ROOM TO READ GIRLS' Education YEARBOOK 2012

Freedom to Dream

ANNA the ADVOCATE in Tanzania • Planting the Seed for A SUCCESSFUL FUTURE in Vietnam
Engineering a BETTER FUTURE in India • MOVING COMMUNITIES FORWARD in Cambodia
Banking on EDUCATION in Bangladesh • Hitting the AIRWAVES in Zambia
HEALING HEARTS and MINDS in Nepal • BRINGING HARMONY to Classrooms in Sri Lanka
Taking EDUCATION to NEW HEIGHTS in Laos
We are excited to share with you Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Yearbook for 2012. The nine stories featured this year are truly inspiring and represent the experience of many girls in our program. Fueled by their own drive and determination, and armed with the training and tools from our program, these girls are on the road to reaching their full potential and making a difference in the lives of their families and communities.

For the 17,000 girls who were enrolled in our Girls’ Education program in 2012, a quality education is about much more than earning a diploma. By completing secondary school and gaining life skills such as critical thinking and communication, girls who would otherwise be at risk of dropping out—or worse—are able to find their own voice and pursue their passions, sending a wave of empowerment across Asia and Africa.

Through our comprehensive life skills curriculum, girls develop tools to help them succeed in school and in life after graduation. These lessons include saving and investing money, creating a life plan and knowing how to recognize and avoid dangerous situations.

To put the life skills training in context, our teams coordinate regular exposure visits throughout the year—field trips that help girls envision their futures and explore possible career paths. Last year, this included an information session with female entrepreneurs in India, a private tour of the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh and a day shadowing female journalists in Cambodia, to name a few. With each new experience, girls gain insight into the myriad possibilities that await them beyond secondary school, and a new set of role models to help shape their individual dreams.

Our teams also organize regional alumnae meetings, in which graduates of our Girls’ Education program meet with current program participants. During these meetings, graduates share the successes and challenges they have experienced since graduation, providing both advice and encouragement to the younger girls. Armed with this invaluable insight from their peers and the training provided by Room to Read, the girls in our program embark on a journey to discover and pursue their dreams—setting a course for success both inside and outside of the classroom.

I hope you enjoy reading about the nine incredible young women in this year’s Girls’ Education Yearbook and their dreams for the future, as told in interviews with individuals who helped inspire them. Each girl has her own story—a distinct set of qualities, obstacles and ambitions that make her unique. Yet, a common truth connects them all: when you invest in a girl’s education, a world of possibilities is unleashed.

On behalf of these nine young women and the 20,000 more who have participated in the program over the past 12 years, I send you a heartfelt thank you! Your generous support is helping to make dreams come true and that is one of the most extraordinary gifts one can give.

Sincerely,

Erin Ganju
Co-Founder and CEO, Room to Read
Media Spotlight on Girls’ Education

Over the past year, global awareness surrounding our work in girls’ education reached a new high, with major multimedia campaigns hitting screens both large and small.

Focusing on the most critical issues facing women and girls around the globe, the Half the Sky Movement selected Room to Read as the featured education partner in a landmark multimedia project that included the PBS documentary “Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide.” The film, which first aired in October 2012, follows The New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof and six Hollywood actresses (America Ferrera, Diane Lane, Eva Mendes, Meg Ryan, Gabrielle Union and Olivia Wilde) to ten countries, including Vietnam, where Room to Read founder John Wood introduced three inspiring young women from our Girls’ Education program—Phung, Nhi and Duyen.

www.roomtoread.org/halfthesky

By leveraging the power of storytelling, Girl Rising, a groundbreaking feature film released in the U.S. in March 2013, shines a light on the simple truth that educating girls is not only the right thing to do, but an investment in our collective future. The film features Suma, a student from our Girls’ Education program in Nepal, and eight other young women, highlighting the unique role that education has played in each of their lives. The stories are brought to the screen by Academy Award-nominated director Richard Robbins, and include voice performances by Meryl Streep, Alicia Keys, Salma Hayek, Kerry Washington, Selena Gomez, Cate Blanchett, Priyanka Chopra, Anne Hathaway, Chloe Moretz, Frieda Pinto and Liam Neeson.

www.roomtoread.org/girlrising

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Meet Anna

9th Grade (Age 15)
Morogoro, Tanzania
Scholar since: 2012

I’ll live near Mt. Kilimanjaro!

In 5 years
I will be studying in college.

In 10 years
I will be a well-known lawyer.

Morogoro
Tanzania

Meet Anna

9th Grade (Age 15)
Morogoro, Tanzania
Scholar since: 2012

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Morogoro
Tanzania
Anna the Advocate

Anna’s smile lights up the room. Warm, friendly, outgoing and funny—she is the picture of a thriving teenage girl. In her first year of support from the Girls’ Education program, Anna has learned a lot about the importance of education. So has her grandfather, who says he will do whatever it takes to help Anna succeed.

INTERVIEWED BY: HAPPINESS TILLYA, ANNA’S SOCIAL MOBILIZER (TRAINED MENTOR)

Before I joined the program, I didn’t think about why I was going to school or what I wanted to do in the future—I went to school because that’s what everyone else did. Now I realize that school can help me achieve my goals and improve my life.

Happiness Tillya: Let’s start with family. How would you describe your home life?
Anna: I live with my great aunt and great uncle, who I call my grandparents. They took me in when I was 3 years old because my mother had me when she was only 13 years old and couldn’t take care of me. I have never met her or my father, but I hope to one day.

Both my grandparents are farmers. We have some small crops to feed the family and a few pigs behind our house. My grandmother also makes bread buns to sell at the market every morning.

HT: And what about you? Do you have any chores at home?
Anna: Yes, I do lots of things around the house. I help my grandmother make buns, clean the house, do laundry, prepare dinner, feed our pigs and wash dishes. I also collect water from our well in the backyard.

HT: When you are not helping out around the house, what do you like to do for fun?
Anna: I love to sing and dance! I am part of my church’s gospel choir, and we sing on Sundays. We have practice three times each week in the afternoon, and I try to attend as much as I can.

HT: Do you have a favorite subject in school?
Anna: I take history, geography, civics, Swahili and English, and my favorite is definitely geography. I love learning about the world, looking at maps and dreaming of places to go.
HT: That’s great! Do you have plans to continue your studies after graduation?
Anna: Yes. I want to go to university and become a lawyer. I know I’ll have to study very hard in order to pass my exams and reach my goal, but I can do it.

Once I become a lawyer, I’ll move to Moshi—near Mt. Kilimanjaro—with my whole family. My grandfather is from that region, and he says it’s very beautiful and there are lots of opportunities there!

HT: Why do you want to be a lawyer? How did you decide on that as a goal?
Anna: I heard a lawyer, Erin Simba, on the radio, and she really inspired me. She is very successful and fights for children’s rights and advocates for girls’ education. I hope to be like her one day.

I want to help street children receive better treatment and help widows fight for their rights. Many widows are treated badly, and their property is stolen after their husbands die. I don’t think that’s fair. I want to help communities understand why girls’ education is so important.

HT: Do you have any other ambitions?
Anna: I’d like to travel—maybe as a pilot—and explore the world. I’d love to visit America! I’d also love to be a famous gospel singer.

HT: Do you think that the Girls’ Education program can help you achieve your goals?
Anna: Yes, especially the life skills classes! I really liked the self-empowerment lessons we had. Before I joined the program, I didn’t think about why I was going to school or what I wanted to do in the future—I went to school because that’s what everyone else did. Now I realize that school can help me achieve my goals and improve my life.

I also liked [the life skills classes that teach] critical thinking and decision-making. They are helping me plan my future and make good choices. They have even helped me to manage my time better than before.
My job in the Girls’ Education program is to act as a mentor to the girls, chart their academic performance and teach life skills. It can be challenging work, like when I have to visit a girl’s home six miles away across a flooded river, but it’s always worth it in the end! I love helping the girls solve problems and gain self-confidence. It makes me very proud.

About the interviewer:

Happiness Tillya, Room to Read Social Mobilizer

I grew up near Mt. Kilimanjaro. My mother was a primary school teacher and my father grew rice, maize and sunflowers. They knew the value of education and made sure my three siblings and I all completed secondary school.

My mother was always helping others. She taught me that educated women had control over their lives—they could get a job and choose whom to marry. I always wanted to be like her. I earned my teaching certificate after graduation and began teaching primary school in a very rural area. When I heard about the opportunity to become a social mobilizer for Room to Read I was excited because it would allow me to work with girls—just like my mom had done throughout her career.

My job in the Girls’ Education program is to act as a mentor to the girls, chart their academic performance and teach life skills. It can be challenging work, like when I have to visit a girl’s home six miles away and cross a flooded river, but it’s always worth it in the end! I love helping the girls solve problems and gain self-confidence. It makes me very proud.

Anna sits with Happiness after school.
Planting the Seed for a Successful Future

When Phuong’s parents divorced many years ago, her father brought her and her two siblings to live with their grandmother. Though undecided about her exact plans for the future, Phuong is committed to continuing in school through university so she can support her entire family. Her day starts at 4:00 a.m. every morning, when she cooks breakfast for the family and completes the household chores—all before heading off to school.

**Interviewed by: Diep, Phuong’s Cousin and Girls’ Education Program Alumna**

**Diep: Phuong, how do you think you have changed since joining the Girls’ Education program?**

**Phuong:** I feel more confident and mature. Before, I could only communicate with people my own age, but now I am comfortable speaking with adults, too. We practiced our communication skills in life skills class, and I think that has helped me gain confidence.

**Diep: Are the life skills sessions your favorite part?**

**Phuong:** Well, I like making new friends and studying life skills, but I also love getting advice from my social mobilizer. When I have a problem at home or in school, I talk to her, and she knows me so well that she can always help.

**Diep: Do you think you will continue in school after you graduate?**

**Phuong:** Yes, I do. I plan to apply to two universities and two training colleges so that I will have options. I would really like to study environmental science at the University of Agriculture and Forestry because I love nature.

**Diep: What will you do for a career?**

**Phuong:** I want to be successful in whatever I do—to have a stable job, a happy family and be admired by others.

When I was very young I wanted to be a teacher, but after tutoring some of the children that live nearby, I realized I did not want that anymore. Later on, I thought about becoming a businesswoman and got a part-time job selling SIM cards for mobile phones. I did not like that very much either, though. Now I think that I would be happiest opening my own flower shop. I really love flowers and I even make artificial ones from paper in my spare time.

No matter what I end up doing for a job, I will work very hard so that I can help my father and grandmother have a better life.

**Diep: Do you have a role model that you look up to?**

**Phuong:** Yes—I have two. One is someone I met when I was selling SIM cards. He is from a very poor family but he worked very hard to get an education and has become a successful aquatic engineer and built a home for his family. Whenever I saw him, he would always remind me to work hard in school, and I appreciated his encouragement.

My other role model is you! When I was little, I always looked up to you because you did so well in school. I loved when we were in the Girls’ Education program together and got to attend some of the same life skills classes.

**In 10 years**

I will build a new house for my family.

**In 5 years**

I might have my own flower shop.

**In 5 years**

I will graduate from university.
Meet Phuong

11th grade (Age 17)
Long An, Vietnam
Scholar Since: 2005

About the interviewer: Diep, student
Phuong is my cousin, but we are also friends. I love how intelligent and confident she is! I used to visit her often when we lived closer, but now I live mostly in Ho Chi Minh City, so it is more difficult.

I joined the Girls’ Education program in 2008 when I started 10th grade. My mother had passed away two years before, and I felt hopeless because I missed her so much. Since then, my father has been working as a garbage man in Ho Chi Minh City, so I am able to stay with him while I study commercial English. He and my three sisters all help pay for my classes, and I am lucky to have their support. My dream is to open an English training center in my community.
Meet Shabnam
11th Grade (Age 17)
Rajasthan, India
Scholar since: 2006

In 10 years I will be an engineer.

I will be a role model for the girls of my village.

I will provide a sound education for my children.

In 10 years I will be an engineer.

Meet Shabnam
11th Grade (Age 17)
Rajasthan, India
Scholar since: 2006
In the Mewat region of India, where Shabnam lives, the female literacy rate is only 6 percent. Most girls in Mewat do not receive a formal education and are expected instead to remain at home—looking after siblings or their own children. Shabnam made history in 2011 when she became the first girl in her village to graduate from 10th grade. She joined school after completing an intensive bridge course set up by Room to Read and our local partner organization, AMIED, and she has been thriving ever since.

INTERVIEWED BY: NOOR MOHAMMED, FOUNDER OF THE ALWAR MEWAT INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT (AMIED)

Noor Mohammed: How would you describe the village you grew up in?  
Shabnam: In Mewat, education is hardly given any importance. Girls are not allowed to study at all. The general mindset of the community is that girls have to look after household affairs and bear children; school is never prioritized. At least, not until you and AMIED started working here—visiting our homes and talking to the elders in the community.

NM: So tell me, how have things changed now?  
Shabnam: Well, we definitely have more girls coming to school. Also, no one in the community ever wanted to talk to our didis (social mobilizers). Now they are treated with great respect.

NM: What about your own family? Do they support your education?  
Shabnam: My parents work on the farm all day and there are six children in my family—three boys and three girls, so there is a lot of housework to keep me busy in addition to my studies. I have to clean the house, cook, look after my siblings and help my mother feed the buffaloes in the field.

My mother has supported my education the most. Neighbors have told her that letting me go to a co-educational school and interact with boys is against the conventions of Islam, but she always supports me. During my 10th grade final exams, my father was completely opposed to letting me travel the 20km (12.4 mi) to the exam center. He said I needed to finish my household responsibilities first, and my brothers refused to help out on the farm if he continued to allow me to study. It was very difficult to negotiate with them and explain how life-changing these exams could be for me. The results would determine my admission into engineering college, and I had imagined a new future for myself—one where I would earn money, have a job and be able to take care of myself. It has taken many years to convince my father, but slowly he has started to come around.

Shabnam at engineering college.

Engineering a Better Future
Education is the tool through which I can become independent—both financially and emotionally. Through education, I can judge right from wrong. It helps me solve problems, express my opinions and stand up to my brothers and father. I can tell them, “look at what I am capable of achieving!”

NM: Now that you are in the engineering college, what is a typical day like for you? Has anything changed?
Shabnam: The biggest change is that I live alone in a one-bedroom apartment. I wake up, cook food for the day and wash my clothes. Then I study for an hour and leave for my engineering classes, which are about an hour’s walk from home.

Classes end at 3:30 p.m., and I usually stop by the market on my way home to buy vegetables. Then I finish household chores and try to study before work. I don’t get a chance to see my parents very often because the village is far away.

NM: You are so independent. Are you scared of anything in the future?
Shabnam: There is no fear. A lot of girls didn’t get an education before, but now things are changing, and girls have an opportunity to prove themselves. I do think sometimes about what would happen if I were not able to study.

You know, my family sacrifices a lot to pay the rent for my apartment. I just pray that I am able to finish my education. I have this daydream of being in an office, sitting in front of a computer!

NM: So what exactly would you say education means to you?
Shabnam: Education is the tool through which I can become independent in my life—both financially and emotionally. Through education, I can judge right from wrong. It helps me solve problems, express my opinions and stand up to my brothers and father. I can tell them, “look at what I am capable of achieving!”

Shabnam: I will get my bachelor’s degree in technology and become an engineer. After school, I will pursue a government job so that I can help build facilities and infrastructure in my village.

I know a lot of girls look up to me for inspiration now, so I feel I have a responsibility...
I know a lot of girls look up to me for inspiration now, so I feel I have a responsibility to succeed in life and help them. When I am an engineer, people in the community will be convinced that girls can study and have a right to build a future for themselves.

About the interviewer: 
**Noor Mohammed, founder of AMIED**

My parents were farmers here in Alwar. As a child, I managed to complete my education at the local village school despite many hurdles and went on to achieve both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. Girls were not allowed to go to school, and in my heart I knew I had to change people’s mindsets and attitudes about that for the betterment of us all.

In 2004, I resigned from government work to start AMIED. My objective was to improve education in the Mewat area, which lies between Delhi and Rajasthan. Room to Read and the Girls’ Education program have helped me do this.

Change is slow, but it is definitely starting to take place. The community is beginning to understand that upholding gender biases and not educating girls will not take them very far. I’m proud of Shabnam and the other girls we have worked with. I remember when her college fees had to be paid. There was such strong opposition from her neighbors and even her own brothers. She was the only girl who would stand up for herself and say, “I want to be an engineer.”
Kea’s Commitment: Moving Communities Forward

Kea’s difficult upbringing in rural Cambodia has deeply affected her. Despite having moved to the city for school, she has vowed to use her education to improve life for the residents of the village she left behind—and others like it.

INTERVIEWED BY: SARY, KEA’S CLASSMATE AND FRIEND

Meet Kea
12th Grade (Age 18)
Siem Reap, Cambodia
Scholar since: 2006

In 5 years
I will finish university, majoring in clinical care.

College Degree

Siem Reap
Phnom Penh
CAMBODIA

Phnom Penh

CAMBODIA
Sary: Tell me about your family. What is it like at home?
Kea: Most people would define family as a father, a mother and maybe some siblings, but I can’t really picture that. My parents divorced when I was very young and then my mother passed away, so I was sent to live with my grandparents. In truth, I do not even know what my parents look like.

My grandparents are farmers and earn money by growing rice and vegetables, and by raising chickens. My older brother sends us money sometimes as well. He works as a bellboy for tourists at the [Cambodian-Thai] border.

Sary: How has being in the Girls’ Education program changed things?
Kea: So much has changed! In 2010 I moved from my village to a boarding house in Siem Reap with 11 other rural girls. All of us are part of the Girls’ Education program and now we feel like sisters. We share everything—laughter, sadness and any difficulties we are facing. It is great to have them by my side.

It is also a relief to be so much closer to school. I used to have to get out of bed before dawn to do my chores and make the 14 km (8.7 mi) journey to school.

Sary: How would you describe life at the boarding house?
Kea: Even though we are all from different places, we respect and help each other. We take turns doing chores—fetching water, preparing food and other duties—and help each other with homework.

When we have free time, some of the girls will get together and chat about our lives. It’s very fun. When I am not with the other girls, I spend my time reading or listening to the radio. Sometimes, on long weekends, I go back to my village to help my grandparents.

Sary: What do the people in your village think about you getting an education?
Kea: Honestly, many people criticize me for investing too much time in my education. I just ignore them. I know that education is very important. It is not only about finding work. I am also learning how to treat others with respect and make good decisions.

Sary: So then, what do you want to do once we are done with school?
Kea: I want to be a rural development worker and focus on health education. I think that proper health care is one of the biggest issues facing people here in Cambodia. There are hardly any health clinics, and people don’t understand how to protect themselves from different health problems.

Healthy people can save money, work hard and have happy lives. I want to help give people the knowledge they need to develop their communities further and make life better for everyone.

Sary: That’s very interesting. How did you learn about this career?
Kea: My passion for community development has always been strong, but it grew when I met Mr. Bunthoeurn, a community health
I know that education is very important. It is not only about finding work. I am also learning how to treat others with respect and make good decisions.

Sary: What will be your first project as a development worker? Do you know where you want to start?
Kea: I want to work with the local government and NGOs to make sure there are enough health centers in the rural areas. The way things are now, people who are seriously ill must be transferred to the district or provincial hospital far away. I want to help change that and educate people.

Sary: That sounds difficult! What kinds of skills will you need to do this work?
Kea: To be successful in my career, I will need to become a master at public speaking and communication, proposal-writing and project management.

Sary: Have you learned anything at our life skills classes that will help?
Kea: The life skills sessions are helpful in preparing me for what life will be like after graduation. I think that in my career certain lessons will be very useful, such as decision-making, personal hygiene, making a life plan and avoiding disease—like malaria and dengue. I have already started to share some of these lessons with people in my village.

Sary: What do you think your life will be like as a community development worker?
Kea: I think there are good and bad parts to this path. It is a very difficult job to change people’s minds and influence their actions. It can also be risky to travel from village to village.

On the bright side, though, I think this role would make me well-known in my village and the surrounding area, which will make my grandparents very proud. It is also an opportunity to help contribute to the development of my country, Cambodia, and maybe even beyond that.
About the interviewer:
Sary, Girls’ Education program participant

My parents earn their living cultivating rice, but with seven children it’s never enough. My father tried to make extra money by building fish traps, but the work left him with a spinal injury that put our family deep into debt.

The situation was bleak. My older sister was sent away to work as a domestic servant in the city, my brother was forced to join a monastery, and I started working at the Cambodian-Thai border—all to help relieve the financial strain on our family.

One day I became overwhelmed by the desire to return to school, so I came home. I struggled to pay my school fees and to catch up on the lessons I had missed. That is when one of my teachers introduced me to the Girls’ Education program.

Room to Read gave me the financial support and tutoring I needed, and found a place for me in a boarding house with other girls. Now I see education as a priceless gift, and—like Kea—I will not let it go to waste! I plan to become a midwife so I can help women in Cambodia give birth safely.

Room to Read gave me the monetary support and tutoring I needed, and found a place for me in a boarding house with other girls. Now I see education as a priceless gift, and—like Kea—I will not let it go to waste!
Meet Hawoa

9th Grade (Age 15)
Sirajganj, Bangladesh
Scholar since: 2009

I want to travel!
In 5 years
I will be studying at a university.

I want to be a good citizen.

In 10 years
I will be working at a bank.

My ultimate goal is to be a bank manager.

In 10 years
I will be working at a bank.

My ultimate goal is to be a bank manager.

I want to travel!
In 5 years
I will be studying at a university.

I want to be a good citizen.
Banking on Education to Chart a New Course

Bangladesh’s sandbar islands are host to some of the most challenging living conditions in the country. They are also home to Hawoa. Together with her parents and three younger brothers, Hawoa lives in a small tin home surrounded by fruit trees and a vegetable garden. Her days typically start at 6:00 a.m. when she performs her household chores before heading off to school.

INTERVIEWED BY: ABDUL HAI, HAWOA’S FATHER

Abdul Hai: Hawoa, you know that as a teacher, I value education very much. What does education mean to you?

Hawoa: I see education as a safeguard. It is helping me face new challenges. The same way that no living being can survive without oxygen, I think that no person can prosper in life without education.

I am grateful to have parents who are educated and support me. I know that your dream is for me to go even further than you did in school and get a master’s degree. I want to make that dream come true.

AH: And what is a typical day at school like for you?

Hawoa: I am lucky that school is only a 20 minute walk from home, because many of my friends have to cross the river to get to school. Since I am in the business study group, I am taking English, Bangla-language, math, science, religion, agriculture, accounting and entrepreneurship.

AH: Which is your favorite?

Hawoa: I think science is the most interesting, because it allows us to understand the world around us. Last year I attended a science camp held by Room to Read, which helped me overcome my fear of the subject. Now I love it!

AH: What about after school? What is your favorite thing to do?

Hawoa: I like playing with Sohel Rana, Sagor and Sourav [her brothers]. I also love to read. Detective stories are my favorite. It feels like they transport me into another world!

Now that we have some solar power in the house, I feel lucky that I can sit at my reading table and study as long as I want at night. Many of my friends have to rely on oil lamps that run out and have trouble completing their homework.

AH: So then, after working so hard, what will your future plans be?

Hawoa: I would like to work as a manager in a bank. Because we live in a low-income community, I know the importance of saving and careful economic planning. By becoming a manager at a top bank I can encourage the people in our village to plan their finances better.

As the oldest child in our family, I feel I must also share the responsibility of providing income as soon as possible, but I will continue to study as well and try to find a scholarship. Through hard work and strong will I believe anything is possible.
I see education as a safeguard. It is helping me face new challenges. The same way that no living being can survive without oxygen, I think that no person can prosper in life without education.

AH: I know you did not always want to be a banker. What made you change your mind?
Hawoa: Before, I wanted to be a doctor, but I realized that the amount of support I would need financially is not available. I joined the business study group, and through my classes, I was inspired to become a banker. I want to help the people here learn how to save their money and take out loans to improve the well-being of their families. I have seen very few women working in top positions at banks in Bangladesh, so having a job like that would also allow me to be a role model for other girls.

AH: Do you have any advice for someone looking to save or invest their money?
Hawoa: I have already started saving money; I think this will help me if I find myself in any troublesome situations. Everyone should save some money for the future. A little amount of taka [Bangladesh’s currency] can make someone feel more secure and take away their worry.

AH: That sounds like great advice. Is there anyone you would like to get advice from in your life?
Hawoa: I wish someday I could meet Shakib Al Hasan from our national cricket team. He became very successful early in life, and I would like to get his advice on how I can do the same!
About the interviewer:

Abdul Hai, primary school teacher

I lost my own father around the time I graduated from secondary school, and it was a struggle to continue my education. But between my own passion for education and my mother’s support, I was able to graduate from university. I try to instill that same passion in my children because I want all of them to become educated.

Of my four children, two are now in school, and Hawoa—the oldest—is part of the Girls’ Education program. Room to Read is helping motivate the girls on this island and helping their parents understand the importance of girls’ education through monthly meetings.

All parents want to do the best for their children, but sometimes the supply cannot meet demand. That is the case for me. As a primary school teacher and the only working person in my family, I find it hard to support everyone on my small salary. The Girls’ Education program provides opportunities for my daughter that I can’t afford, like learning camps, and helps to relieve the guilt I carry in my heart for not being able to give my children the very best.

All parents want to do the best for their children, but sometimes the supply cannot meet the demand. That is the case for me.
Hitting the Airwaves

At first glance Lumba seems shy, but when she speaks about her family, everything changes. At just 13 years old, Lumba already has a clear plan for her future. Confident and talkative, she is resolute in her dream to build a better life for her family, one where her mother and younger sister—both of whom suffer from HIV—no longer have to earn a living by selling tomatoes, beans and onions from their front yard.

INTERVIEWED BY: JOYCE PHIRI, LUMBA’S OLDER SISTER

Joyce Phiri: Lumba, can you describe your daily routine for me?

Lumba: I wake up at 7:00 a.m., wash my face, brush my teeth and do my chores: washing dishes, sweeping the dirt in front of our house and fetching water from the well. Then I do my homework. If I need help I ask our neighbor, since mother cannot read. After that, I get lunch ready and head off to school. On weekends, I help mom in the maize field instead.

School starts at noon and is one hour’s walk from home. After school I like hanging out with my friends and jumping rope. We even made our own rope the other day by tying together some old pieces of rubber.

JP: What subjects are you taking in school?

Lumba: I have five classes: math, English, Cinyanja [the local language], development studies and technology. Math is my favorite, because I am good at it and I enjoy learning the multiplication tables.

JP: Do you think that getting an education is important?

Lumba: I think it’s very important! At school you learn to read and write, and if you pass your exams and do well, you can get a good job. I want to do well enough to go to the University of Zambia and get a master’s degree.

JP: Do you like being part of the Girls’ Education program?

Lumba: I really enjoy the life skills classes, especially the sessions focused on gender issues. That’s where I learned that men and women are equal, and that women can achieve as much as men.

JP: If you had three wishes for the future, what would they be?

Lumba: My first wish is to complete secondary school and go to university. Second, I wish to become a famous TV journalist at the Zambia National Broadcasting Corporation (ZNBC). For my third wish, I want mother to stay healthy and live a long life so she can see me become successful.

JP: What kind of journalist do you want to become?

Lumba: I’d like to bring more attention to crime—like murder, theft and prostitution—to help stop those things from happening. I’d also like to educate communities about the dangers of early marriage and the importance of sending girls to school.

JP: Do you have a role model?

Lumba: I am very impressed by Mary Magambo, who works for ZNBC. She’s young, beautiful and very good at reading the news. I want to be just like her.

About the interviewer: Joyce Phiri, mother of two

My parents struggled to support our family when I was growing up and couldn’t afford to send me to secondary school. I had to drop out after 7th grade, and I never learned to read or write. Instead, I got married young and now have two sons. My husband and I work in the maize fields to support our family and do other odd jobs around the village. It is quite difficult to earn a living without a basic education.

I dream of something better for my younger sister, Lumba. I often give her advice about avoiding early marriage and pregnancy so that she can make better choices than I made when I was her age. It is very difficult for my mother to feed the family and also afford the HIV medication that she and our youngest sister both need to stay healthy. There is never enough left over to pay Lumba’s school fees, so I was very happy when I heard that Room to Read would support her. No one in our family has ever made it to secondary school before. Lumba is our best hope for the future.
Meet Lumba

5th grade (Age 13)
Lusaka, Zambia
Scholar Since : 2012

In 5 years
I will be finishing my final year of secondary school.

In 10 years
I will be working as a journalist.

I’ll live in a five-bedroom house in Lusaka.
Healing Hearts and Minds in Nepal

After nine years of indentured servitude, trapped in Nepal’s illegal Kamlari system, Asha was freed by a local NGO and enrolled in Room to Read’s Girls’ Education program. She now lives with her mother and older sister, Laxmi, in rural Bardiya. The youngest of eight children, Asha and Laxmi bear the responsibility of caring for their visually impaired mother. The two sisters are the first in their family to ever step inside of a school.

Interviewed by: Mr. Tihar Bahadur Chaudhary, Community Leader

Meet Asha

10th grade (Age 19)
Bardiya, Nepal
Scholar Since: 2008
Tihar Bahadur Chaudhary: Like you, I spent many years in bonded labor. Can you tell me about your experience as a Kamlari?

Asha: I first became a Kamlari when I was five years old. I worked for nine years from dawn until dusk before I was rescued. I had four different masters, but in every household it was the same story. I was peppered with work all day with little time to rest in between. I remember spending many nights crying because I couldn’t attend school like the other kids my age.

TBC: What has changed now?

Asha: Living as a Kamlari was a very lonely experience. I was far from my mother and sister and couldn’t attend school because I was buried in work. When I was rescued, I thought I’d never be able to enroll in school because I had missed so much. That uncertainty loomed over me, even as I was consumed with the joy of being reunited with my family. When I learned that Room to Read was helping former Kamlari girls go to school, I was ecstatic. Entering school for the first time was the happiest day of my life!

Education has liberated me. I now live at home with my family and am doing what I love — studying. I am pursuing my dreams.

TBC: How do you balance school with your other responsibilities?

Asha: My sister Laxmi and I take turns doing the daily chores: cooking, cleaning the house, caring for the chickens and sowing the potatoes, greens and turmeric that grow in our yard. Laxmi and I are also responsible for earning our family’s income, so we work as day laborers on the weekends, hauling bricks and other materials at local construction sites. We earn around 200 rupees per day [approximately USD $2].

TBC: I see. And what are your plans for after you finish secondary school?

Asha: I will continue my education, despite the difficult circumstances my family is facing. My sister and I are aware of our fragile economic situation, but we are not giving up on our dreams—not after making it this far! Laxmi is in upper secondary school now, and I am getting ready to take my School Leaving Certificate Exam [a highly-competitive national exam in Nepal that all 10th graders must pass to move on to upper secondary school]. I plan to get a job as a teacher or put in more hours as a laborer so that I can afford to continue my studies after the Girls’ Education program.

Asha with her mother and sister.
In 5 years I will graduate.

My ultimate goal is to be a doctor.

I might work in construction to pay for my education.
TBC: What are your dreams for your career?
Asha: I want to become a doctor. To be able to heal people is something I have wanted for a long time.

All my life, I have lived in conditions where illness meant that you couldn’t pursue your dreams. We are the lowest rung of society, and there are many more like us. I find it revolting that a simple illness and a lack of resources for proper treatment can rob a person of their future.

TBC: What made you so passionate about this issue in particular?
Asha: Once I was very ill, and that is where I learned how differently we—the poor—are treated by society. I couldn’t move from my illness and feared my body would just freeze up. The staff at the hospital treated me without compassion, and as I glanced around, I saw that I was not alone.

That experience strengthened my resolve. I thought that if I were a doctor, I would treat my patients kindly and with great compassion. Illness is a big problem here, and there are not enough health care services. When I achieve my dream of becoming a doctor I can help improve the situation for everyone.

TBC: Entering school for the first time was the happiest day of my life! Education has liberated me. I now live at home with my family doing what I love, which is studying. I am pursuing my dreams.

TBC: You said that education has liberated you. Other than helping you become a doctor, what does that mean?
Asha: Education helps people face the world with confidence—I know from personal experience.

A while ago, Laxmi, my mother and I were living with my brother’s family, and it was a very trying time. Every evening my brother would get drunk and start shouting. He wanted us to give him our earnings to sustain his drinking habit. He treated us like strangers and insulted our mother. He even tried to stop Laxmi and me from going to school, but we were resolute. We told him we would go without food, but we would never stop studying. Had I not been educated, I wouldn’t have been confident enough to stand up to him like that.

About the interviewer: Tihar Bahadur Chaudhary, education advocate
As community leader of my village, I bear a great responsibility, but the most important decision I have made by far is to take a stand against the Kamlari system.

I spent 14 years in bonded labor before earning my freedom, and I will never forget when my first master said to me, “illiterate people can only herd cattle, while educated minds herd ideas, opinions and people.” That thought stuck with me all these years.

Once I realized that only education can bring true freedom, I became a fierce advocate for education here in my village. I have made it my mission to ensure that former Kamlari girls get to school and am glad Room to Read is helping to achieve this goal.
Bringing Harmony to Sri Lanka’s Classrooms

Vinodani has lived her entire life on the same tea plantation, situated on the edge of a thick forest. Studious and hard-working, she knows that education is her best chance to make a difference in the world, something that is clearly reflected in her plans for the future.

**INTERVIEWED BY: MS. NAGENDRAN SUBASHINI, VINODANI’S TEACHER**

Ms. Nagendran Subashini: Tell me a little bit about your family.

Vinodani: I have two sisters and one brother. My older sister is 17 years old, my younger sister is 11, and my brother is only 8. We all go to the same school.

My parents both work on the tea plantation where we live. My mother picks tea leaves, and my father works on the estate. Sometimes he helps my mom pick leaves or sells areca nuts to earn extra money.

NS: Did your parents ever go to school?

Vinodani: My father studied up until the 6th grade, but my mother stopped after 3rd grade. She cannot read or write, so she is always very interested in what I am studying. Every day after school I recount what I have learned that day and sometimes also read her a story from the library. She loves it!

NS: What does a typical day look like for you?

Vinodani: I wake up at 5:00 a.m., make some tea and prepare for my classes. Then I walk to school with my brother and sisters. At 2:30 p.m. when school gets out, we all walk home and talk about what happened that day on the way.

When we get home, I help my mom with chores. I also feed our three goats, since it is my job to look after them. Then in the evening, we all do our homework. Usually I can complete it on my own, but my sister helps whenever I get stuck. She is a very good student and did very well last year on her Ordinary Level Exams [a national exam in Sri Lanka that students must pass to move on to upper secondary school]. We are both in the Girls’ Education program together.

NS: I know your Ordinary Level Exams are coming up. How are you getting ready for them?

Vinodani: I will take the exams at the end of 2013, but I have already started preparing. I have drawn out an elaborate timetable for studying that I have hanging in my room. I use it to manage my time and track how I am doing. It also inspires me to see it every day!

NS: What do you like to do when you are not studying?

Vinodani: Besides studying, I like to go to the garden with my sister and my parents and help out. We pick the tea leaves and sell them to earn money. Sometimes we also sell our areca nuts. It feels good to help out.

NS: Do your parents ever go to school?

Vinodani: My parents did not go to school because they had to work on the plantation. They wish they could have gone, but they are proud of me for going to school.
Meet Vinodani
10th grade (Age 14)
Central Province, Sri Lanka
Scholar Since: 2009

I want to write poetry and publish a book!

In 10 years
I will be a music teacher!

In 5 years
I will be enrolled in university.

Vinodani: During my free time I play cricket with my brother and sisters, and listen to the radio. I also like to write poetry.

NS: Do you know yet what you want to do in the future?
Vinodani: I want to be a music teacher!

NS: Why is that?
Vinodani: Everyone in the community looks up to teachers. Also, I love music—especially classical music, and want to share my passion with others. Being a music teacher will allow me to combine my two dreams.

NS: If you want to be a teacher, you must believe that education is very important. Is that true?
Vinodani: I definitely do. Life on the tea estate is very hard. For us, the children of the tea workers, I think education is the only way we can change our situation. It helps us dream big. The majority of the people here are illiterate like my mother, and hearing their stories has helped me see that education can change lives. It is a real blessing.

About the interviewer: Ms. Nagendran Subashini, teacher
I have known I wanted to be a teacher since I was a student myself. I realized early on that it was my calling, and I enjoy it very much. When I finished school, I enrolled in teacher training college immediately so that I could pursue my dream.

The best part about teaching is seeing a student’s face light up as they understand a new concept. The satisfaction from watching children learn every day is unbeatable. For children here on the tea estates I know that education is extremely important. I see so much potential in students like Vinodani to accomplish great things—she is very talented.
Meet Tomkham
11th Grade (Age 15)
Xayabouly, Laos
Scholar since: 2009

In 5 years
I will be an English major at a university.

In 10 years
I will be a flight attendant.

I want to have a farming business!

I will donate money to charity!
Taking Education to New Heights

Tomkham is the third of five children and the second in her family, after her sister Vonechay, to participate in Room to Read’s Girls’ Education program. Tomkham works very hard in school and dreams of a life far beyond the borders of Xayabouly province.

INTERVIEWED BY: LAY HANGBUKY, TOMKHAM’S MOTHER

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Lay Hangbuky: I am so proud of all of my girls! How has Vonechay [Tomkham’s older sister, a Girls’ Education program graduate] been a role model for you?

Tomkham: Vonechay is curious and likes to learn new things. I like that. She also works hard and always makes time for extra tutoring, especially in English. That inspires me.

LH: What are your dreams for the future?

Tomkham: I want to be a flight attendant because I would be able to communicate with other people around the world in English. It would be great to have conversations about all different topics and learn about other countries. The most amazing thing would be to visit those places for real!

I also know that flight attendants make a good salary, so I would be able to save money and build a better house for our family. I could pay for the things we can’t afford and help make a better life for all of us.

LH: Is English your favorite subject?

Tomkham: Yes, I like English and mathematics best. I always get a score between eight and 10 [out of 10 possible points] on my English exams. I can understand most things and translate them into Lao. Sometimes I still get nervous answering in English, though.

LH: Do you have a plan to improve it?

Tomkham: I want to be an English major at the National University of Laos in Vientiane. It’s a big university, so I can make many friends there from different parts of the country. After graduation, I can get a job as a flight attendant.

LH: How did you decide that you wanted to be a flight attendant in the first place?

Tomkham: About three years ago when I visited Vientiane [the capital of Laos] for the first time, I went to the airport with our cousins to welcome their relatives from abroad. I saw all the flight attendants walking out from the arrival gate. They looked so professional; they are all tall and beautiful! I could not stop smiling.

LH: I see. And, what do you think will be the best thing about traveling?

Tomkham: Seeing new things and exploring the world!

LH: Is there a particular place you want to see the most?

Tomkham: I want to go to Malaysia and then England! I want to go to Kuala Lumpur because I have seen photos of the Petronas twin towers. One of my teachers who went to university in Malaysia showed them to me. After that, I would visit London to see the big clock! I saw it on TV once and just looking at it gave me a good feeling.

About the interviewer: Lay Hangbuky, mother of five

I have lived in Xayabouly my whole life. Growing up, both of my parents were farmers, so I only made it to 5th grade before dropping out to help support the family. Now I work on our small farm while my husband, a former military physician, works construction jobs around the village. With five children, it is difficult to keep enough food on the table—even with two incomes, but all of my children are very helpful.

Many people laugh when they learn of Tomkham’s ambition to become a flight attendant, but I believe in my daughter. One of my other daughters, Vonechay, was also part of the Girls’ Education program, and her success taught me about the miracle of education. She worked very hard and earned a full scholarship to attend university in Vietnam! Whenever I think about it, my heart swells.

I think Vonechay has inspired Tomkham, because she works very hard as well and often earns the rank of first in the class. I always remind her to be herself, listen to her heart and follow her dreams.