one thing left out, is the terrible devastation that early childbirth has on many of the child brides in making them incontinent and thereby causing them to be abandoned, shunned and isolated.

Laws can be changed, but changing a culture is much more difficult.

[Member #2]:

I love the actress who was the lead in the movie.  Everything she does is poignant and insightful.

The film was well done.  Domestic violence, abuse and child marriages are so frightening, but still very prevalent all over the world.  The victims are primarily women and girls. What makes it so difficult to stop is the cultural/religious beliefs of those involved. Education is what will help in correcting some of these evils, but of course, men are most afraid of educating their women. Ignorance keeps women and girls silent and subservient.

[Member #3]:

Change requires capacity building and capacity building requires *advocacy*. So what came first the chicken or the egg?  AAUW CA had been working long and hard to advocate for our global mission. What happened to it?  Krys's lead question reminds me of the scene from Network in which Bill Holden whips open the window of his apartment and shouts his feelings to the roof top. Change begins with the "shouting" and the "shouting" leads to awareness, which leads to legislating change and yes, even global cultural change.

In 2009-2010, the now defunct International Advocacy Committee of AAUW CA revised its goals to include **“Expanding Our Global Vision for a Global Mission”,** which led to a unanimous vote at Convention '10 to draft our Resolution In Support of CEDAW. In 2011 the same International Advocacy Committee launched its program titled "It's Global and It's Local" so that we as an organization could make a start toward effecting *real* advocacy regarding Human Trafficking. Those efforts were then followed by the play titled "A Mutual Onus" written by our very own Cathy Foxhoven. Shall I continue?

So who will throw the next stone into the water to revive our efforts toward effecting change? A colleague in another organization who just returned from CSW58 in NYC wrote the following.

*The first week of CSW has been exciting and I see so many areas where (name of organization) can get involved one hardly knows where to start....most forward-thinking is the Cities for CEDAW campaign that was launched on Thursday.*

Here's some background information on the history of that campaign.  Note the final paragraph and then read the info in its entirety.  Will the recent launch inspire you to action?

<http://www.una-sf.org/cities-for-cedaw-posted-by-una-sf-womens-committee/>

[Member #4]:

First to answer Krys’ question: Initially the movie was haunting and the lead actress Shohreh Aghdashloo has a lot to do with that. The subject matter speaks to us all, of course, but she is a commanding presence on the screen. (Did anyone else see her in “House of Sand and Fog”?). In 17 minutes, it gave us a glimpse — which is all you can really ask for a “short” — but in some ways Aghdashloo’s strength at the end belied the horrible life she’d lived up to that point. Sinclair's photo essay was more powerful by far, for me.

I read [Member #3]'s link on the Cities for CEDAW campaign, and I can see why it makes sense to focus on major cities, but that write up didn't address the specific topic we are discussing here: protecting girls’ rights by ending child marriage.

As I explored the [tooyoungtowed.org](http://tooyoungtowed.org/)’s website, I clicked on the [TAKE ACTION tab](http://tooyoungtowed.org/%22%20%5Cl%20%22/takeaction), and there is a place to sign up to be a part on the ongoing campaign to stop this destructive practice.

We could also work together as an Online Branch “team” to do a social media blitz on the topic, sharing this link with others and encouraging all our friends to join this campaign.

Krys (moderator):

We have a perfect vehicle for action as our own state public policy committee is meeting this coming weekend, March 21-22.  They will be studying bills that fall within the CA public policy priorities.  One of those priorities reads:  " Support for United Nations programs that address human rights and women and girls concerns."  We can certainly ask the Committee to be sure to take a look at this priority when evaluating bills.  In the last session they encouraged AAUW CA advocacy around Sex Trafficking and many of our branches have been holding programs to address the situation locally.  So we have taken the international advocacy into the local arena in Calfiornia.  But there is always more to do. While we may not be able to address child brides at the local level, we can be aware that it certainly could carry over to the local arena.  The story of SILK is actually about a real woman in Glendale California, so the cultural practice may have taken place in another country, but then the couples immigrate to America and are living right here.

[Member #6]:

I found the short to be excellent and the acting excellent. But I also found the film to be so frustrating, sad and unsettling.....I wondered why, with all of her strengths, she stayed with him....I expected her to take the money and run, despite the major joke on her husband she accomplished by giving the money and van away....what did it teach the girls about their lives??? not much...

[Member #7]:

I have already began the sharing by suggesting this as a topic for my branch's cocktail and Convos discussion topic. I also will use TX tweet and Facebook page to get this topic put to interested branches and student organizations in TX. Thanks for very interesting program Krys.

Krys (moderator):

That's great, [Member #7].  It is thought-provoking and I bet it will make an excellent Cocktails and Convos discussion! Let us know!

[Member #8]:

I am not sure where her strength lies – she did not leave him or take the money. What did the girls learn? They were more bully than empathic. This is a sad, frustrating story of pathos. So many women in all cultures live lives of quiet desperation as they stay in relationships rather than finding ways to leave them. In reading all the comments about this film I realize that my take is very different from almost everyone else. In 21st century California I find her obedience annoying.

[Member #9]:

Responding to the comment about being impatient with the “obedience” of the main woman and the bullying of the others.  Experience in working with abused women, including a close friend who I never knew until recently was routinely abused by her husband both verbally and physically, has really reinforced for me the adage not to criticize until you “walk a mile” in those shoes.  None of us can really say what we would do in such situations, even though we might hope we’d stand up for ourselves and rise above whatever awful things have happened in our lives.

[Member #8]:

Hi, [Member #9]. Thank you for this – it is an excellent reminder.

Krys (moderator)

I think some of [Member #4]'s ideas about a social media blitz are intriguing.  Tell us just how we could do that, [Member #4]?  I also agreed that the photo essay was very powerful and I could understand why it won a Pulitzer.

I also agree with [Member #6] that the film really did not address the real message she was trying to convey to the younger generation of girls here.  I really felt it fell down in that area.  What do others think?

[Member #4]:

I had trouble with the “why” of her staying, too.

But I found the videos posted on the [tooyoungtowed.org](http://tooyoungtowed.org/) website to be MUCH more powerful… and to the point, because they aren’t fictional characters, but real people in real situations.

If you have time, watch at least a few of [these videos](http://tooyoungtowed.org/%22%20%5Cl%20%22/videos)!

Follow-up [a little later after above post]….

I had only watched 2 of the 4 videos posted on the [tooyoungtowed.org](http://tooyoungtowed.org/) website when I sent the previous email message, and have since watched all four.

The fourth one, titled “National Geographic” is truly the MUST SEE video!  It’s nearly 21 minutes long, but unlike the others it really delves into the complexity of the issue — that it isn’t always done because girls aren’t valued, but sometimes because the families feel it is the girls' best protection and option.  Very enlightening!  The biggest take-away from it is the importance of access to education as the best way to break the cycle of this practice.  (Sound familiar?)

I urge you all to watch that video out of the group!

[Member #1]:

I agree, [Member #4], that National Geographic is a must see. It makes the ununderstandable almost understandable. But oh how hard to change!

Krys (moderator):

To [Member #4]:  thanks for the suggestion to watch the videos on the website.  I totally agree that the complexity of the issue is a lot more than could have been conveyed in the short film, and I had to keep in mind that the photo journalist's video essays are really quite a different medium than a short film for telling the story in different ways.

I could understand how the filmmaker wanted to bring the story closer to home by showcasing, through film, the consequences of this issue, but here in the United States.  But, for me, the pictures of the actual young girls and their various reactions was much more powerful.  As many said in the earlier parts of the discussion, the young American girls didn't really seem to have a clue about the situation from which the middle aged woman had come, nor did they even really seem to care or want to know.

That this practice is prevalent in more than 50 countries on our planet and that more than 100 million girls will become child brides in the next decade, makes this a very pressing human rights issue.  The most important factor to focus upon is education. It really is the key!  You could just see the difference in the faces of the girls who were learning!

My one lasting impression and emotional reaction to this topic is a profound sense of grief!  I really mourn the loss of their childhood!

[Member #10]:

I, too, feel the most enduring 'take away' from Nat'l Geo clip on the subject of child brides is the enormity of the situation and the profound sense of sadness, grief, and the brutality of mankind.  I am sure that not all these relationships are brutal, but far too many are.  Not only is there a necessity of education for girls, but for the boys of these nations too.  In fact the education of the male population is really what will stop this practice.  Even if the girls are educated, they are still nothing more than chattel to the men.  There must be a push for education for both sexes.  The passage of laws has minimal effect on stopping this and many other practices, such as mutilation of female genitalia or throwing of acid on girls who reject an arranged marriage. As stated before, the changing of culture traditions takes decades, if not centuries.  Education is a start, but is a very slow process, but the only enduring change.

**Krys (moderator): What does anyone think about the "gender lens" of the the filmmaker and the photojournalists?  Was the topic best covered from a woman's perspective?**

[Member #10]:

Yes, in my view; however, it would be interesting to have heard how a male photojournalist would have portrayed the situation.

[Member #4]:

If you watch the [videos posted](http://tooyoungtowed.org/%22%20%5Cl%20%22/videos) on [tooyoungtowed.org](http://tooyoungtowed.org/), there was one that included interviews of some of the boys who were entering into these arranged marriages, and they looked just as frightened and unwilling as the girls.  Granted, this wasn’t like many of the cases where it was a much-older adult male marrying these very young girls.  But it was very telling that the boys in those clips understood that it wasn’t right for any of them — boys or girls.

As for the ‘gender lens’ of the photojournalists, it’s a given that females from our culture would have a strong reaction to the practice of forced childhood marriage, but I don’t think we can assume male journalists wouldn’t feel the same way.  All they’d have to do is think how they’d feel about such a thing happening to their sisters, daughters, nieces, etc.

On a purely practical level, being a woman in this case helps the journalist have access to the women (particularly recording the details of how the girls are prepared for the weddings, in areas where men aren’t allowed).

[Member #11]:

I agree with [Member #4] that the critical factor is education.

I think some of [Member #4]'s ideas about a social media blitz are intriguing.  Tell us just how we could do that, [Member #4]?  I also agreed that the photo essay was very powerful and I could understand why it won a Pulitzer.

[Member #4]:

I never responded to Krys’ question about the social media blitz, because I wanted to see where the conversation went first.

If we wanted to all jump in and share an image, link or video clip on the subject, that would be a good “blitz.”  Our mutual friends would notice the common thread and be more likely to pick it up and share it with their friends, etc.

So I’d like to suggest each of us pick something that touched us most deeply — or something you would most like others to see on this topic — and post it on social media.  You can get it rolling by first posting a few things on our branch’s Facebook group, and everyone can “share” from that.  Or you can just post something on your own FB, Twitter, Google+, etc and encourage your friends to join the conversation.

Tip:  Even though we mentioned the power of the longer video clip from the [tooyoungtowed.org](http://tooyoungtowed.org/) website, the reality is that in social media most people are more likely to really look at something that is SHORT.  An image or short video clip, or link to a website, which they can peruse in more depth if they wish.  If you give them a link to a long article (particularly one without photos), don’t count on many people actually reading beyond the headline/title.

How does that sound?  Are you all game to do a little social-media-educational-blitz to heighten awareness and education on this topic?