

SUMMARY

THE MOMENT OF LIFT

MELINDA GATES



Summary of “The Moment of Lift” by Melinda Gates

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Learn how empowering women has the power to change the world.

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Introduction

What's the best way to spark change? By empowering women. When women are empowered, lives are counted equally and change begins to snowball into all areas of life. Throughout *The Moment of Lift*, author Melinda Gates discusses the eye-opening statistics, lessons, and discoveries that she has made over two decades of philanthropic work through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. So what does the *moment of lift* mean? Have you ever been on a plane about to take off? As the plane barrels down the runway, you find yourself anxiously waiting for the moment the wheels come off the ground and the wings take over; you're waiting for that moment of lift. Oftentimes, you feel as if the wheels are taking longer than usual to get off the ground and you wonder, *why is it taking so long to get off the ground!?* Why does it sometimes take so long while other times it happens so fast? As Melinda wondered this, she also wondered how she could summon a moment of lift for human beings -especially women. She knew that once society lifted up women, society could lift up humanity. Throughout her travels, Melinda encountered hundreds of millions of women who wanted to decide when to have families but didn't have access to contraceptives. Even more, many other rights and privileges of women were denied: the right to decide when and whom to marry. The right to go to school. Earn an income. Work outside the home. *Walk* outside the home. Spend their own money. Shape their budget. Start a business. Get a loan. Own property. Divorce a husband. See a doctor. Ride a bike. Drive a car. Go to college. Study computers. Throughout the world, these rights are denied to women. Sometimes they are denied under law, but even when they are allowed by law, they are often still denied because of cultural bias against women.

As Melinda began to work with underprivileged societies, she quickly realized that she had to speak up for *women*. She knew it wouldn't happen one step at a time; instead, it would happen wave by wave as women become empowered. Throughout her book, Melinda tells of the lessons she's learned from women all over the world. Those who have built schools,

saved lives, ended wars, empowered girls, and changed cultures. She hopes they can inspire you the same way they inspired her. She hopes they can show you the powerful change that can happen when women become empowered and have the right to live the lives they want. “Our call is to lift women up - and when we come together in this cause, *we are the lift.*”

Contraception and its Link to Poverty

It was on a trip to China that Melinda discovered she was pregnant for the first time. She was elated to tell Bill, her husband, the news. As they basked in the excitement of becoming parents, Melinda made another life-changing decision: to quit her job. Both her and Bill worked at Microsoft and they were fortunate enough to not need two incomes. She was thankful for the privilege to choose the life she wanted to live.

When asked if she would choose her career or her family, Melinda simply answered “yes!” She planned to build her career, have a family, and then create a mixture of the two later in life before fully immersing herself in her career again. But how was she able to create such a successful life? She had the benefit of a small pill that allowed her to choose when to become pregnant as well as the time and space between pregnancies. As she and Bill began searching for ways to make a difference, she didn’t immediately make a connection between the support of the poorest people in the world and the contraceptives she was using to make the most of her family life.

Of course, she understood the value of contraceptives for her own family. After all, it was no accident that Rory was born three years after Jenn, and their daughter Phoebe was born three years after Rory. It was her and her husband’s decision to do it that way. She was also fortunate to be able to get pregnant when she wanted to. But she also could *not* get pregnant when she didn’t want to. That privilege has allowed her to build the life and family that she wanted. It was during a trip to Africa in 1993, the year before Melinda and Bill married, that Melinda witnessed the scenes that would later launch the Bill and Melinda Foundation. As they drove through towns, she saw a woman carrying a baby in her belly, another baby on her back, and a pile of sticks on her head. Clearly, the mother had been walking a long distance with no shoes while the men were wearing flip-flops, smoking cigarettes, and no sticks on their heads or kids on their sides. As they drove along, she saw even more women carrying heavy burdens; she felt a need to understand their lives.

Years later, Melinda and Bill set up their foundation and traveled to Malawi to give children access to vaccines. She would talk to the women and they would tell her of the long distances they walked, sometimes ten or fifteen miles. It was during these vaccinations that she also discovered women complaining of not having access to shots themselves: the Depo-Provera shot, a long-acting birth control injection that could keep women from getting pregnant. These women had given birth to more mouths than they could feed. These impoverished women were destined to continue having children when they could hardly provide for the ones they had. The lack of access to contraceptives is a common struggle for many developing countries. In 2012, for example, 260 million women were using contraceptives in the world's 69 least wealthy nations. In those same nations, however, more than 200 million wanted to use contraceptives but didn't have access to them.

Increasing access to contraception in developing countries is a clear solution. In the 1970s, an ongoing study in Bangladesh revealed that women who were provided contraceptives were healthier, as were their children. Furthermore, the families were better off and their children were more likely to attend school. These benefits can be linked to the fact that women were allowed to choose when to become pregnant and they could better plan for their careers and education. Even better, they could choose how many children to have and avoid becoming poor. In other words, contraception provided women and families the opportunity to break the vicious cycle of poverty.

Education and the Infant Mortality Rate

As Melinda and her husband's foundation began cutting the number of childhood deaths because of vaccinations, the same could not be said for the worldwide rate of infant mortality. In fact, Melinda and Bill were appalled at the deaths of children in the poorest of nations, a direct result of their poverty. Infants were dying because mothers could not care for them, they lacked nutrition, vaccines, education, and both parents were forced to work. Melinda was shocked to learn that half of the children who lose their lives under the age of five die within a month of being born. Additionally, 3 million newborns die every year, and most cases occur in remote, impoverished areas where access to hospitals and medical professionals is limited.

Melinda and Bill knew they wanted to help in some way. The statistics were too appalling to simply ignore the problem of infant mortality. So in 2003, they partnered with a team in India where they trained community health workers. From there, they sent the workers to several impoverished communities, including Shivgarh, a remote village in Uttar Pradesh, a place where 300,000 newborns die each year and is responsible for ten percent of the world's newborn death rate. Here, they focused on maternal and newborn care. However, the team here was doing something drastic, they weren't using technology. You see, infants simply needed basic care and support during and after birth.

The team educated the community by promoting skin-to-skin contact to keep the baby warm and develop immunity, they educated them about breastfeeding from birth instead of waiting three days as the religious leaders advised, and they promoted other hygiene practices that went against traditional convention in the villages, like not giving the infants water because of the high contamination risks. In 2010, Melinda met a six-year-old boy whose life had been saved by the education program put in place all those years ago. The boy was born just a month after the initiative, his mother had fainted during childbirth and the baby had stopped moving.

Immediately, the family called for help and Ruchi arrived to see what she could do.

Ruchi noticed the baby was so cold that he was turning blue, so she asked the aunt of the boy to hold him against her skin so bring his body temperature up. Unfortunately, the aunt refused to help because she believed the baby was afflicted by an evil spirit; she refused to touch him. Ruchi, an upper-caste woman, decided to embrace the lower-caste baby despite the criticism and ridicule she could receive. She went against tradition, and soon, the baby began to show signs of life by crying and moving around. The baby wasn't taken over by an evil spirit; instead, he simply needed a physical human connection.

The story of Ruchi saving the young infant's life showed that helping impoverished communities must begin with educating the people of the taboos and stigmas that are present in their cultures. Soon after Ruchi's story, women began implementing skin-to-skin contact and changing their behaviors during childbirth. Something as simple as teaching others about human connection had the power to empower women and save the lives of their children. And just eighteen months after the initiative began, the remote village reduced their newborn death rate by half! Melinda understood then that fighting poverty must begin with empowering women.

Access to Education at All Levels

In the town of Kanpur, India, an impoverished area where its residents are members of one the lowest castes, a colleague of the foundation named Gary worked to educate the people of the town on family planning. It was while Gary was working in Kanpur, that a ten-year-old girl named Sona asked him when she would be receiving a teacher for herself. This question mirrors what many young girls face today: a lack of education. Melinda realized that no matter how much contraception they provide to the women of these impoverished countries, they still couldn't break the cycle of poverty. Sona was still destined to sort through the garbage looking for valuables to sell just as her parents did.

Education for women is still a global issue and when girls are given an education equal to that of their male counterparts, everyone in society benefits. Melinda knew that these impoverished communities needed more, they needed schools and they needed to start a transformation of how countries view education for women. Schools are places that have the power to inspire and empower students into recognizing their strengths and capabilities. However, in 2019, statistics on education showed a disparity between boys' and girls' educations. The problem, however, is a cultural one that is reinforced by the traditional view of male lawmakers who believe "the role of women is to serve the man."

This view of women is entrenched in many parts of the world. For example, look at Malala Yousafzai, the fifteen-year-old girl who was shot by the Taliban for her efforts in educating young girls. Later, she received the Nobel Peace Prize for activism and refusal to stay silent despite her close run-in with death. In countries like Afghanistan, only 30 percent of girls attend secondary school while 70% of their male counterparts attend school. Meanwhile, in other low-income countries, only 55 girls go to school for every 100 boys. Unfortunately, the reason behind these shocking statistics is that families rely on child labor to keep their heads above water. In other words, children are needed to contribute to the family's income.

In an effort to break the cycle of poverty, countries like Mexico have created initiatives that pay girls a monthly salary equivalent to what they might earn in the workplace to encourage them to go to school. They paid the families the amount of lost labor productivity; additionally, the less likely the girl became to attend school, the more the family was paid. The program called “Opportunities” has worked so well that Mexico now has the highest percentage of women graduating from programs like computer science at a university level. As a result, 52 other countries have followed suit and implemented similar programs.

Unpaid Labor is a Direct Correlation to Women's Inequality

One of the hardest jobs in the world is the work of rearing children and becoming a housewife. Even educated women face such hurdles as women are expected to complete unpaid labor, including providing childcare, cooking meals, and running errands. In many countries, women are far more likely to complete these jobs over men and the data reveals a clear disparity.

For example, women in India engage in six hours of unpaid work a day while men only complete just one hour a day. The United States also shows this disparity where the average woman completes four hours of unpaid work a day but men only complete two-and-a-half. When you add up the numbers, on average, women will engage in seven years more unpaid work than men in their lifetimes. Not surprisingly, this is also the amount of time one needs to complete both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Melinda realized that she needed to transform herself before she could begin transforming others. Her passion for equality in partnerships required her to take a look at herself and recognize that she needed to have integrity and an equal partnership within her own marriage. Therefore, she and Bill worked to share their feelings and cultivate love and respect in their daily interactions. For example, Melinda recognized that she felt it was unfair that she was the one dropping off and picking her daughter up from school each day. After this conversation, Bill offered to help take the load off Melinda and share in the responsibility. Soon, other dads throughout the community were driving their kids to school too.

Furthermore, economist Diane Elson created a framework to help reduce the gender gap between unpaid work. She called it the three Rs: *reduce*, *recognize*, and *redistribute*. First, governments need to recognize that unpaid work must be included in labor statistics. Next, we need to reduce how long it takes to complete unpaid work by providing access to better

technology, including washing machines and breast pumps. Finally, we can't simply stop at reducing the work by providing better technology, we also need to make the work equally distributed between men and women.

Child Marriage is the Most Disempowering Practice for Women

Child marriage is still surprisingly prevalent in many developing countries. When Melinda attended a dinner hosted by Dutch Princess Mabel van Oranje, she realized just how child marriage directly related to her foundation's efforts in educating communities about family planning and newborn and maternal health. Melinda learned that child brides were subject to higher rates of HIV, abuse, rape, beatings, female genital cutting, little or no educational opportunities, and many were dominated by husbands who were much older than themselves. In other words, they had little or no chance of creating an equal partnership and were more often treated like slaves.

Even worse, child brides were at risk of losing their lives. The leading cause of death for 15 to 19-year-old girls is childbirth, and if the child bride doesn't die, her infant may, and the young mother is left with physical trauma. Still, child brides are a widespread phenomenon, and in 2012, it was estimated that 14 million child marriages occurred. Statistics show that an estimated one-third of girls in emerging economies were married off before turning 18, and almost 10 percent of those were married before the age of 15. However, the issue stems deeper than simply selling children to older men. In fact, many of the young girls come from families who live in dangerous communities where the options are limited and even dangerous. Oftentimes, families marry their children away to escape their community and the parents do it out of love and desperation.

Parents believe they are providing their daughters with a better life and are saving her from rape, sexual abuse, and even scarier situations that she may encounter throughout their community. However, child marriage typically means uprooting the girls' lives and separating them from their friends and family. They are shipped off to neighboring villages and are expected to take care of all household duties, including cleaning, cooking, and even

child-rearing. Child marriage is perhaps one of the most disempowering experiences that any girl can go through.

Molly Melching, the founder of Tostan, is a pivotal example of how empathy can spark change. Based in Senegal, Molly has worked to end child marriage in the region by getting involved in the community simply by facilitating conversation, not distributing aid. To avoid Westerners telling developing countries how to behave, the goal was to offer an open dialogue about tradition and life while also offering education on the community's terms. In the program, facilitators were trained and sent to villages where they organized community workshops and discussed the future in which the people wanted to see and experience. The results showed a remarkable change from the inside out. Overall, the community experienced better marriages, better health, and more equal partnerships. What's more, there were no more child marriages in more than 8,500 communities in the region.

Women Inequality in Agriculture

How do you get the food you need to survive? For many people in developed countries, they simply head to the supermarket to get their weekly supplies. However, this is not the case for many developing countries. Instead, hundreds of millions of families grow food for survival, and data shows that 70 percent of the poorest people in the world turn to farms so they can sell food and make ends meet. By 2006, the Bill and Melinda Foundation had recognized the value of agricultural production in combatting poverty. However, they quickly realized that agriculture was largely a male-dominated area; meanwhile, when you looked out into the fields, there were only women working there.

In many communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, women farmed the land, took care of the house, and reared the children. Yet, they received a third less yield than their male counterparts. Therefore, the foundation aimed its focus on empowering women to farm better. By providing access to better seeds and holding workshops on more efficient farming techniques, they believed they could help combat malnutrition and poverty. Furthermore, they aimed to provide women with credit lines, supplies, marketing opportunities, and free land ownership of men to better improve their farming success.

In 2015, Melinda met a female farmer named Patricia who was working on improving her crop yield so she could afford to send her children to school. Unfortunately, the system in Malawi was not cut out for women to succeed. Women were not allowed to inherit land; therefore, unlike the male farmers, she had to rent the land that she farmed. Additionally, like most women in her community, Patricia didn't have control over the family spending. In other words, if she needed more farming supplies, her husband would be the one to determine whether or not she received them.

Fortunately, Patricia and her husband took part in a program called CARE Pathways which taught them farming techniques and the importance of

gender equality in farming. In one session, Patricia and her husband participated in a family budgeting exercise where they discussed how they should invest their money and produce better results. In the end, Patricia told Melinda that the program changed her life. Suddenly, her husband was accepting her requests for better farming equipment and the program was able to give her better seeds, allowing her to quadruple her crop yield. The increase in crop allowed Patricia to send her children to school. Even more, Patricia took part in her community and empowered the women by providing them with better seeds as well.

In 2011, a study showed that female farmers produced 30 percent fewer crops than men in developing countries even though they were equally skilled. The study revealed that if women were empowered with the resources they needed, they could match the crop yield of their male counterparts. The result would not only be an improvement in the lives of the poor women but would also improve their families and the economies in which they resided. It wouldn't simply be a ripple effect, but a tsunami of meaningful change as 150 million people could escape extreme poverty.

Diversity in the Workplace

Not only does Melinda plan to tackle gender inequality around the world, but she also plans to tackle it right here at home. Throughout her career, Melinda worked in the tech industry at Microsoft, a field dominated by males who were abrasive, direct, and never said thank you. They also came down hard on failures and mistakes. Eventually, she found herself wanting to leave; however, Microsoft was too exciting of a place to give it up forever. So what was she supposed to do?

In the wake of the #MeToo Movement as well as the journey of Susan Fowler (of Uber), Melinda has continued to celebrate the empowerment of women, focusing especially in the tech industry. Today, Microsoft has gone through a cultural shift, in part due to cultural changes led by Melinda and a team of 1,700 people. Throughout their shift, Melinda and her team encouraged employees to be honest about their mistakes and own up to their weaknesses. However, many other tech industries have failed to do what Microsoft has done.

Melinda believes that diversity is key, especially in the world of AI. If AI is going to run the world, then it needs to represent every diverse part of humanity equally; otherwise, the gender and racial inequality will only continue as future technologies are shaped by men and in men's favor. So why are so many women becoming excluded from tech in the first place? One reason is that the perspective of programming has shifted from a secretarial job to a more complex profession suited for men. For example, when Melinda graduated in 1987, 35 percent of IT graduates were women. Today, that number has dwindled to a mere 19 percent!

Additionally, women are largely underrepresented in tech since only 2 percent of venture capitalist investors are women. Even more, only 2 percent of venture capital is invested in start-ups created by women. For this reason, Melinda has begun investing in venture capital funds that are led by women. Aspect Ventures, for example, invests in organizations that

are either founded by women or people of color. Melinda recognizes that women and people of color are severely underrepresented and experience life differently than white men. This means that they can offer different perspectives and solutions to problems. At the end of the day, diversity is key to the success of a healthy workplace and society in general. Diverse societies that lift women up and empower one another have the power to create a better world.

Final Summary

Bill and Melinda Gates first began their foundation so they could help people all over the world and make a difference. Throughout their journey, however, they switched their focus as they recognized that increasing access to contraception and healthcare for women empowered them to create a life they wanted. This not only helped them but also their families and communities. Unfortunately, gender inequality is deeply entrenched in societies that believe a woman's role is to care for men. Women were unable to choose a life for themselves because they were forced into marriage at a young age or the laws put in place meant they couldn't have the same opportunities as men. While the foundation has helped millions of people across the world, and progress has certainly been made in developed and developing countries, society still has a long road before we see a world in which women have the same opportunities as men.



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