**Prompt**

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|  | In John Woods' Room to Read, a great deal is said about establishing libraries and reading programs in developing countries such as Vietnam, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and others.  And sometimes there is pushback in one way or another, usually governmental or financial.  However, consider:  are Woods' goals culturally based on his Western approach to education?  Are there cultures (not necessarily governments) that would reject his notion of widespread education, particularly for girls?  What would cause this, and at what levels of society? Consider how we define culture: the shared ideas, ideals, and artifacts of a people that they create for mutual survival and the perpetuation of their way of life.  In addition to your reading and understanding of the philosophy and actions of the Room to Read organization, research an incident, event, or circumstance in another country or culture that speaks to education, reading, and books - does it fit in with Woods' endeavors?  Why or why not?  Most importantly, Should it?  Take a position one way or another and defend it while appreciating cross-cultural beliefs that might be contrary to a Western point of view.  Cite your source and use relevant passages from Room to Read that might address such a situation. |

**Response**

In examining John Wood’s methods and ideas, I would say that his goals are definitely based in the ideology of Western culture. Several times he brings up that, culturally, many of the countries Room to Read works in do not have a history of educating girls. China comes to mind, although I am aware this has shifted somewhat. My grandparents were frequent customers of a Chinese buffet. One of the waitresses there knew them by name and loved to talk to them. I recall one conversation about the laws regarding having children (which may not be in effect now; I admit to being ignorant on the current status). At that time, if your first child was a girl, you were allowed to try for a second child; if the child was a boy, you were done having children. If the second child was a girl, you were also done (I believe this was done, in part, to attempt to counteract the population crisis in China). The reason for this was that boys were valued more than girls, because they could get better jobs and support the family more, either in the family business or later in life. Sadly, in many cases, families chose to abandon first and second girl children so that they could try for a boy; often, this meant that they killed the child or sold her into prostitution.

Sad as this story is, it is a clear example of a culture that, at least historically, devalued the worth of women in its society. This is a common thread across cultures. Wood is careful, for definite reasons of safety, to work only in countries and locales that show a willingness to go against this cultural trend. Going against a culture can be dangerous. Take a look at American history! The Civil War is a perfect example. In modern times, at least in most parts of the US, slavery and racism are frowned upon and not the culturally accepted norm, but it was not always so. Changing culture takes time, and it is almost never a smooth transition.

Regarding the education of girls, many examples exist. A prominent one comes out of Kenya and involves a tribe of people called the Maasai. The Maasai are a generally nomadic tribe of Africans that hold very strongly to their cultural beliefs and history. However, in holding to their culture, they have neglected the education of many of their children, especially girls. There are varied reasons for this. Some include incentives for early marriage and a “return on investment” mindset. Girls are married off almost as soon as they hit puberty, because at that time their “monetary” value is at its highest and their social standing will increase based on the number of children they birth. Regarding investment, many families feel that educating their daughters undermines the family because, when she is married off, her talents and education will be made useful to another family. In an environment and lifestyle where competition between families for survival is a basic fact of life, this is a powerful incentive. Additionally, families fear that putting daughters in school past a certain point exposes them to the possibility to early pregnancy outside of marriage, which drastically decreases the value of the dowry the family can receive for her. In addition, the nomadic lifestyle often results in great or varying distances to walk to school each day, a danger anywhere in the world but especially in Africa.

Changing this system, as the organization Maasai Girls Education Fund does, requires a significant effort to navigate the complex relations between two vastly different cultures. Similar with Room to Read, this organization creates funds and scholarships to keep Maasai girls in school and to educate their mothers and families about the benefits of a formal education. The problem with the mindset of Western culture, especially from an American viewpoint, is that it has a tendency to feel superior about itself. This is, generally, offensive to other cultures. What if that particular culture does not think that we have been particularly successful? What is THAT culture’s idea of what it means to be successful? Wood has made astounding progress in working within the bounds of culture and showing that education can improve a culture and makes a nation better able to compete in the modern world. However, as rapid as the success of Room to Read has been, it is important to remember how many hundreds of thousands of children have not been helped by its efforts across dozens of nations and cultures. This shift, this changing of culture which is fundamental to the understanding that a people has of themselves, can only be gradual.

<http://www.maasaigirlseducation.org/the-need/barriers-to-education/economic-cultural-physical-barriers>

<http://www.aidforafrica.org/member-charities/maasai-girls-education-fund/>