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2018 PSR/Sacramento Essay Contest Finalist

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In the Oscar nominated film, *The Breadwinner*, a young girl, Parvana, seeks a better life under the strict influence of the Taliban in Afghanistan despite her set back due to her gender. Without a male escort to accompany them to the market, Parvana and the other women in her family are imprisoned in their home, sinking deeper and deeper into poverty. In desperation, Parvana cuts her hair, disguising herself as a boy so she can travel to and from the market to provide for her family. Her plan works and for the first time in her life, Parvana is free from the restraints of her womanhood. She suppresses her femininity as a survival instinct to provide for her family, but over time, it becomes natural.

Parvana's story is far too common in our world. Women grow up believing their voices cannot impact communities and their femininity is a weakness. It is toxic to teach girls that their voices as a females are not valued. When half of the voices in a society are silent, no progress can be made to benefit all members. Women offer a perspective that has to be recognized. When women speak up, change does happen. Other groups like the Taliban target girls in school to suppress the female voice.

On February 19th, extremists in Nigeria known as Boko Haram kidnapped 104 schoolgirls. When the girls were released a couple weeks later, they carried the message, "No more Western education for girls or we will strike again." By threatening their education, the extremists targeted the girls' abilities to fight back.

When young people have access to schools, they gain tools to fight against oppressive powers. A knowledge of history, critical thinking, reading, and writing all contribute to social revolutions. Boko Haram fears this power. They know that if girls are educated, they will grow up to challenge the power dynamic. They hit where they could suppress women's equality and secure their hierarchy.

Other parts of the world are making steps in the right direction. During the Rwandan genocide, almost a million people were slaughtered because of the ethnic divide between Tutsis and Hutus. After the fighting was over, Rwandans rebuilt their country in the face of grief. However, their response to tragedy was unique among other international incidents. Rwandans focused on reconciliation within their borders and elected more women than any other country in the world. They recognized the feminine voice as a healing power for conflict and poverty. Women ensured that government facilities could facilitate discussions between the Tutsis and Hutus. Today, Rwanda has more women in politics than any other country and there is no longer ethnic tension.

Unfortunately, women are disproportionately underrepresented in politics around the globe. This stems from social and institutional failings, but by educating girls, we can ensure they can will grow up to spark change. We will never end war, poverty, domestic abuse, or any other number of global issues without equal voices from educated men and women.