

The Asian University for Women, Chittagong, Bangladesh

Lady Judy Moody-Stuart

I write as a proud past member of the Foundation Board of the unique Asian University for Women (AUW) whose first pioneer class of 139 young women of 12 Asian nationalities, starting five years ago in Chittagong, produced 134 graduates with a BA in Liberal Arts this May. I am so passionately concerned for the success of AUW's students and our teaching faculty in Bangladesh, and inspired with the spirit of partnership that I intend to tell a little of their story.

I met Kamal Ahmad, the enterprising young Asian Development Bank lawyer who conceptualised this educational first, at Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire with the draft Operation Plan document 2006 in his hand, and within 20 minutes I was convinced. The twin drivers of his global enterprise were the challenge of ushering in global development, and counteracting the effect of centuries-long



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Women of 12 nationalities are learning together



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Applicants were reached through NGOs, communities and online

disdain for specifically female skills in Asia. So the idea was to access, via the women's development network within NGOs and communities and our website (www.asian-university.org) rather than by any standard state system, a particular sort of young woman and to bring her for interview with our local representative in her own country. Then, where suitable and where possible, we would offer her a bursary to a globally funded and accredited university education in the region.

The idea was to gather together young women of intelligence, academic impulse and initiative from disadvantaged backgrounds who had avoided (or negotiated) the traditional ties of marriage, and with their family's backing completed secondary education. This, we believe, can change the world. When these young women get into positions of responsibility, enter the corridors of commercial and political power, they will change the world. I divide these potentially underprivileged young women into three target categories: distant rural, urban poor and stateless refugees.

Chittagong, the second and main port city of Bangladesh, has a liberal Muslim majority, with GDP supplied largely through the remittances of men labouring overseas, and through the equally skilled and reliable global standard of women's work in textile manufacturing. There are several national and private universities in Chittagong, and women have access to secondary and tertiary education and respect locally – but what are their life plans and expectations? Are the particular views, skills and 'hard-wiring' of the female brain available to contribute to global decision-making – or are we still living in an often-dysfunctional man's world? Why must this be? What we need is not total revolution, but practical



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An excellent retention rate: of 139 in the first intake, 134 graduated (May 2013)

partnership, between those currently in power at the top of the global pile and those who aspire to making the world work better – project by project. We need a partnership between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' in terms of opportunity and respect.

In the years since 2007, we initiators have had several surprises, and learned many things in partnership with faculty and students. Our early funders doubted whether such an enterprise could attract high calibre faculty. Our chairman, Jack Meyer (of Harvard Foundation, and now of Convexity Capital), was adamant that we should not in any way 'sell our young women students short' by compromising on quality at AUW. Contrary to several people's expectations, we found that the challenge of the English-language medium and our innovative AUW plan and ethos does in fact



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Self-improvement and self-defence: a student practises karate

readily attract a certain sort of talented academic – the sort of person old or young who shares that ethos, and is willing to move to Bangladesh to put it into practice. This plan recognised the need for an Access Academy, a funded associate institution tailored to match a newly arrived student's skill-stage in maths and language. The idea is to build on that in the individual, focusing particularly on the need for quantitative reasoning and communication in English, and to bring clever but often under-educated young women up to the level of a global standard university entrance.

Moving to join a not-for-profit enterprise in Bangladesh is a challenge for career academics; so why did we choose Chittagong for our enterprise? There are three clear reasons: firstly, the geography of Chittagong, with its international airport in the centre of our catchment area of Asia and knowing the ongoing readiness of Bangladeshi workers to go overseas for work via Commonwealth and other connections. Secondly, that the Bangladesh people through their parliament voted us a charter of academic and intercultural autonomy, crafted on the lines of a UN document. Thirdly, the government in Dhaka granted us a magnificent residential site in the hills just north of Chittagong, well above sea level, and in a secure setting for the safety and convenience of our many nation students and their teaching and administrative staff.

This brings me to the last issues of partnership. The first is familiar to me as a veteran resident of many oil-camps and foreign residential enclaves. For a group of privileged human beings of many nationalities living in close proximity in a foreign city, the power of rumour and free-thinking peer pressure and the building of norms is a heady mix. Experience has taught us to encompass a medical report in our student entrance interviews, because the responsibility of adding a medically challenged individual to the community requires experienced and understanding experts on hand to deal with the possible stresses of living with 12 or more other nationalities in currently cramped campus accommodation in town. We are all equal partners in the new and creative society that we are building.

The second issue is 'What next?' For the reputation of our current and graduating students, and our own, AUW needs to open ready communication channels and opportunities for internships – and ultimately for jobs with global reach. Some of our girls are going home to start a married life, to teach, to enlighten and inspire their former youthful companions; some are heading for further academic study abroad – and they will certainly give as much as they will get. Some are the absolute dream 'material' for transnational intercultural enterprises in the coming century of Asia.

However, our final and outstanding partnership issue is that of funding. As Jack Meyer explains so cogently, if you focus on just one on the list of the developing world's problems, and try to beat it, you become overwhelmed by all the others. As female education rises, fertility, healthy population growth and infant mortality fall, and economists report that 90 per cent of a woman's income is spent on her family. We need leaders at all levels who can reflect inter-culturally and solve problems in partnership; the world needs something that can operate across the board, the lead partner in cultural development. And as Jack Meyer believes, 'that "something" is women's education: it is the greatest impact for your philanthropic dollar that you can have'.

LADY JUDY MOODY-STUART studied chemistry and natural sciences at Newnham College, Cambridge, followed by five years research in cretaceous palynology at the Sedgwick Museum of Geology, Cambridge. She married fellow Cambridge geologist and now ex-chairman of Shell Group and Anglo American mining company, Sir Mark Moody-Stuart KCMG, and travelled the world raising a family with him. She has recently retired from the boards of Transparency International (UK) and Quaker Social Action, and supports various ex-offenders and local and international reconciliation projects. Her current priority is the Asian University for Women based in Bangladesh.