



Just Business: Swan Paik on Nike Foundation and the Girl Effect

Swan Paik , Julia Taylor Kennedy

February 24, 2011



[Swan Paik](#)

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Welcome to Just Business, a series of interviews about global business practices. I'm Julia Taylor Kennedy, and today we're talking about adolescent girls in the developing world and how efforts to educate and empower them can impact poverty around the globe.

The [Girl Effect](#) sees young women as the key demographic for economic growth in the developing world. Nike Foundation supports the Girl Effect, and the Foundation's Swan Paik will tell me why.

Swan Paik, thanks for joining me on Just Business.

SWAN PAIK: Julia, it's a pleasure to be here.



[Julia Taylor Kennedy](#)

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Let's start with the idea that young women are the key to unlocking the economic potential of the developing world. Where does that idea come from?

SWAN PAIK: That idea, which is the central premise of all of the Foundation's activities, came from deep analysis that the founders of the Foundation conducted seven years ago when it was first created. We wanted to take on a global issue at the Nike Foundation and, while we operate separately from Nike, Inc., we really wanted to bring in the best of the Nike DNA to the realm of development.

When we looked around, we said, "Where is the need great and what are the poverty segments that are really in a desperate situation?"

The need is astoundingly great with girls. Just a few examples:

- Thirty percent of secondary-school-age girls in Sub-Saharan Africa attend school.
- The current prediction is that there will be 100 million child brides in the world by 2020.
- In the developing countries, half of all first-time mothers are teen-agers.

We said this is a population that has a great need.

The second part of our analysis was that girls are positioned to make change happen. They can play a central role in solving some of our most persistent development problems, such as child marriage, teen pregnancy, the spread of HIV—complex issues, intergenerational issues. Quite frankly, we believe these are issues that can't be solved unless girls are included and are revalued so that they can get an education, they can have access to their health rights, and they can pursue economic opportunities.

The third part of the analysis was that the cost of exclusion is extremely high. All of these things that happen to girls have a huge price tag. For example, over a lifetime, adolescent pregnancy in India results in nearly \$100 billion in lost potential income. That same kind of economic analysis plays out in many other countries where girls are deprived of their ability to transition safely from adolescence into adulthood.

We said: "Wow! There's really something powerful going on here. Girls seem to be an untapped solution, both preventing certain costs from being incurred but, as well, they are a huge untapped potential that can generate and drive growth for economies and nations."

Then, the final piece that made us realize that this was going to be our singular area of focus is that girls are actually being left behind by the development community. Everyone assumes that they are being reached, but we realized from our early analysis that they are not.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Do you see working with girls, empowering them, making sure they can fulfill their economic and social potential as a silver bullet to ending global inequality?

SWAN PAIK: We don't like the word "silver bullet." Maybe it's a missing bullet. Maybe it's—

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: A missing arrow in the quiver.

SWAN PAIK:—like we don't have enough gunpowder.

It would be too simplistic to say—and we honestly don't believe—it's a silver bullet. But we do believe that it's a powerful missed opportunity. The world is missing out on the strategic power of this segment.

There's a short window of time when all of these irreversible consequences happen to girls. It's from the time that she reaches puberty—let's say 12—to the time that she's 17. This is a five-year window when she will likely be married; she will have her first birth, and that sets the whole pattern for her future birthing; she will contract HIV or develop AIDS; she will be dropping out of school.

It's the silver missed opportunity. We think that the world is just missing out on her as a powerful accelerator of change. You are both paying a high price tag for her exclusion, as well as missing out on the tremendous potential that she has to offer by allowing her to fall through these irreversible trapdoors during her adolescence.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You also have funding from other sources, right? How does that work?

SWAN PAIK: Yes.

The Foundation was started with Nike, Inc. funding and it drew from our parent DNA, value system, and a value for human potential.

Then the [NoVo Foundation](#) came on board and decided that the girl-focused part of their portfolio and their strategy would be managed and funded through the Nike Foundation. They came in 2007 or 2008 and became a key partner for us.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You have an investment portfolio. How much are you investing in efforts around the world to empower girls?

SWAN PAIK: We have about 60 active grants right now that reach girls. They reach girls as well as boys, men, and communities, because the Girl Effect is about lifting everyone out of poverty.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: I also wanted to clarify the difference between the Girl Effect and the Nike Foundation. A lot of people are familiar with that viral [video](#) about the Girl Effect that reached so many different parts of the Internet and the world.

What's your relationship with the Girl Effect and how did that video come to be?

SWAN PAIK: The Girl Effect was launched in 2008. It is a collaboration of the Nike and NoVo foundations.

It's a fact-based advocacy tool that focuses on the benefits of investing in girls worldwide.

Part of the rationale and the timing for launching the Girl Effect was that we wanted to make sure that we were clearly building a fact base to draw upon key insights that we could articulate and amplify through the Girl Effect messaging. We took our time to make sure that we were clear and accurate in what we were saying, because we didn't want to jump to a message that didn't have tremendous substance behind it.

We created it because we didn't want the attention drawn to Nike or NoVo. These are two very high-profile brands that could dominate and overtake the conversation that we wanted to drive about girls. Creating the Girl Effect helped us to direct the attention to where we wanted it to go.

We created it to respond to two gaps in the field: a lack of awareness about the importance of investing in girls and a lack of tools to help raise awareness.

It wasn't just the Nike Foundation that was lacking the tools. All of the girl champions in the world—in the marketplace, if you will—lacked tools. The campaign platform was designed to fill that gap, and maybe even more importantly, to ignite a movement that all girl champions could own. When we say "girl champions" we mean NGOs, donors, governments, companies, and individuals. It's an open access brand for girls.

We took this approach based on what Nike, Inc. had learned from the experience with [Lance Armstrong](#) and the [yellow wristband](#) that we created. We learned that by taking the "swoosh" off that wristband we could actually have broader appeal, invite more people to embrace the message, and to participate in the movement for ending cancer.

When we created the Girl Effect we really drew on those lessons and said, "We want to create that open access brand that no matter what particular angle, perspective, or point of view that you have about girls' empowerment, whether you're an education, health, or a human-rights-based supporter, that the Girl Effect could embrace all people that wanted to raise awareness about girls and use it to amplify their own messages and their own work."

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: That's so interesting, because I had no idea that the "Live Strong" yellow wristband campaign was Nike-funded or related to Nike. So I guess that was successful.

SWAN PAIK: Yes.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What other trickle-through effects have come from being associated with such a successful company?

SWAN PAIK: The Nike brand is all about bringing inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. We say, "If you have a body you are an athlete." We view the world and every individual as having the potential to be an athlete, even if they don't believe it themselves.

Starting from that mission statement, we draw a lot that we build into the practice of the Nike Foundation and how we operate.

The first piece of that I'll take is innovation. The portfolio that I run, the investments that we have on the ground, we actually consider that our innovation kitchen. It's the innovation engine, because we are putting our risk capital on really compelling ideas and interesting models that no one else is funding, interested in funding, or is willing to fund.

We very much bring that core value of innovation into the way that we think about our investments and how we build the various program models on the ground: customizing micro-finance for girls, creating formal savings products for girls, and having a self-financing school for girls.

We have a very rich body of work that has as a common thread a high level of innovative thought behind the programs that we create. Innovation is absolutely core to what we do.

Then there is the inspiration piece. We say internally, "We have ridiculous ambition"—and we do. But that is very much a Nike trait as well. We absolutely believe in the power of going to the biggest vision and challenging ourselves to be better than we ever thought we could be. We take that into our work with girls, the way that we talk about girls, and the way that we want to see girls take over their own empowerment and drive the movement.

We have girls at the center and think about big ambition and big vision, and then the innovation that attaches to that, and then we back that up with hard, disciplined operations.

One of the things that I heard early on was that the Nike Foundation had a commitment to M&E rigor that was exceptional. Our grantees at times would be extremely challenged by the level of attention that we paid to this part of our partnership with them. But they would always follow up by saying, "It was hard but it was very rewarding, and we're so glad that you made us do our M & E with such rigor because it helps us, it helps girls, and it's actually a better way to operate."

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What does M&E stand for?

SWAN PAIK: It's monitoring and evaluation. It is understanding what works and why, so that we can continuously improve and get a deeper connection to our girls. The deeper our connection and understanding for what works for our girls, the better the work will be.

Innovation, inspiration, thinking big, and bringing our branding and communication excellence to that, and then

backing it up with operational excellence, is what we bring from the business.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Out of the innovation kitchen that you mentioned and then from monitoring it, what have you found has worked, what kinds of projects are successful?

SWAN PAIK: The examples I like the most are the ones where we are proving that longstanding, often harmful, traditional practices where people say, "You can't change that because that's culture and people have been doing that for hundreds of years and it's going to be like that forever"—well, we love hearing that, because that's exactly what we want to change.

We have a program in Ethiopia—one of our earlier investments—to end child marriage in the Amhara Region, which is one of the child marriage hotspots. It's a place where child marriage rates reach up to 50 percent of girls, and that's both under age 18 and a significant proportion of girls under age 15.

We started a program there leveraging government and community support, starting with some incentives for the girl and her family to keep girls in school. That program, which was relatively inexpensive, showed dramatic results, and a complete eradication of child marriage in the villages where the program was implemented. The participants in our program were 90 percent less likely to marry than those in the control group.

It has been so successful that [DFID](#) [Department For International Development], the UK development agency, has decided to fund a scale-up of this program so that it can reach over 200,000 girls in the Amhara Region over the next four and a half years.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What specific methods are you using to reach out to educate these families?

SWAN PAIK: Even when we have programs that involve community and other stakeholders—gatekeepers of the girls—we start with the girl, what does she need, and then we build around that.

We're very much focused on making sure that the girls get specific human and social assets. Social assets, in particular, are very important for girls that often live in extreme isolation.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What would be an example of a human asset and a social asset?

SWAN PAIK: A human asset would be knowledge, basic literacy, financial literacy, knowledge, and education. The social asset is very powerful in making sure that girls have relationships of trust, friends that they can call upon, a private safe place where they can meet other girls and actually talk about their lives or problem solve, or just play together.

Then there are some financial assets. In the case of this program, we started with a small incentive to the families and the girls to keep them in school. The idea was if they kept the girls in school and unmarried, initially they would get a goat.

What was interesting was that over time that incentive became less and less important, as the community itself embraced a new norm. Once the community does that, then that's sustainable development and you don't need the incentives, because the community has decided that they don't want child marriage, and they find all kinds of interesting and creative ways to enforce their own value system.

That's exactly what happened in Ethiopia. We layered on. Starting with the girl, making sure that she has some assets; working in community dialogues, but ensuring that the girls participated in that.

That combination and that certain sequencing of inputs enabled the community at large to make a change.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Why was it so important to have a control group?

SWAN PAIK: Because evidence is so important for getting larger systems and larger donors to fund these types of investments. We had very rigorous research around this project, which was instrumental in making the case to the larger bilaterals and to present to the world that this can be done, you should be doing it too, and here's the proof.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: One of your grantees that stood out to me in a list was the [Instituto Promundo](#), which is a Brazilian NGO that focuses on gender attitudes of men. Why include men and why support this program?

SWAN PAIK: If you ask the girls, they will say, "You've got to include the men and boys in the change equation," because they control so much of what happens to the girl. There are so many gatekeepers—mothers and

mothers-in-law—that keep the girl in isolation. We have to get through many layers and barriers to get to the girl and have her be able to participate in the programs.

We hear it from her, we see it, and we experience it as we try to roll out our programs.

The point here is that men are not the enemy, in our opinion. The enemy is invisibility, ignorance, and inaction. Overcoming those barriers is why the Girl Effect exists and why we want to raise attention and awareness.

Girl Effect has been as successful as it has been because we're offering a slightly different narrative. We're talking about the possibilities and the opportunity versus assigning blame or somehow taking an approach that other actors are really the villains in the equation.

Promundo was a leader in this field. We took their program and tried to replicate it, or expand it if you will, in various parts of India.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: How many commonalities are you seeing in the different parts of the developing world that you're working in, in terms of interventions that are effective, and how many differences are there based on geographic region?

SWAN PAIK: There are many commonalities, depending on the problem statement that you are addressing. As you do the analysis around, "Okay, maternal mortality is the problem in this region," and you start breaking down what the solutions are and conclude that girls are actually at the highest risk of maternal morbidity age 15 to 19—it's actually the leading cause of death in girls in that age range in the developing world—then you can say, "These are the core things that we know work for girls to get them empowered."

Beyond that, it has to be highly contextualized. The way that you actually go about the work, you need to look at what is the power structure around those girls in that community where maternal mortality is high, where do you want to reach them and make a change.

We try to share the best of our knowledge, what we know works for girls generally—a standard protocol—things that we have seen time and again that girls in poverty and vulnerability need. They need social capital building, access to resources, to understand their human rights, and a community engaged in the change. Those things are design principles for programs for girls, but then how that actually plays out in a particular context will vary based on the very specific circumstances that you find in different geographies or hotspots.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Have there been other things that you have tried that haven't worked so well? What lessons have you learned along the way?

SWAN PAIK: When you have an innovation portfolio, it's really important to have failure and for our partners to understand that failure is acceptable. In most donor-grantee relationships that's a no-fly zone; no failure is allowed.

We're really interested in learning. It's actually hard to tease out the failures, because no one likes to talk about it. But we've learned a lot.

We've learned that it's actually really hard trying to create a breakeven-to-profitable product for the private marketplace that is girl-focused. It's really hard to generate the business case that is acceptable to formal micro-finance institutions that operate with business principles, and the need for their products to deliver some contribution to their bottom line.

We experimented. With some financial institutions we were able to do really well, and with others we weren't.

We learned that it's really hard even for organizations that have some practice in doing work for girls, to do it with more of our methodology, where you put girls at the center and the start of the design process. It's very hard to reach very vulnerable girls.

With some of our programs, we've learned how challenging it is to work with school systems and try to get teachers motivated to take on an extra burden of work and do some activity with girls.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: You mentioned that you've been at Nike Foundation for a couple of years now. What drew you to this kind of work?

SWAN PAIK: It actually came from a particular moment. I was sitting in Amsterdam watching a BBC news segment about the trafficking of young girls across the Nepalese border into India. What stunned me about that trafficking was the magnitude of it. Hundreds of thousands of girls experience this—and this is just in one region,

one kind of border crossing—and they end up leading lives as sex slaves entrapped in brothels, where they're raped all day long and they can't leave their cells.

When I saw that and I realized the magnitude of the trade, I just thought: I don't know how we can call ourselves human beings when we allow this to happen to our most vulnerable children, our girls.

At that moment I knew that I would be involved in some way. I didn't know how that would ultimately play out. But I knew that this was something that I wanted to spend some of my life energy helping to solve.

I was very fortunate in that I was running the Nike women's business for the Asia-Pacific region, and there were very similar kinds of obstacles that we confronted on the business side about why girls do not participate in sports and what holds them back. Particularly in Asia, there are all kinds of gender norms, cultural barriers, and a lack of a belief in themselves, their own potential, and how that could be expressed.

When I got the call from the Nike Foundation that they had this opening, I felt like that was the opportunity I was waiting for, for a couple of years. It has been a dream come true.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: What are your goals now moving forward? Are there any specific types of projects you're looking to fund or any new initiatives that you're working on?

SWAN PAIK: The Foundation is in an exciting phase of growth. We are now looking more towards how to scale what we know and how to reach many more millions of girls with what we've built to date in our practice.

Because we've got a powerful portfolio, evidence that we're building, collaboration partnerships that we're strengthening, powerful advocacy that we can get after with tools like the Girl Effect, strong communications, and everything else that we bring to bear, we feel like we have built a body of work that we can now think about taking to the next level.

We're really set on how do we unleash the Girl Effect at scale. This will change the way we think about the partnerships that we forge and the way that we invest our portfolio. We'll still always have innovation investments, but more and more we'll be looking for prototyping investments.

If we want to get to scale, what is the next step that we need to take? How do we have prototypes incorporating the best knowledge that we have and get partners to help us to implement those prototypes, which then builds a bigger body of evidence, which then enables us to go after bigger-scale opportunities?

That's the next phase of growth that we're entering at the Foundation. It's very exciting.

JULIA TAYLOR KENNEDY: Swan Paik, these have been wonderful insights and it has been such a pleasure to have you on Just Business. Thanks for joining me.

SWAN PAIK: Thank you so much, Julia. It has been a pleasure.

Copyright © 2011 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs