

**25 TRUE STORIES**  
**OF**  
**CHANGEMAKERS**  
**FROM AROUND THE WORLD**

This collection features 12 incredible tales of girls from Room to Read's Girls' Education Program, who have created positive change in their lives and the lives of others. In the program, these girls learned to believe in themselves, persist through difficulties, and support one another as they defy gender stereotypes to improve their circumstances and their communities. They have created sustainability apps, challenged early enforced marriage, grown award-winning gardens, and earned money for their families as YouTube sensations. The girls' stories are paired with 12 tales of their heroes, women from across the globe in whom they've found inspiration and strength.

Dive into these pages to celebrate the girls and their heroes—and see how you might follow their examples in your own life!

Scan the QR code below to find exciting interactive activities and learn more about these girls and their journeys.



REBEL GIRLS SHE CREATES CHANGE 25 STORIES OF COURAGEOUS YOUNG WOMEN AND THEIR HEROES



Room to Read®

presents  
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with

REBEL  
GIRLS

SHE CREATES  
CHANGE

25 STORIES OF  
COURAGEOUS YOUNG WOMEN  
AND THEIR HEROES





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# REBEL GIRLS

SHE CREATES  
CHANGE

25 STORIES OF  
COURAGEOUS YOUNG WOMEN  
AND THEIR HEROES

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This is a work of creative nonfiction. It is a collection of heartwarming and thought-provoking stories inspired by the life and adventures of 25 women. It is not an encyclopedic account of the events and accomplishments of their lives.

For more information about obtaining copies of this book, contact [info@roomtoread.org](mailto:info@roomtoread.org).



[www.roomtoread.org](http://www.roomtoread.org)



[www.rebelgirls.com](http://www.rebelgirls.com)

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# FOREWORD



Hello, Changemakers!

Over the last two decades, my life has been enriched by witnessing girls and women take control of their destinies by pursuing life trajectories of their choosing. I am even more gratified and hopeful when I see their families and communities celebrate and support them. In this collection, I am proud to share a selection of stories showcasing some of these inspiring changemakers, participants in Room to Read's Girls' Education Program. These young women have used life skills such as perseverance, critical thinking, self-confidence, empathy, and communication to overcome a range of obstacles, design better futures for themselves and their families, and strengthen their communities. We all walk in the footsteps of the changemakers who came before us. So, you'll also find stories of these young women's heroes—strong women who came before them to help pave the way.

Just like the individuals featured in this book, it is my hope that you will set and achieve goals of your choosing and that you will find fulfillment by staying in school, continuing to learn, and creating positive change in society. My mother is an example of this transformation, and she is my hero. She knew how important it was for a girl to be educated. She grew up in India and refused to be married at a young age, even though child marriage was common in her community. She was ostracized when she left home seeking higher education, but eventually earned a doctorate degree. Her





choices created choices for me and led me to my position as CEO of Room to Read, where I have the privilege of helping young people like you across 20+ countries acquire skills and achieve their dreams. For the women in my family, the transformation from child bride to CEO happened in a single generation.

Magic happens when young people like you can become lifelong learners and make their own choices. Each of you has the power to shape your story. As you recognize your own strength, develop new life skills, acquire knowledge, and form trusted relationships with peers, mentors, and role models, you will create a world of possibility for yourself and others. My hope is that you find nuggets of wisdom throughout this collection and that, as you read the stories, you see the potential to overcome any challenges that may stand in your way. I dedicate this book to your power, your dreams, and your chosen destiny!

Warmly,



Dr. Geetha Murali  
CEO, *Room to Read*®





# DEVINA

## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATE

**D**evina was no more than six years old, working alone in a field of maize, when she sensed danger. Heart pounding, she picked up a stick and looked around. Monkeys inched closer—in all directions. The chase was on!

Devina had to think fast. A daring escape followed. She was the youngest of nine kids and money was tight in her family. Unfortunately, many more crises lay ahead, but one thing was for certain: when things got tough, Devina kept her cool.

One day, a woman in Devina's village was robbed of her land. She had purchased a plot with her life's savings, only to have it sold out from under her. Devina was troubled by the injustice. She wanted to better understand the law and how to protect those most vulnerable, but didn't know how.

She had never known a lawyer, but she'd read about one in a book. But, university was expensive, and she would need money for that. So she returned to harvesting and worked night and day in the fields for weeks on end. With her earnings, she applied to Moshi Co-operative University, to study law.

On graduation day, Devina celebrated more than her law degree. "I realized many poor people are taken advantage of," she said. "I am not rich. I am poor, but I have a place in society."

While attending university, she managed to send money to her family, to help grow rice and eventually buy a plot of land to build a new home. Proud of all that she has achieved, Devina chuckles and grins, "My younger self would tell me: congratulations, you have gotten out of the chase with the monkeys."

BORN 1998

TANZANIA



**“I HAD HOPE FOR THE FUTURE.  
I AM HERE TODAY BECAUSE  
I HAD HOPE.”**

**—DEVINA**



**Devina's Hero:**

**GLORIA  
ALLRED**

*See next page.*

**ILLUSTRATION BY  
NICOLE KAMBI**

# GLORIA ALLRED

FEMINIST LAWYER



One summer day in 1941, a girl named Gloria was born in Philadelphia, U.S.A., a place nicknamed the City of Brotherly Love. She was the only child in her Jewish, working-class family.

When she was a young woman, Gloria was sexually assaulted. She did not report the rape, fearing nobody would believe her. Yet she never forgot what she went through. Gloria became a lawyer, and a fearless defender of women's rights. "I have been the victim of many of the injustices [my clients have experienced]," Gloria said. "... I understand how this is impacting their lives—economically, psychologically, often physically."

Gloria fights for justice for women. In one case, actor Hunter Tylo was fired by television mogul Aaron Spelling because she was pregnant. Gloria's work was important in establishing the rights of pregnant actors. She also advocated for a law to end time limits on sexual assault cases in the State of California. Now, when a Californian is ready to prosecute their attacker, they can't be told it's been too long since the original incident.

Some people attack Gloria's work, but she remains persistent and unstoppable. In fact, she has been inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in the United States. When asked what her biggest fears are, she bluntly responds, "I can't say that I really have fears. But I guess if I had to name one, it would be not living long enough to do everything that I want to do." Gloria wants to keep fighting injustice, because "when one woman is denied her rights, we're all being denied our rights." Maybe her hometown, Philadelphia, should now be known as the City of Sisterly Love?

BORN JULY 3, 1941

UNITED STATES





"[... SOME PEOPLE] STILL FEEL  
THREATENED BY STRONG WOMEN.  
THAT'S THEIR PROBLEM. IT'S NOT MINE."

—GLORIA ALLRED



ILLUSTRATION BY  
ANDINA SUBARJA



# DEWMINI



GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT



Once upon a time, there was a girl who dreamed of growing a magical garden filled with mangoes, brightly colored flowers, and a babbling stream with singing fish. Dreaming of this paradise gave her strength to deal with the problems she faced in her everyday life.

Dewmini was born in a poor area of Sri Lanka where severe droughts caused by climate change made life very difficult. Some days there was no water to drink, and she had to go to school without breakfast. One day, Dewmini's father decided the only option was to send her to a wealthy house in the city to work as a servant. Dewmini was angry and refused to go. She was desperate to stay with her family.

At school, Dewmini learned about agriculture and decided to grow a garden. She began by planting eggplants. Then she added lemons. Then betel nuts. Then okra. Her teachers and parents were astonished by her determination as her garden bore vegetables in no time at all.

Dewmini and her father soon began to sell her vegetables to people in the village, and she surprised everyone—including herself—when she won third place for the most bountiful garden in the entire district! "It was my happiest day," she beamed. "I feel quite accomplished to do that at such a young age."

Dewmini has big plans for the future. She lobbied her town's leaders to build wells. And "one day, after I get my degree, I will build an agricultural hub for my community, educating farmers and giving jobs to many. There will be plenty of food and drinking water, and lots of trees to give everyone shade."

BORN 2008

SRI LANKA





An illustration of a young woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling warmly. She is wearing a yellow t-shirt with a pink collar and small yellow star-shaped earrings. She is holding a small green plant with four leaves in a dark, textured pot. The background is a lush garden with large green leaves, red flowers, and yellow flowers. In the distance, there are rolling hills and a building with a pulley system.

ILLUSTRATION BY  
KATHERINE AHMED

“THERE’S NO GAIN  
WITHOUT COURAGE  
AND DETERMINATION.”

—DEWMINI

**Dewmini’s Hero:**  
OTARA DEL  
GUNEWARDENE  
*See next page.*

# OTARA DEL GUNewardENE

FASHION ICON AND  
ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

**N**ot so long ago, a compassionate girl grew up on the tropical island of Sri Lanka, playing with squirrels and birds and dreaming of ways to help animals and the environment. It surprised no one that she planned to become a veterinarian.

But when she started college, Otara discovered that she loved fashion, too. She began to model, inspired by colorful local designs and eye-catching patterns. Eventually, she got the idea to gather surplus clothing from factories and sell it out of her blue station wagon. To start the business, she borrowed a small sum from her brother and mother. Soon, Otara created the first retail store of a clothing brand that combined her first two names: Odel!

Because of Otara's hard work, Odel became one of the biggest fashion empires in Sri Lanka. Yet, being a successful entrepreneur wasn't enough. Otara had never forgotten her passion for animals, and designed a line of T-shirts to help protect Sri Lanka's wildlife. She helped plant trees and clean up beaches. And then, Otara met Niko.


Niko was a rescue puppy. As she nursed him to recovery, Otara learned firsthand the suffering of street dogs. She started a new brand to support them, and even brought puppies onto the fashion runway! The brand's success convinced Otara to sell Odel and devote her energy back to helping neglected animals.

Today, Otara envisions a world of "respect and care for all living beings." She focuses her time and money on the connections between business and environmental preservation. She aspires to help Sri Lanka become a true paradise: a safe, healthy home for animals and people.

BORN AUGUST 30, 1964

SRI LANKA



An illustration of a woman with short brown hair, smiling, holding a brown and white dog. She is wearing a white top with yellow and blue floral patterns. The dog is wearing a black collar with a silver buckle. The background features a blue sky with pink clouds, a yellow sun, and dark mountains.

“LET YOUR DETOURS  
LEAD YOU TO YOUR  
DREAM.”

—OTARA DEL  
GUNEWARDENE

ILLUSTRATION BY  
MONTSE GALBANY



## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT



nce there was a girl who learned she was as beautiful as a flower. Diksha's skin was a darker shade than the people in her village. Everyone saw her as different. Kids teased her. Her mother pressured her to use whitening cream. Diksha would look into the mirror and ask herself, *"How can I feel so beautiful on the inside, but not see it on the outside?"*

Diksha's older sister was angered by the discrimination in her family. She took Diksha to a field of flowers. "Look," she said. "You are just another color in the midst of all these blossoms." In that moment, Diksha understood that she was beautiful, inside and out.

One day, Diksha noticed her friend, Sita, was not at school. Sita's family believed in a tradition that prohibited girls from going to school when they were menstruating, and forced Sita to sleep in the animal shed when she had her period. Diksha knew no girl should ever be made to feel ashamed of her body, so she took her life skills notebook and went to visit Sita's grandmother. It was unusual for a young person to confront an elder, but Diksha knew it was the right thing to do.

Sita's grandmother listened to Diksha and was convinced to let her granddaughter out of the shed. Together, the girls skipped through the forest. "That forest never meant much until the day Diksha rescued me," Sita shared. "Then it was like paradise."

Diksha plans to work for girls' equality when she is older. "I want to be one of those people who signs official papers and makes big decisions."



BORN 2005

NEPAL







“YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE FEARFUL.  
YOU HAVE TO BE FEARLESS.”

—DIKSHA

**Diksha's Hero:**  
**SAPANA MALLA**  
**PRADHAN**

*See next page.*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
KATHERINE AHMED

# SAPANA MALLA PRADHAN

SUPREME COURT JUDGE

Once upon a time, a girl named Sapana was born in a small village surrounded by steep mountains and rushing rivers. Growing up, she realized that women in Nepal had fewer rights than men. Women could not initiate a divorce and weren't allowed to hold many jobs. These injustices seemed as enduring as the sheer peaks of the Himalayas, but Sapana was undaunted. She wanted those laws changed.

And for the power to change a law, Sapana knew, you had to become a lawyer. So she did exactly that.

In her first big case, Sapana joined hands with two other women lawyers to fight a case for women to inherit property. She knew that being considered a full person under the law would have ripple effects on girls' lives, empowering them to make decisions different from so many of Sapana's peers in her own village. It took Sapana seven years to win the case, but at last, she and her colleagues were able to ensure that daughters had the same property rights as sons.

After their victory, some people blamed Sapana and her fellow women lawyers for destroying Nepali society. They received terrible threats of physical violence. There were many times when they felt hopeless. But with the support of the legal community she had built and her purpose, she found strength to persist. Sapana is now a judge in Nepal's supreme court. She continues to advocate for women's rights, including women's sexual and reproductive rights, in and outside of the courtroom.

Passion for justice continues to keep Sapana—and many of her fellow Nepalese women—going strong.

BORN NOVEMBER 15, 1963

NEPAL





ILLUSTRATION BY  
NABILA ADANI

“YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE IN POWER  
AND AUTHORITY TO BRING CHANGE.”  
—SAPANA MALLA PRADHAN



# KEYA

## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT

**K**eya loved to read the news. Her father was a barber, and each night she'd wait for him to bring home the newspapers from his shop. Keya poured over the pages, dreaming of becoming a great politician.

When Keya became a teenager, her father decided it was no longer appropriate for his daughter to read the news and stopped bringing home the papers. Keya was very upset. Reading was her connection to a world of possibility, and she would not give that up. Determined, she began collecting the newspapers street vendors used to wrap food. "He couldn't stop me," she recalls. "I would read them and tell my mother what was going on in the world."

One day, Keya and her friends were walking home from school when a group of boys started harassing them. She told the boys to stop, but they became belligerent. Keya asked her parents for help, but they were worried and told her to keep her head down. Keya went to her teachers. They did not have a solution.

Years went by and the situation worsened. Keya knew she had to do something. This time, she mustered up the courage to speak directly to the town leaders. "If you can feel the pain of others, then you will feel the need to help us," she told them. "This must stop." Keya made history that day. The leaders listened to her and filed formal charges against the harassers.

Looking back, Keya is proud that she stood up and spoke out. "I did it for all girls. Not just myself and not just my friends, but all girls."

Now, the story of Keya the changemaker appears in the newspapers that she was once forbidden to read. This time, her father beams with pride.

BORN 2006

BANGLADESH



An illustration of two women in a room. The woman on the left is seen from the back, wearing a blue and red patterned shawl. The woman on the right is facing her, wearing a blue patterned top. The room has a pinkish-purple wall with several papers pinned to it. A large, circular object, possibly a mirror or a piece of art, is on the wall behind them. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

“MY MOST PRIZED  
POSSESSIONS ARE MY  
KNOWLEDGE AND MY PEN.  
WITHOUT THEM,  
I HAVE NOTHING.”

—KEYA

ILLUSTRATION BY  
HANNAH PECK AND  
BONNIE TAYLOR FORSYTH


**Keya's Hero:**  
BEGUM ROKEYA  
*See next page.*



# BEGUM ROKEYA



FEMINIST AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST



One day in 1880, a free-spirited girl named Rokeya was born in an industrial village in Bangladesh. Her father was highly educated and encouraged his sons to go to school—an opportunity he would not allow for Rokeya or her sister. But Rokeya knew her rights. She wouldn't let anyone stop her from getting an education.


Though her home was Arabic-speaking, Rokeya convinced her brother to teach her Bangla, a local language, and English—in secret! Ultimately, she would speak five languages fluently.

When she married, her husband was supportive of her passions. Rokeya began to write and write, advocating for education as the key to women's equality.

Her slogan was: “Jago Go Bhogini” (Wake Up Sisters), meant to inspire Bengali Muslim women. She knew that social norms often limit women from being independent and achieving their potential. So, Rokeya shared her message in magazines and books. One of her science-fiction novellas, *Sultana's Dream*, featured a world ruled entirely by women leaders!

Rokeya's bravery extended beyond the page. She set up the first school for Muslim women in her area when she was only 29, risking her life by knocking on the doors of men, like her own father, who did not want to send their daughters to school.

Today, her legacy lives on as thousands of girls in Bangladesh read her works and attend schools that she founded. Those same girls, and millions more, also celebrate Rokeya Day every December 9th, echoing her cry for women's rights and justice.



DECEMBER 9, 1880–DECEMBER 9, 1932

BANGLADESH





“WAKE UP SISTERS!  
WAKE UP MOTHERS!  
WAKE UP DAUGHTERS!”

—BEGUM ROKEYA



ILLUSTRATION BY  
SARAH SAIYARA



# LAYTHONG

## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATE

In a Laotian community close to the Chinese border, a girl named Laythong lived in an unfinished brick house. Early in the morning, she donned her one school uniform, said goodbye to her dear grandmother, and walked the hour to school. As she trudged, Laythong struggled to overcome her fury and loneliness. She felt like such a burden.

Laythong's father had passed away, and her mother worked in another city. To afford school, Laythong harvested rice and flowers on the weekends. She learned to manage money, giving some to her grandmother, and saving for her own needs.

At school, Laythong found comfort in volleyball. She joined her school team, and was thrilled to learn to spike, serve, and pass. She loved to support and be supported by her teammates. Laythong was making her life work for her. But when her team lost the finals, everything seemed hopeless.

That's when Laythong's friends and coach helped her bounce back into action. Practices and classes made her mentally stronger and braver. Slowly, Laythong regained her confidence and decided to study for two different university entrance tests. Laythong did not pass the test for her first career choice—to become a doctor. But she *did* pass the test to become a sports teacher. Now, Laythong teaches that life is not about winning or losing: what matters is how you cope with your experiences. "I achieved my second dream," she says proudly.

Today, Laythong zooms to her job on a motorbike her mother gave her, head held high. Between her friends, students, and her own motivation, Laythong has built herself a happy family of her very own.

BORN 1997

LAOS





**"I MAKE MY OWN FUTURE."  
—LAYTHONG**

**Laythong's Hero**  
PLEUMJIT  
THINKAOW  
*See next page.*


ILLUSTRATION BY  
JOANNE DERTILI



# PLEUMJIT THINKAOW



VOLLEYBALL PLAYER



One day in Thailand, Pleumjit was practicing her table tennis spins when her sports-loving father arrived with a brand new volleyball. She loved football, badminton, and basketball, but table tennis was her favorite. *Try playing volleyball, he said that day. I think you'll have fun with it.* And so at fourteen years old, Pleumjit began learning the basics of volleyball. She spent hours in practice, inspired by her father's constant encouragement.

Pleumjit soon joined her school's volleyball team, working intensely to become a star player. She was so good that when a volleyball coach from Bangkok saw her in action, he brought her to the capital to play. She joined the national junior team, and then the national team. In Bangkok, she rose to become one of Thailand's best athletes.

Pleumjit and her Thai teammates were not as tall as many professional players, so they trained to become faster and to play with more power, improving their strategy and developing quick thinking on the court. Pleumjit could spike at more than 9 feet in the air, and block nearly as high! Yet as important as her own skills were her connections with her teammates. The "instinctive connection" between her and the team's setter impressed audiences: "[It is] as bewildering to opponents as it is brilliant to watch."

Through amazing athleticism, an infectious smile, and fun social media posts where she shared her everyday life with millions of fans, Pleumjit became an inspiration to a new generation of players. She and her teammates put Thailand's women players on the global map of professional volleyball—as real people, role models, and spectacular athletes.

BORN NOVEMBER 9, 1983

THAILAND



“TEAMMATES ARE LIKE FAMILY.”  
—PLEUMJIT THINKAOW



ILLUSTRATION BY  
KRIS DURAN



# MENGHORNG



## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT



Once upon a time, a shy girl named Menghorng watched, intrigued as her teacher typed on a computer keyboard. She was not very familiar with computers, but she loved music. The motion looked a bit like the way a piano was played, with the same endless possibility to create. Menghorng was fascinated. She knew she wanted to learn more about Information and Communications Technology (ICT).

In the small Cambodian village where Menghorng was born, only boys were encouraged to pursue ICT. And while her parents supported her, Menghorng found learning to program very difficult. Still, she spent hours tapping away at the keyboard, determined to improve her skills. And improve she did! But Menghorng was still too nervous to share her work. To build her self-esteem, she started to read motivational books and join school debates. Finally, she entered a competition—and she didn't win. By now, she knew her weak points, and where she needed to work harder.

When Menghorng had an opportunity to create an app based on sustainability, she programmed one that helped her community understand climate change. This time, she won! Next, Menghorng created another award-winning app to help STEM students improve their critical thinking. Now, Menghorng feels like she is living a fairy tale, where the intelligence and resilience of a rural girl is internationally recognized at last.

Today, at only 15 years old, Menghorng mentors other girls as they experiment in an ICT field that is still heavily male-dominated. Menghorng knows that their perseverance will lead to a better future, where the world's difficult problems are solved by girls and boys together.

BORN 2006

CAMBODIA







**Menghorng's  
Hero:**  
**RITH SOVANDALIN**  
*See next page.*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
KATHRIN HONESTA

**"JUST TRY, NO MATTER  
HOW HARD IT IS!"**  
—MENGHORNG

# RITH SOVANDALIN

APP DESIGNER AND DATA SCIENTIST



nce upon a time, a 13-year-old in Cambodia learned an exciting new language: computer coding. Sovandalin delighted in its possibilities for communication and creativity, and knew she wanted not only to use tech, but to make it. Her parents, however, did not see the sense in a girl doing “boy’s work.” In fact, they were horrified.

So, Sovandalin turned to YouTube. As her skills and experience expanded, she considered the challenges for girls in STEM. “I realized that I wasn’t the only one who suffers from [gender stereotypes],” she remembers. But she wouldn’t let that stop her—or anyone else.

Sovandalin gathered 30 girls online, organized them into a club, and began teaching them to create animated videos. Sovandalin loved seeing a girl’s eyes light up when her code worked. “Coding is not naturally only for men,” Sovandalin said. “Women can do it, too . . . [but] it is important to be confident with ourselves.”

Despite her parents’ unchanged minds, she earned a full scholarship to study web and app development—and left home. Balancing her studies, her emotions, and her club was a huge task. Sovandalin kept a detailed to-do list. And she sought support from a mentor to talk, recruit volunteers, and create budgets. Her initiative impressed UNICEF Cambodia, and she secured their funding. Sisters of Code now has a core team of eight!

Today, Sovandalin is one of only two girls majoring in Data Science Engineering and Artificial Intelligence at CamTech. There are still snarky remarks from young men, but she stays firm in her commitment to help women share their talent in the gender-inclusive future of STEM.

BORN JANUARY 30, 2003

CAMBODIA





“I WILL ALWAYS DO MY  
BEST TO INSPIRE OTHER  
GIRLS AND WOMEN TO  
FOLLOW THEIR DREAMS.”

—RITH SOVANDALIN



ILLUSTRATION BY  
JANET PAGLIUCA



## ENVIRONMENTALIST

**N**estled in a secluded forest near the famous Kruger National Park, Bushbuckridge in South Africa is home to the go-getter Neo. While she watched animals in the Kruger happily roam and leap, Neo could not do the same. She was born with a severe walking disability. She had to deal with daily stares because she was different.

Neo's parents encouraged her to walk instead of using a wheelchair. They believed that walking would strengthen her legs. For little Neo, this decision was hard and she was met with stares and sometimes laughter as she struggled to walk to school. But as difficult as it was, Neo walked on. Indeed, her legs got stronger—and her self-confidence and resilience, too.

With a new spring in her step, Neo walked tall and she walked proud. She walked to church for her choir practice. Once, she walked to the mall to do her own shopping. This was a defining moment for her. Never mind the stares! She knew then that her body was differently built so that she could stand out.

Today, as one of a few college students in a community struggling with low levels of literacy, Neo is admired. Neo's legs carry her throughout her community, educating those around her about climate change and preserving their beloved Kruger. Parents encourage their children to follow in her footsteps. Her name means "gift" in Setswana, and Neo is indeed a gift to her community.





“STAND UP FOR YOURSELF  
EVERY CHANCE YOU GET.”

—NEO

ILLUSTRATION  
BY TYLA MASON

**Neo's Hero:**

**CONNIE  
FERGUSON**

*See next page.*

# CONNIE FERGUSON

ACTOR AND FILM PRODUCER



nce upon a time, a little girl with big dreams was born in Lobatse, Botswana. Connie grew up in a small town in Southern Africa, but her dreams defied its borders. Soon, her parents moved the family to Kimberley, a sleepy city in South Africa's Northern Cape. But Connie's bright, confident personality needed a bigger stage! In the early 1990s, South Africa transitioned from apartheid to a democratic state and Connie moved to Johannesburg—a big city where she thrived.

In 1994, entertainment blossomed for Black South Africans. From the dusty streets of the Soweto township to rural villages, homes were flooded with local television productions telling Black stories. One of these productions was *Generations*, a soap opera so popular it brought the country to a standstill every weekday as it played. Connie was the star of the show. The bright city lights shone brighter on her. This girl was on fire! Connie the filmmaker? You bet! A producer? Check! She became one of the few African women who has made a successful career in filmmaking and producing.

Connie became a businesswoman, too. Her skin care line for Black women was the first of its kind in South Africa. Connie works hard every day and uses her fame to actively support young people, sharing positive messages that can help others sparkle, too.

BORN JUNE 10, 1970

**BOTSWANA**





“CHOOSE SERENITY,  
COURAGE, AND WISDOM!”  
—CONNIE FERGUSON

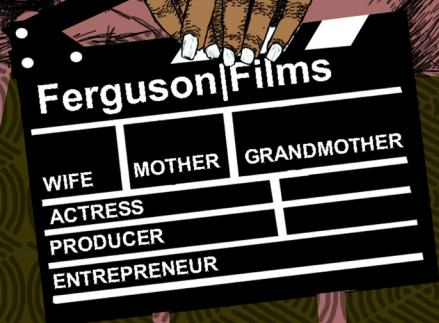


ILLUSTRATION BY  
ANOVUYO MALI



# SAPANA



## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATE

**T**here was once a girl who daydreamed of healing people with rays of light from her hands. Her name was Sapana, and when she was young, her little sister fell ill. Her family lived far from a hospital, so they performed a traditional healing ceremony to try and cure her. Sapana begged her father to make the journey to a medical clinic, but by the time they set off through the jungle, it was too late, and her sister died. At that moment, Sapana promised herself she would become a nurse.

No one in Sapana's family had graduated from high school, but they supported her, even if paying her school fees meant they had to sometimes go hungry. Every day, she walked for four hours to get to school. And when monsoons flooded the roads, she slept overnight in her classroom.

Finally, the day came for her to apply to nursing school and take the entrance exam. Sapana was not accepted and she fell into a deep depression. But she then remembered the advice of a mentor, who told her to never underestimate herself. "I realized I had the strength to keep trying," remembers Sapana. "I was not going to stop there."

After months of preparation, she took the entrance exam again. Later on, outside the college admission's office, she stood at the window and scanned through the list of students' names who had passed. There, in the middle of the list, in big, black, all-cap letters: SAPANA!

Now, as a nurse working on the front lines of COVID-19, Sapana spends each day using her persistence and courage to save lives. She daydreams about her hero, Florence Nightingale, wondering "what gave her the strength to keep working for others." Many might wonder the same about Sapana.

BORN 1998

NEPAL



**“SOMETIMES ALL YOU  
CAN DO IS NOT GIVE UP!”**

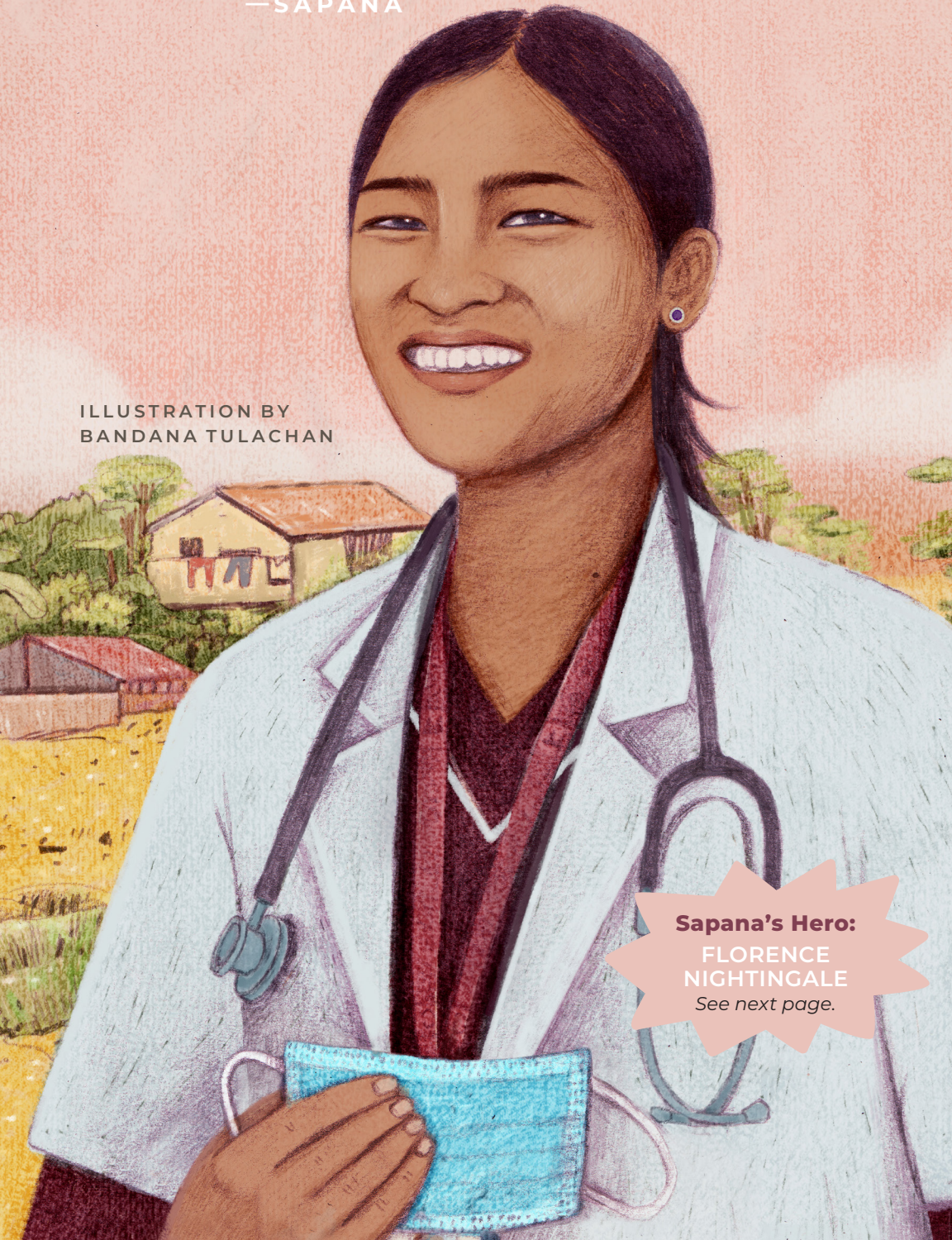
**—SAPANA**

ILLUSTRATION BY  
BANDANA TULACHAN

**Sapana's Hero:**

**FLORENCE  
NIGHTINGALE**

*See next page.*



# FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE

NURSE



nce upon a time, a baby was born to an English couple traveling in Italy. They decided to name their daughter after the beautiful city where she was born, so they called her Florence.

Florence loved traveling, she loved math and science, and she loved collecting information. Whenever she went to a new place, she would note down how many people lived there, how many hospitals there were, and how big the city was. She loved numbers.

Florence studied nursing and became so good at it that the government sent her to manage a hospital for injured soldiers in Turkey.

As soon as she arrived, Florence started collecting and examining all the data she could find. She discovered that most of the soldiers died not because of their wounds, but because of infections and diseases contracted in the hospital.

“The very first requirement in a hospital is that it should do the sick no harm,” she said.

She made sure that everyone working there washed their hands frequently and kept everything clean. At night, she carried a lamp as she made her rounds, talking to her patients and giving them hope.

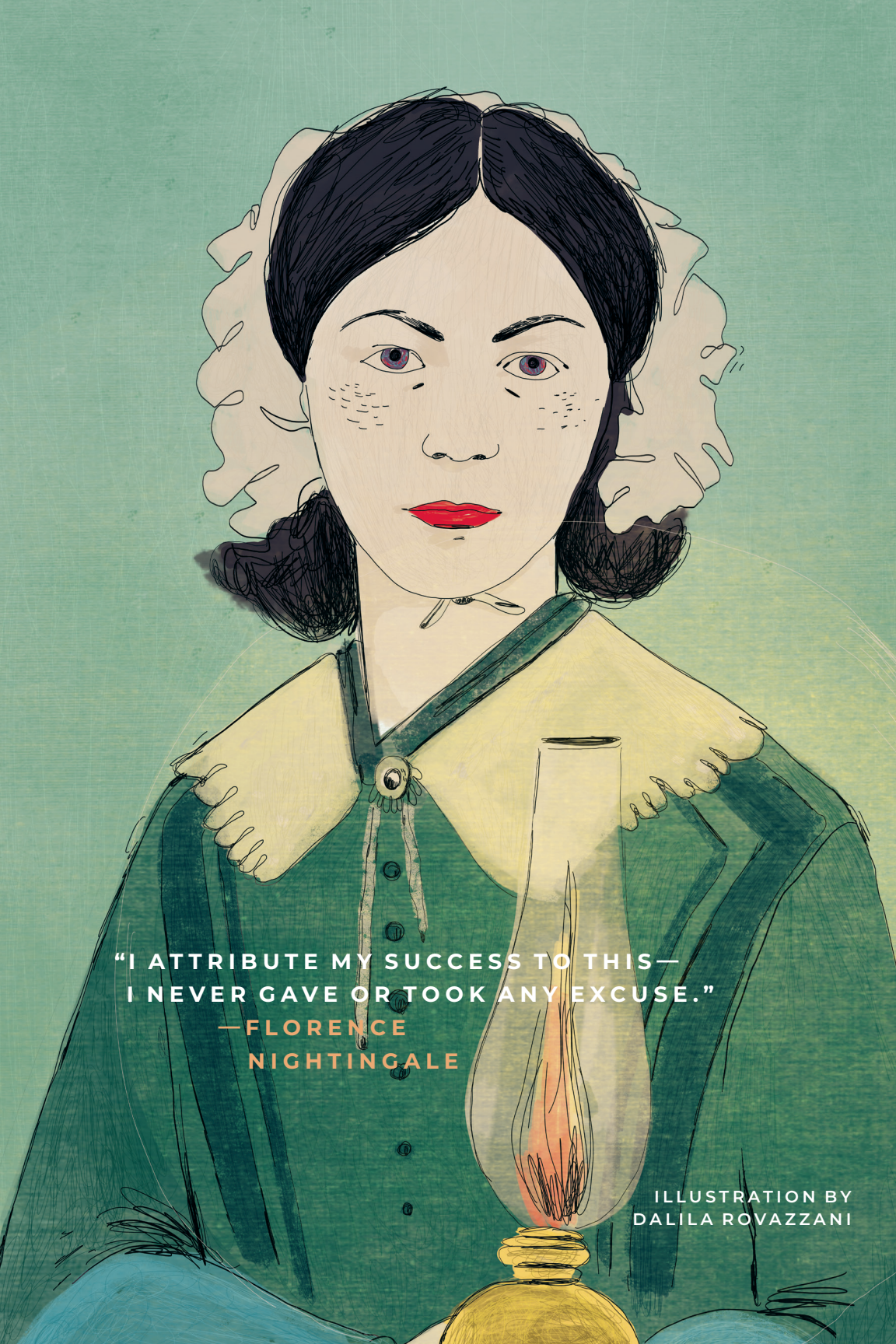
Thanks to her, many more soldiers made it home safely, and she became known as “The Lady with the Lamp.”

MAY 12, 1820–AUGUST 13, 1910

UNITED KINGDOM







"I ATTRIBUTE MY SUCCESS TO THIS—  
I NEVER GAVE OR TOOK ANY EXCUSE."

—FLORENCE  
NIGHTINGALE

ILLUSTRATION BY  
DALILA ROVAZZANI



# SENGHONG



## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT



Once upon a time, a Cambodian girl called Senghong loved to laugh, read, and, especially, write. But her dreams of being an author were often interrupted by a painful tightness in her chest. Once, she became so breathless and frustrated during an oral geography test that she lost consciousness. But no one knew what was causing her symptoms.

Throughout her childhood, Senghong's father also struggled. When he could not find work, he became abusive. When he died, Senghong's beloved elder brother left to get a job in another city. Then her sister broke her leg, and the operation was delayed because they couldn't pay. The stress made Senghong's breathing worse than it had ever been. Her mother, a model for Senghong's own courage, comforted her: "We are ok."

At last, in 9th grade, a doctor diagnosed Senghong with heart disease. To help her spirit, she spent hours lost in stories and philosophy books. Support from her friends, mentors, and family filled her with gratitude. So for them, and others who struggle, Senghong began transforming her challenges into words of inspiration. She felt like a fountain of words!

One day, Senghong saw a publisher online asking for work from young writers. She shared some motivational essays, and this led to her first published book. "I write about real situations in my community, and in my life," Senghong says. She also posts uplifting messages on social media. "Writing is healing," Senghong shares, "and it makes me happy."

Senghong believes that obstacles make us stronger. With her strong support network and inspiration from beloved books, Senghong is on her way to becoming a successful author—and making her dreams come true.

BORN 2003

CAMBODIA





“PATIENCE IS NECESSARY  
FOR SUCCESS.”

—SENGHONG

Senghong's  
Hero:  
SENG GECHLY  
*See next page.*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
KASIA BOGDANSKA

# SENG GECHLY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Once upon a time, near the lowlands of the great Mekong River, there lived a young Cambodian girl who could not set down her pencil. Gechly spent hours in her spare time pouring her thoughts and emotions into journals. Writing felt like not only her first love, but her destiny.

Her parents felt differently.

They wanted her to become a “respected” professional, a doctor or a banker. But Gechly would not give up. Depression crept in, and Gechly started writing about it in a journal. Gechly and her parents fought about her future constantly, and those fights only intensified when she made it clear that she would never change her mind.

After high school, Gechly left home to pursue her literary career and take care of her mental health. The vibrant city of Phnom Penh opened up her world, and in turn Gechly opened up her innermost self to the world.


In 2018, when Gechly was only 19, she self-published a book version of her journal about living with depression. It became a bestselling phenomenon. Gechly then started a Facebook page to encourage young people who suffer from mental health to speak up and educate themselves. “Like me, many teens in Cambodia are journaling as a way to cope with their mental stress,” Gechly says. Soon, she had 200,000 young fans and followers, and published two more books in her series called *Student of Life*.

Today, Gechly uses her celebrity as an author to be a true social media influencer: not by making brand endorsements, but with content that inspires action. Talk about being an influencer with real influence!

BORN JANUARY 22, 1999

CAMBODIA



An illustration of a young woman with long, dark blue hair, wearing a maroon t-shirt, sitting at a wooden desk and reading an open book. She has a gentle smile. Behind her are two wooden shelves against a light pink wall. The top shelf holds several colorful books. The middle shelf holds a small potted plant with green leaves and more books. To her right, a smartphone is mounted on a blue tripod, displaying her face. On the desk in front of her is a stack of books, with the top one having a blue cover and some text in a non-Latin script.

“LIFE IS A CHOICE.  
WHAT YOU REACH FOR  
IS UP TO YOU.”  
—SENG GECHLY

ILLUSTRATION BY  
DEBORA ISLAS



# SHIRIN

## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM STUDENT

**O**nce upon a time, a Bangladeshi third-grader named Shirin was eating a small biscuit for lunch. It was all her family could afford. Another girl approached and asked Shirin about her future dreams. "I want to be a teacher," Shirin replied. "Poor people like you never become anything," the girl scoffed. "You'll be married off by fifth grade."

The words cut through Shirin's heart, as she feared they weren't far from the truth. "I felt so small," Shirin says. "But then I decided to prove her wrong."

Shirin convinced her parents to send her to a bigger school, with more opportunities. But in her 7th grade year, they changed their minds. Soon a family arrived to talk to her about marriage. Shirin summoned her courage and refused. She was so persuasive that her parents also agreed she could continue her education.

However, Shirin's family still could not afford tuition. So, Shirin started working at a lightbulb factory. Long hours of work and late nights of studying became her life. Shirin's work caused blisters and cuts all over her hands. But her dream lit her way.

At the factory, Shirin befriended girls who faced similar challenges. She encouraged them to speak up against child marriage, and even talked to their parents about how education could change a girl's life and her family's. "Never be afraid to speak up," she counsels. "When you see that you can accomplish small goals, you slowly gain confidence."

Today, Shirin is working towards a teaching career. She uses some of her money for school and saves the rest. Shirin hopes to inspire others to light up their own futures by speaking up and defending their dreams.

BORN 2004

BANGLADESH



An illustration of a young woman with dark skin and black hair in two braids, wearing a blue shirt. She is holding a glowing yellow lightbulb in front of her chest with both hands. Inside the lightbulb is a smaller version of herself, wearing a yellow shirt, reading a book and holding a pink highlighter. A red heart is floating above the smaller figure. The background is pink with several yellow lightbulbs hanging from thin black lines.

“IF YOU DO NOT  
BELIEVE IN YOURSELF,  
NO ONE ELSE WILL.”

—SHIRIN

ILLUSTRATION BY  
SONIA LAZO

**Shirin's Hero:**  
**SUFIA KAMAL**  
*See next page.*






# SUFIA KAMAL



POET AND POLITICAL ACTIVIST

nce upon a time in Bangladesh, a smart and driven girl called Sufia hid under a bed, her nose in a book of poetry. Her wealthy Muslim family did not believe in schooling for women, but she always found a way to learn, even if curled up in a dusty corner on the floor! Sufia spent hours in her uncle's library. From a tutor, she was allowed to learn the languages Urdu, Arabic, and Persian.

One day, Sufia's mother took her to Kolkata. There, she met a famous woman author who wrote about the challenges faced by women, challenges Sufia knew by heart. Sufia started writing her own poems and stories about life, love, and the experiences of women in her culture.

Sufia became such a good writer that words seemed to flow from her pen. When reporters would come knocking at her door to ask this now-famous writer for her poetry, she would sit them down and write a poem instantly!

When war broke out, Sufia organized to help women and people experiencing poverty. With her words, she nurtured the dream of a country with stronger rights for all. She wrote, "I'll remove the thorns along the path—so that, for those who come after, thorns don't prick their feet; so that, for their thorn-pricked feet they don't fall behind. That much I'll do with whatever strength I have."

To this day, Sufia Kamal, the people's *Khalamma* (auntie), inspires a new generation of leaders and poets in a land called Bangladesh—her words speak to their hearts and souls, in all the corners they find the courage to learn.

JUNE 20, 1911–NOVEMBER 20, 1999

BANGLADESH



ILLUSTRATION BY  
MICHELLE D'URBANO

“DO THAT WHICH  
IS GOOD FOR OTHERS.”

—SUFIA KAMAL





# TRANG

## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATE

**T**rang lived with her family in a small thatched hut in remote Vietnam. She helped her mother sell sweet cakes at the market across the river. One day, their boat tipped over and all the cakes tumbled into the water. Trang's mother cried. Now they wouldn't have enough money to buy food.

"I will never forget that day," Trang recalls. "I wanted so badly to help my family out of poverty." So she sat and thought. She had a special bond with animals, especially with Bim Bim. He was the only white duck in a flock of all black birds, and he was not accepted by the group. Bim Bim must be lonely, thought Trang, just like me. It dawned on her that maybe, just maybe, the world might enjoy their unique friendship.

Trang had heard about YouTube. She dreamed of becoming an actor and decided to start her own channel. "At first I recorded videos with old phones that kept on breaking, and many times my videos didn't get a single view." But Trang kept at it. She posted Bim Bim's birthday party, Bim Bim learning to cook, Bim Bim dancing. Over time, the whole nation was laughing!

Trang won YouTube's Silver Creator Button Award for earning 100,000 fans. "I never thought I could go that far. I do not have an assistant. I do not have high quality equipment. I taught myself everything."

Trang has even started a YouTube channel for her mom called Mother's Hometown. "It celebrates my mom's delicious cooking and helps college students overcome feeling homesick," she said. "My mother was very happy."

Trang hopes her success inspires others to think beyond what feels possible.

BORN 2002

VIETNAM





00:15:28

"TOMORROW, MY  
LIFE WILL BE  
DIFFERENT!"  
—TRANG



**Trang's Hero:**  
H'HEN NIÊ  
*See next page.*

ILLUSTRATION BY  
JUEN TIEN



# H'HEN NIÊ

MISS UNIVERSE VIETNAM

# W

When she was not helping her parents cutting rice, herding cows, and picking beans, young H'Hen Nie loved to explore her home in Vietnam's Central Highlands. She swam in the lake, slid down slopes, and played in the lush forest among the colorful birds and butterflies.

But among the Ede people, an ethnic group to which H'Hen Niê's family belongs, young girls marry and start a family by age fourteen. Her parents expected her to do the same, but H'Hen didn't want to. "I had lots of dreams and I had to follow them," she said.

So she left her rural village to study in the city. Her mother saved to send her through college and, to help with the expenses, H'Hen also worked as a nanny, house cleaner, waiter, tutor, and even a Christmas tree decorator!

She graduated, and eventually discovered the glitzy world of fashion and started modeling. She realized that if she was a successful model, she could help her family. H'Hen worked hard to learn more about fashion and soon she was joining runway shows and going on national auditions.

In 2018, H'Hen became a Top Five finalist in the Miss Universe pageant—the first Vietnamese contestant to do so. At her mother's suggestion, H'Hen used 100% of her prize money from the pageant to build a library in one of Vietnam's rural central provinces. H'Hen continues to advocate for women empowerment and girls' education and literacy because she believes that "if girls are given tools to succeed, then nothing can hold them back."

BORN MAY 15, 1992

VIETNAM



“FROM NOTHING,  
HERE I AM.  
I CAN DO IT, SO YOU  
CAN DO IT, TOO.”

—H’HEN NIÊ

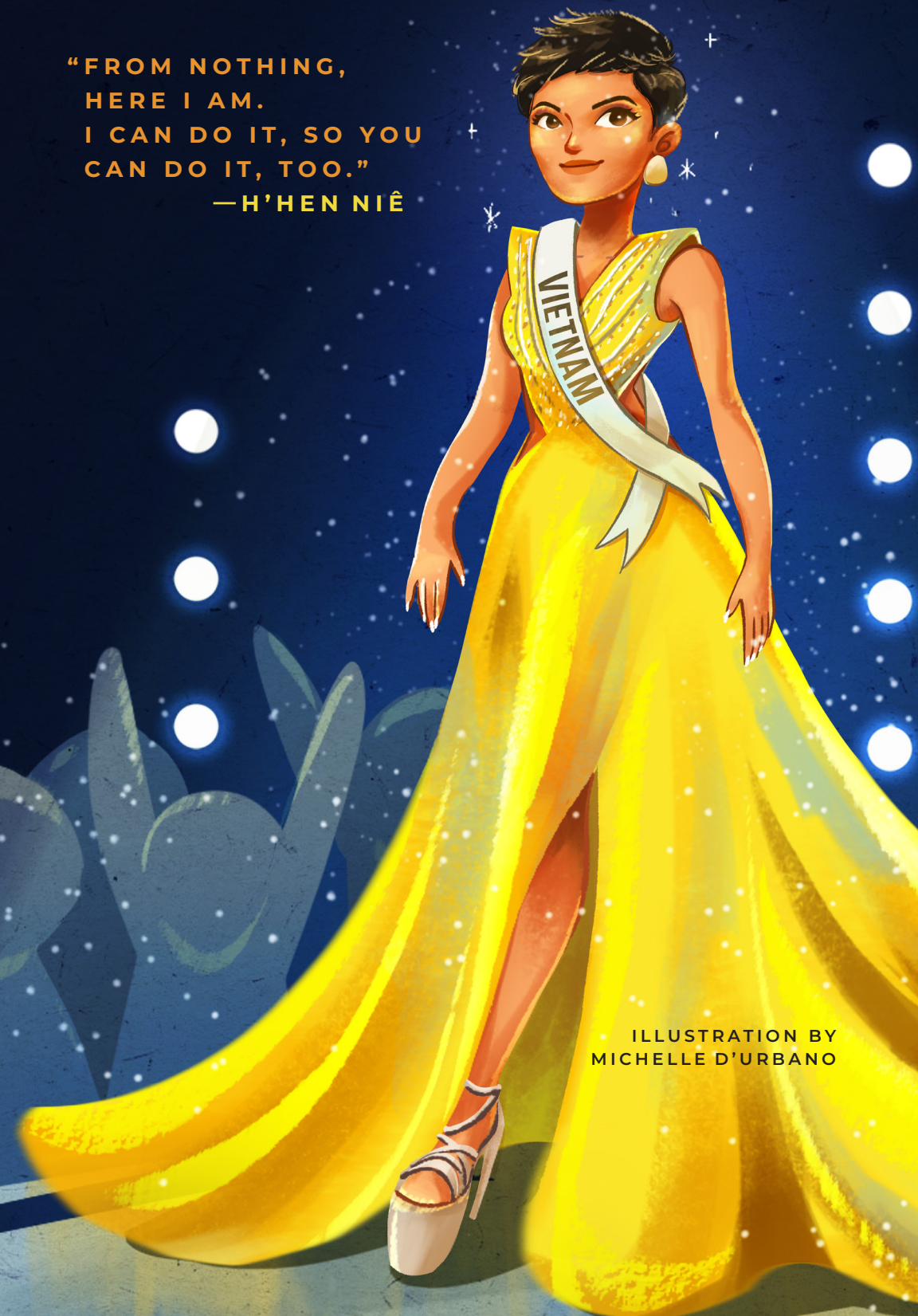


ILLUSTRATION BY  
MICHELLE D'URBANO






# YASHIKA



## GIRLS' EDUCATION PROGRAM GRADUATE



Once upon a time, there was a girl who karate-chopped her fear. For young Yashika, it was not easy to get to school. Without street lights, sidewalks, or school buses, the route was sometimes dangerous. Yashika's parents worried so much they asked her to stop going. But Yashika was determined to get an education! She had learned in a life skills class how to advocate for herself and knew there just had to be a safe way to get to school. Instead of giving up, she asked the local leaders for support and they listened.

One day, Yashika had the opportunity to take a self-defense class for girls. Standing in front of the class was the teacher, a powerful and strong woman. "If she can do it, why not me?" she thought to herself. The next day Yashika signed up.

People in her town teased Yashika and her family. "Karate is a boy's sport," they'd say. Her parents pressed her to quit, but she remained calm. "Confidence does not come at once. It is a gradual process. By doing karate I learn to never give up, no matter my challenges." Before she knew it, she won a tournament! Then another and another.

A few years later, Yashika boarded a train and traveled to the biggest city in all of India to compete in the Skys India National Karate Championship. There, the girl who was once afraid of walking to school won a silver medal for her individual performance and, with her team, she won gold.

Today, "The Karate Girl," as she is fondly called by her fans, is a beloved mentor for girls. She tells her students that dedication, focus, and hard work will make dreams come true, and karate will help you kick fear's butt.

BORN 2003

INDIA





ILLUSTRATION BY  
TASNEEM AMIRUDDIN

“DREAM BIG  
IRRESPECTIVE OF  
YOUR SITUATION  
OR YOUR  
SURROUNDINGS.”

—YASHIKA

**Yashika's Hero:**

ARUNIMA  
SINHA

*See next page.*

# ARUNIMA SINHA

MOUNTAINEER



Once upon a time, an Indian girl with a passion for sports was determined not to let an administrative error threaten her chances for a job with India's security forces. While she was on the train to their office, thieves snatched her gold chain. "Thanks to my fitness, I gave them a tough time. But they threw me out of the train," Arunima remembers.

Another train ran over her left leg, shattering it from the knee down. Doctors had to amputate and give her a prosthetic leg. Arunima fought for her life—and won.

Her bones were broken, but not her determination. On her sick bed, she experienced many people who saw her only for her disability. Arunima decided to "answer them with action, not words" by scaling the world's tallest mountain! As soon as she could leave the hospital, she visited the first Indian woman to climb Mount Everest. Bachendri Pal told Arunima, "You already conquered your inner Everest . . . climb the mountain only to show the world what you are made of."

Arunima trained, and trained *hard*. In the final part of the climb, she saw skeletons covered with snow. "Our bodies behave according to how we think," Arunima says. "I firmly took stock of my fears and told my body that dying was not an option." Slowly and steadily, Arunima continued to climb. Each step filled her with confidence. Finally, after 52 days, Arunima reached the top of the world. She took off her oxygen mask and screamed in victory.

Since then, Arunima has scaled the six other highest mountains around the world. She is the first woman amputee to reach these summits—and she continues to challenge perceptions, each and every day.

BORN JULY 20, 1989

INDIA





ILLUSTRATION BY  
SAMIDHA GUNJAL

**“NEVER FORGET  
YOUR GOAL.”**  
—ARUNIMA SINHA





**R**oom to Read's social mobilizers work in places as far apart as the snowy mountains of the Himalayas all the way to the hot, sunny grasslands of East Africa. From childhoods spent making their own way in societies that, historically, have not valued education for daughters, today these women are mentors, advisors, friends, and teachers. They've used life skills like courage and creative problem-solving to build careers serving girls from their communities. From mentoring and looking at life options, to talking to families about the importance of education, to supporting a girl standing up for her rights to government officials, social mobilizers represent essential role models and advocates for many girls.

Tafatia could not openly talk to her mother as a teenager, or speak up for herself. Nevertheless, growing up, she chose male friends who respected women and respected her decisions. Tafatia is now a social mobilizer. "Now, I teach girls open communication, and how to speak up," Tafatia says. One of her life skills lessons on reproductive health and communication encouraged a girl to get a medical test, which showed that she had HIV. Her family had kept the secret from her. Today, she lives healthy and freely despite her illness, and speaks up about it



openly thanks to the strong voice she developed in her work with Tafatia.

Brought up by her grandmother after her parents' divorce, social mobilizer Happyness understands the pain of living apart from a parent. When one of her mentees was struggling to manage the emotional distress of her own parents' divorce, she found comfort in Happyness' guidance and life skills lessons. "If I had had a mentor growing up, my life would have been very different. All I was ever taught by my grandmother were traditional and cultural practices, nothing about expressing my feelings and navigating my teen years," says Happyness.

Social mobilizer Megha's mother was still in school when she was born, and she had to drop out. Their community was not always kind to the young mother, but she was determined to give Megha a better life. Megha's mother and grandmother believed in her, and supported her to finish her education at any cost. Megha even remembers having to outmaneuver wild animals on her daily three-hour walk to school! She became fearless. "I see myself in the perseverance of the girls I mentor," Megha says. "Helping them learn to think critically and get out of their shell is a joyful feeling." Her proudest moment was when a girl who was bullied for her dark skin declared, "I don't want to be fair, I want to be fearless."

Every single girl in this book shared that, in addition to her hero, her social mobilizer is one of the most important people in her life. The service of these women is mighty, proving that when Rebel Girls of all ages across the world join hands to support each other, anything is possible.

ILLUSTRATION BY  
TATSIANA BURGAUD







# WRITE YOUR STORY



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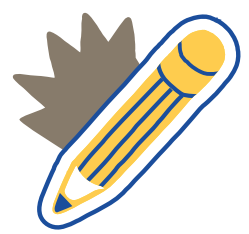
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**DRAW YOUR PORTRAIT**





## ROOM TO READ'S TEN KEY LIFE SKILLS



Life skills are the knowledge, attitudes, and abilities that enable us to effectively address challenges and make decisions in our everyday lives—whether at home, school, work, or in the larger community. Learn more about some of the life skills Room to Read focuses on in the list below.

- ★ **1. SELF-CONFIDENCE:** the ability to recognize your own value as a person, to know how to rely on yourself, and to be aware that you deserve a good life
  
- ★ **2. EXPRESSING AND MANAGING EMOTIONS:** the ability to identify your emotions, understand how emotions affect thoughts and behaviors, and to share them with other people
  
- ★ **3. EMPATHY:** the ability to recognize the emotions experienced by other people—that is, to imagine what they are experiencing and then relate to them in a compassionate way
  
- ★ **4. SELF-CONTROL:** the ability to control your emotions and behave appropriately in all life's situations
  
- ★ **5. CRITICAL THINKING:** the ability to evaluate information, opinions, and beliefs, and to consider a problem from different points of view





- ✦ **6. DECISION-MAKING:** the ability to make a decision by carefully thinking through all the possible outcomes it could lead to
  
- ✦ **7. PERSEVERANCE:** the ability to continue to strive toward achieving a goal, even in the face of obstacles
  
- ✦ **8. COMMUNICATION:** the ability to make yourself understood, and to listen and understand what is being said to you—good communication means both speaking effectively and listening effectively to others
  
- ✦ **9. CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING:** the ability to imagine or identify different possible solutions to a problem
  
- ✦ **10. BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:** the ability to maintain existing relationships with other people in a healthy and positive way, and to form new, healthy, and positive relationships



# UNDERSTANDING LIFE SKILLS



★ Which 1-2 of these life skills do you think are the most useful or helpful to you right now? Why?

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★ Which of these life skills do you think are currently your strengths?

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★ Which 1-2 of these life skills would you most like to further develop or strengthen? Why?

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# EXPLORING LIFE SKILLS

Devina from Tanzania, Keya from Bangladesh, and Senghong from Cambodia. All these girls have different stories, but they used their life skills to overcome obstacles and create positive change.

**What life skills did you notice Devina, Keya, and Senghong demonstrate in their stories that were similar to one another?**

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**What life skills did you notice Devina, Keya, and Senghong demonstrate in their stories that were different from each other?**

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**How do you think Devina, Keya, and Senghong developed these life skills? Who in their lives might have supported them?**

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## WHO'S YOUR HERO?



All of the girls you've read about had a hero or mentor—someone who inspired them and made a great impact in their lives and the lives of others. Who's your hero or mentor? Draw a picture of this person below! Write the 3 qualities you most admire about this person somewhere in your drawing, and share your completed drawing with a friend or family member.

# INTERVIEW A HERO IN YOUR LIFE

Role models and mentors are everywhere around us—they aren't just famous or public figures. They can be found within our families, schools, and local communities. Identify a local woman role model or mentor and interview her to get to know her better!

## Some questions you can ask:

- ✦ What dreams or personal goals have you achieved?
- ✦ What 2–3 skills helped you reach your goals?
- ✦ What advice would you share to young girls about overcoming challenges?

## My interview notes:

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**“JUST TRY, NO MATTER  
HOW HARD IT IS!”**

**– MENGHORNG, CAMBODIA**



**“STAND UP  
FOR YOURSELF EVERY  
CHANCE YOU GET.”**

**– NEO, SOUTH AFRICA**



**“DREAM BIG IRRESPECTIVE  
OF YOUR SITUATION OR  
SURROUNDINGS.”**

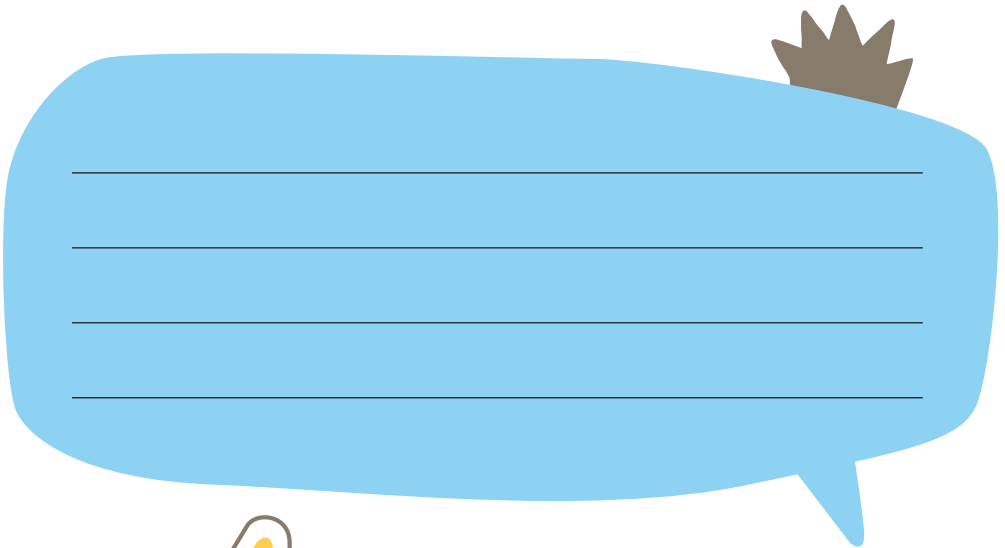
**– YASHIKA, INDIA**



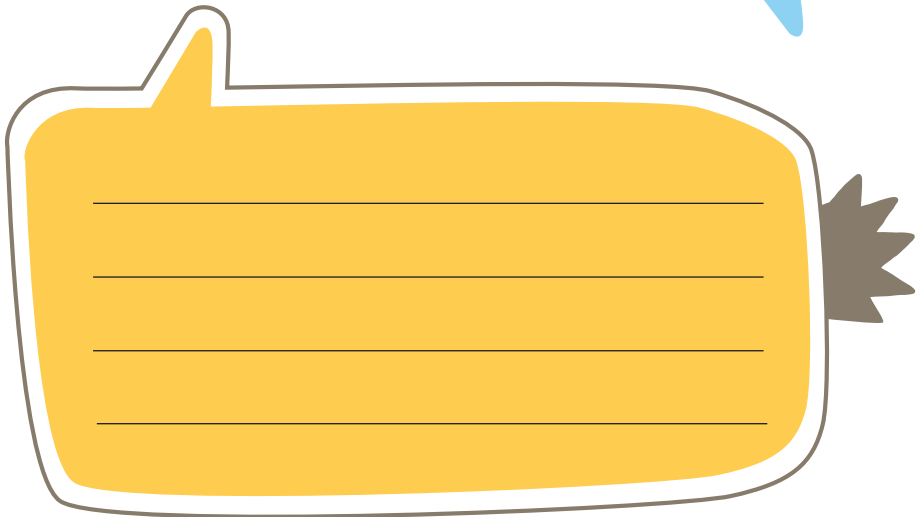
# POWERFUL QUOTES

All of the girls in the book, and their heroes, shared powerful quotes about their life experience and advice for others. If you could share your own personal quotes with others, what would they be?

**My quotes:**



A large, light blue speech bubble with a brown crown on top. It contains four horizontal lines for writing.



A large, yellow speech bubble with a brown crown on the right side. It contains four horizontal lines for writing.

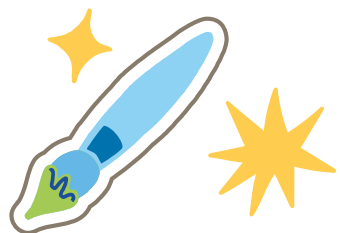
## IDEAS FOR CHANGE

Positive change happens in big and small ways. Is there an important issue affecting you or others in your community that you want to address, but are not sure where to start? Check out the ideas below for how you can create change.

★ **TALK ABOUT IT.** Discuss the issue with your peers, teachers, and family, and share why the issue is important to you. Sharing your thoughts and how you feel is a great first step to bring awareness to the issue—and you might just learn that there are others who feel the same way as you!

★ **START A PETITION.** Collect signatures from people who support your issue. Petitions can show that a large number of people believe the issue is also important to them and want to support change.

★ **WRITE A LETTER OR ESSAY.** Put all your thoughts down on paper! Write about the issue, how it affects you and others, and what you think should change. Share this letter or essay with your teacher, the local newspaper, or a community leader.





★ **TALK TO AN ELECTED OFFICIAL OR LEADER.** Take the issue to your local leaders. Attend a meeting or speak directly with community and elected leaders about why the issue needs to be addressed. Raising the issue with those who have the influence or authority to make decisions is an important step in getting your voice heard.

★ **CREATE SOME ART.** Draw, paint, design, and choreograph about the issue to raise awareness. Whether you make posters, complete a mural, or dance, visual materials and storytelling are compelling and fun ways to engage others.

★ **ORGANIZE FRIENDS AND SCHOOLMATES.** Gather a group of friends and peers to help support you in tackling part of the issue. More people involved means more support.







## LEADING THROUGH ACTION



All around the world, girls—like YOU—are exercising their leadership skills! Many of the girls and women featured in this book overcame adversity and challenges, and often initiated positive change in the process. They took action to solve a problem and improve the situation for themselves and others. What inspires you to take action?

**Can you think of 1–2 issues in your local school or community that could be improved or changed?**

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**What is the first step you might take to address this issue?**

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# THE AUTHORS AND ILLUSTRATORS

**MARTHA ADAMS** is a celebrated multimedia storyteller from the **UNITED STATES** with a focus on gender equality. 10, 14, 34, 46

**AVERY GIRION** is an award-winning writer living in the **UNITED STATES** with a love for comedy, television, and telling women-focused stories. 6, 18, 42, 50

**AIMEE MORALES** writes poetry and non-fiction pieces. As the founder of the Freelance Writers' Guild of the **PHILIPPINES**, she is an ardent writers' rights advocate. 12, 20, 24, 44, 48

**ANURADHA SHARMA** is an award-winning writer from **NEPAL** who writes charming, funny, and action-packed stories. Her latest story was named a best book by *The Guardian*. 16, 22, 26, 42, 52

**LORATO TROK** is a lauded children's book author from **SOUTH AFRICA** with a focus on telling authentic African stories. She is also an experienced editor, translator, and publisher. 8, 28, 30, 32, 38, 40, 54–55



Twenty-five extraordinary women and nonbinary artists from all over the world illustrated the portraits in this book. Here are their names:

ANNALISA VENTURA, **Tanzania**, cover  
NICOLE KAMBI, **Tanzania**, 7  
ANDINA SUBARJA, **Indonesia**, 9  
KATHERINE AHMED, **U.S.A.**, 11, 15  
MONTSE GALBANY, **Spain**, 13  
NABILA ADANI, **Indonesia**, 17  
HANNAH PECK, **U.K.** and BONNIE TAYLOR  
FORSYTH, **Australia**, 19  
SARAH SAIYARA, **Bangladesh**, 21  
JOANNE DERTILI, **U.K. & Greece**, 23  
KRIS DURAN, **Venezuela & U.S.A.**, 25  
KATHRIN HONESTA, **Indonesia**, 27  
JANET PAGLIUCA, **Venezuela**, 29

TYLA MASON, **South Africa**, 31  
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TASNEEM AMIRUDDIN, **India**, 51  
SAMIDHA GUNJAL, **India**, 53  
TATSIANA BURGAUD, **France**, 54–55

## **ABOUT ROOM TO READ**

Founded in 2000 on the belief that World Change Starts with Educated Children®, **ROOM TO READ** is creating a world free from illiteracy and gender inequality. We are achieving this goal by providing support during the two most critical time periods in a child's education: primary school for literacy acquisition and secondary school for girls' education.

Our Literacy Program trains and coaches teachers, creates quality books and curricular materials, and establishes libraries filled with diverse children's books in local languages that can be enjoyed at school and at home.

Our Girls' Education Program helps girls build skills to succeed in secondary school and make key life decisions by providing life skills curriculum, opportunities for mentorship and peer support, and family and community engagement.

We deliver additional remote solutions that leverage local logistical infrastructure, broadcast media networks, and internet-based technologies to facilitate learning beyond the classroom. Room to Read collaborates with local communities, partner organizations, and governments to test and implement innovative models that can be integrated into the education system to deliver positive outcomes for children at scale. To date, Room to Read has benefited more than 32 million children, and has worked in more than 49,000 communities and 21 countries, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Grenada, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, United States, Vietnam, and Zambia. Room to Read plans to benefit 40 million children by 2025.

 **Learn more at [www.roomtoread.org](http://www.roomtoread.org).**



## ABOUT REBEL GIRLS

**REBEL GIRLS** is a global, multi-platform empowerment brand dedicated to helping raise the most inspired and confident generation of girls through content, experiences, products, and community. Originating from an international bestselling children's book, Rebel Girls amplifies stories of real-life, extraordinary women throughout history, geography, and field of excellence.

With a growing community of 20 million self-identified Rebel Girls spanning more than 100 countries, the brand engages with Generation Alpha through its book series, premier app, events, and merchandise. To date, Rebel Girls has sold more than 8 million books in 49 languages and reached 18 million digital audio listens. Rebel Girls award recognition includes *New York Times* bestseller list, 2022 Apple Design Award for Social Impact, multiple Webby Awards for Family & Kids and Education, a Common Sense Selection, and iHeartRadio podcast nomination among many others.

### JOIN THE REBEL GIRLS' COMMUNITY:

Web: [rebelgirls.com](https://rebelgirls.com)

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- ✦ Twitter: [@rebelgirlsbook](https://twitter.com/@rebelgirlsbook)
- ✦ Podcast: [rebelgirls.com/podcast](https://rebelgirls.com/podcast)



- ✦ **If you liked this book, please take a moment to review it wherever you prefer!**

## ★ ABOUT THE ROOM TO READ ★ AND REBEL GIRLS PARTNERSHIP ★

When two women CEOs committed to creating a more gender-equal world cross paths, creativity ignites with phenomenal results. The idea for this collection started when Dr. Geetha Murali, CEO of Room to Read, and Jes Wolfe, CEO of Rebel Girls, met in a networking group. They soon realized that they had a lot in common: both lead organizations focused on inspiring young women to reach for their dreams. Both recognize the extraordinary power of storytelling to change how we see the world—and to change history.

Together, Geetha and Jes initiated a partnership to showcase the stories of young women who are rarely in the spotlight, but regularly demonstrate remarkable courage as they advocate for themselves and their futures. Under this partnership, Room to Read collects the real-life tales of participants in their Girls' Education Programs who have used their life skills to overcome enormous obstacles and create positive change for themselves, their families, and their communities. Rebel Girls then publishes these narratives using their robust array of media channels, providing girls around the world with access to stories that spark the imagination, invite reflection, and reinforce the inner strength all girls possess.

This book is one of several creative collaborations that the organizations have embarked on. The collection is being translated into numerous languages and incorporated into the curriculum of Room to Read's Girls' Education Program. This collaboration is just one chapter in a dynamic anthology of initiatives that highlight the magic that happens when girls discover their own power and gain access to role models, both on the page and in person.