DESTINATION LITERACY

Stories of Defying Expectations and Transforming Lives
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Some global problems seem insurmountable. Hunger. Disease. Inequality. Poverty. But we know there is one tool that can help fix them all:

**EDUCATION.**

Early marriage, illiteracy, school dropout, low wages—these are the futures that statistics would predict for the children in the countries where we work.

*With the proper educational resources and guidance, however, a child can reshape his or her destiny. We’ve seen it happen—thousands of times.* Every day, we watch as students in our Literacy and Girls’ Education Programs overcome the odds and work toward a better future. These are some of their stories and the stories from those who support them. Each changed destiny provides a glimpse into the millions of lives that are being positively transformed through Room to Read’s fight for literacy and gender equality in education.

Thank you for journeying with us as we move closer to a world where all children can have the destiny they deserve.
DESTINED TO CHOOSE HER OWN FUTURE

THE CHALLENGE: EARLY MARRIAGE

In Bangladesh, 65% of girls are married by age 18.
Shwapna
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENT, BANGLADESH

When the results of the Secondary School Certificate Examination were published, Mr. Based Ali wept. His 16-year-old daughter, Shwapna, had earned a perfect score and passed with highest marks. With the entire village gathered at Based's house to celebrate, he decided it was time to publicly admit something that he had struggled with for many years.

"Parents generally help their kids study," he said. "But I pressured my daughter instead to marry when she was 14. I pressured her to spend time on household chores instead of school. It was only Shwapna's devotion to learning and her continuous inspiration and support from Room to Read that helped to bring us all to this unbelievable day. I am grateful!"

In Pratapdighi Village where Shwapna lives, it is common for parents to arrange their daughters' marriages after 8th grade. Based had arranged for Shwapna to be married to a local shopkeeper, just as he had arranged for her older sister to be married at age 15. Shwapna did not want this same fate so she refused her parents’ demand, but they continued to pressure her. As punishment for going against their wishes, Shwapna was given more housework and family chores, including running her father’s grocery store.

With the added workload, her schoolwork suffered. Determined to continue her regular studies and keep from falling behind, Shwapna approached a friend for advice.

"I went to my friend, Shymoli, and her mother asking for their suggestions. Shymoli’s mother insisted I stand against this decision," explained Shwapna. "I had also heard about Room to Read’s Girls’ Education Program and that they might be able to help. I searched out the social mobilizer at our school, explained my problem and asked her to speak with my father."

The social mobilizer agreed to visit Based to help him understand the value of education and the long-term consequences of early marriage. After many sessions, Based finally agreed to support Shwapna’s decision and reduce her chores so she could continue her studies.

Shwapna could not contain her excitement. "When I realized that I had successfully prevented the marriage, it gave me confidence to know that I am quite capable of overcoming any obstacle in my life, now and in the future."

Shwapna set her sights on passing the Secondary School Certificate Exam to gain access to higher secondary school and pave the way for university studies. Room to Read offered support through tutoring and life skills training, which included workshops on preparing for exams, stress management and planning for her future.

“My dream is to enter the highest level of education in Bangladesh,” Shwapna says. “Thanks to Room to Read, I have the courage to go after my dreams!”

“When I realized that I had successfully prevented the marriage, it gave me confidence to know that I am quite capable of overcoming any obstacle in my life, now and in the future.”
DESTINED TO ENGAGE YOUNG LEARNERS

THE CHALLENGE:
LACK OF TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Nepal averages 26 students per teacher in primary schools.
Gita Sharma
FIRST GRADE TEACHER, NEPAL

THE CLASS IS BURSTING WITH EXCITEMENT.
Twenty 1st graders at Shree Gosaibaba Lower Secondary School are enthusiastically raising their hands and answering in unison—sometimes even before their teacher can finish holding up the next flash card. With each card, the difficulty increases, rising to rather complex words for a 1st grader. But the students navigate each word and its pronunciation with ease. No wonder the teacher, Gita Sharma, is so proud of her class.

When Gita started teaching six years ago, she didn’t think this level of student participation—let alone spontaneous surges of correct answers—was possible. The traditional instruction method in Nepal consists of rote memorization of the alphabet. It is a one-dimensional technique where students simply echo the teacher. The majority of teachers continue to use this outdated style that cuts off meaningful engagement between the students and the teacher.

Things are different now in Gita’s classroom because she has been coached on new methods by Room to Read. “I used to be one of those uninspiring teachers,” said Gita. “We were teaching like most in Nepal and didn’t think too much about it. Room to Read has expanded our horizons. Without the program and the teachers’ training, we wouldn’t have been able to bring such positive changes to our school.”

Based on her training, Gita now focuses on phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension followed by writing. “Before, students could memorize and recite the alphabet, but lacked abilities to string together words, make sentences and convey their thoughts.”

Room to Read’s Literacy Program has brought new life into Gita’s class and her entire school. “I started seeing changes from the first day,” she says. “I used the skills we acquired from the training. At first I was skeptical, but then I was overjoyed to see my students responding so well.”

The educational resources Room to Read provided also piqued students’ interest and helped transform the classroom experience. “The pinwheel charts, the word cards, the alphabet cubes and the workbooks help a lot,” Gita says. “We divide the students into groups, give them a word and ask them to break it into parts. It’s great to see them working together.”

In this exercise, students identify the letters in a word by chanting together and clapping. For example, if a word is composed of three letters, they will clap a total of four times: once as they say each letter, and a final clap as they say the full word. “It is a fun way to learn,” she says, “drawing in even the most reluctant students.”

“Now I work harder than before to ensure my students are having fun while learning. I believe that they learn more that way, and the program has equipped us with the knowledge about how to make it fun.”

“Room to Read has expanded our horizons. Without the program and the teachers’ training, we wouldn’t have been able to bring such positive changes to our school.”
DESTINED TO BE A ROLE MODEL

In Zambia, 87% of girls graduate primary school, but only 36% continue on to secondary school.
Miriam
SOCIAL MOBILIZER (MENTOR), ZAMBIA

AS A STUDENT IN LUKWIPA BASIC SCHOOL, MIRIAM WAS STRUGGLING. Her father had died when she was just a baby, leaving Miriam’s mother to raise six children on her own. While her mother scraped by to make a living, selling tomatoes by the road, Miriam and her siblings just tried to survive.

With no one to pay her school fees, Miriam believed she would never finish school. She felt like a failure. To her, education was a light at the end of the tunnel. It was the only way out of poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy, which had trapped so many of her friends.

“I used to dream of having my own small exercise book to write in,” Miriam says. “Can you imagine what happened when I received that dream? Through the Girls’ Education Program, Room to Read not only gave me a hard cover exercise book, but also paid my tuition and gave me school uniforms! I still wake up in disbelief when I think about how far I have come.”

When Room to Read opened a door for her, Miriam gladly walked through, working hard in her mother’s business to help contribute to her education. She graduated from secondary school in 2012, thanks to her strong work ethic and renewed sense of purpose. Now, at age 24, she has joined Room to Read on the other side working as a social mobilizer, or mentor, for current students in the program.

“My motivation to work as a social mobilizer goes back to when I was still in high school. I used to admire how determined, passionate, courageous and composed my social mobilizers were and how they managed to maintain a personal relationship with each one of us,” she says.

Miriam takes the same approach with the girls she mentors now, sharing her own personal experiences and using her life story as an example. “As a mentor who has been through many hardships in my life, I understand the risks that young girls face,” she says. Many Zambian girls are vulnerable to older men who take advantage of the fact that they are desperate to stay in school but cannot afford the fees. To prevent that from happening, Miriam stays in constant touch with her girls.

Miriam is inspired by her relationships with girls who are pursuing their dreams with determination—girls like Florence, a 7th grader who dreams of becoming a doctor because she wants to care for those less fortunate. “When I met Florence, I was struck by her willingness to try again after failing to get something right. She is a student who puts in the extra effort to be the best in her class and this reminded me of myself. I am confident that she will attain her dreams.”

“As a mentor who has been through many hardships in my life, I understand the risks that young girls face.”
DESTINED TO SPARK A NEW HABIT

THE CHALLENGE: LACK OF LEARNING MATERIALS

In Laos, only 0.5% of homes in poor areas have books.
Tiseng Souliyavong
SCHOOL LIBRARIAN, LAOS

A SEASONED TEACHER WITH MORE THAN TWO
DECADES OF CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE, MS. TISENG
SOU LIYAVONG ATTENDS ROOM TO READ’S LIBRARY
MANAGEMENT TRAINING EVERY YEAR. While she
has been a 4th grade teacher for years, one of her
proudest accomplishments was becoming a
librarian for Manilad Complete Primary School
and encouraging her students and the community
to become independent readers.

Tiseng is thrilled with how the library has transformed her school and the students. She has seen
those who once lagged behind become more active readers. The library has become the school hub—a gathering spot for shared reading and
fun activities with friends and teachers. Students are more courageous about speaking up in
class because they frequently read stories aloud in the library. Even attendance has increased.

In addition to books for early readers, the titles
for older students and parents have been a real boon to the community. “We want to promote
our library books to parents, our neighbors, and
other villagers,” said Tiseng. “Quite often they
want to learn more and I always suggest that
they visit our library.”

At Room to Read’s library management training,
Tiseng was encouraged to involve other teachers
in managing the library to spread out the
workload. She has subsequently trained her
colleagues on what she learned, and now all the
teachers share the librarian’s job, which improves
how the library functions. Just as the students
have a set reading hour, the teachers have a
library hour outside of their normal teaching
schedule.

Noungniran, a 3rd grade teacher, appreciates the
fact that all her colleagues take ownership of
the school library. “Everybody must be a librarian and
encourage their students to read more books,”

Noungniran said. “When we have visitors from
other schools, they always say that they would
like their school to manage its library like we do.”

The school principal actively supports Tiseng
in sourcing more books for their library. Even
though the library is officially closed during
summer break, the principal invited the village authorities to hold regular town meetings at the
library to show off the space, décor, book collection and children’s artwork. “Once they saw our
space, they started to donate books, stationery
and materials for organizing reading activities.
Our school library now serves the Manilad com-
community, the neighboring secondary school, and
students from nearby primary schools who want
access to more books.”

“There is no secret to managing a library,”
Tiseng says. “It is not about economics but about
cooperation and planning. We let everyone
borrow books and share them at home. We ask
teachers to encourage students to share with
parents and siblings. We want everyone to come
and use our library.”

“We let everyone borrow books and share
them at home. We ask teachers to encourage
students to share with parents and siblings.
We want everyone to come and use our library.”
DESTINED TO RAISE EDUCATED CHILDREN

In Cambodia, only 35% of fathers are supportive of their children’s education.
MANY CAMBODIAN FAMILIES GATHER AROUND THE TELEVISION AFTER MEALS, BUT SIVFANG’S FAMILY IS DIFFERENT. Everyone gathers around her to listen while she reads aloud.

Every day, 10-year-old Sivfang holds story time in her small brick house, sharing the books she brings home from her school’s library. She has to compete with the noise of the sewing machine, which her mother, Soklin, hunches over each day to sew, earning 25 cents per shirt. Her younger sister, a 1st grader, always sits nearby listening carefully. When her father is home, he plays an active role, coaching her on the more challenging words even though he only has a 9th grade education himself. He says helping Sivfang is relaxing after working all day juggling three jobs to support his family.

“On school days, she borrows up to five books to read for us,” her father, Sokkhim, boasts. “She can now read everything without asking me for help.”

Sivfang just started 4th grade at Hun Sen Peam Chi Kang Primary School, where Room to Read established a library two years ago. Before the library came to her school, Sivfang had only a few books to read to her family, making it hard to practice new words. Now she always has a fresh batch of books to borrow at her current reading level.

“I am very happy and proud that Sivfang is an outstanding student,” said Sokkhim. “And her younger sister is learning to read now too. She remembers what Sivfang reads to her, and Sivfang comes up with very creative ways to help her sister remember characters and words.”

“I want to be a doctor when I grow up. I want to be able to take care of my grandmother, my family, and others,” said Sivfang. Her father laughs proudly—he knows that this is a big ambition. In Cambodia, becoming a doctor requires seven years of university plus additional training.

“We still have a long way to go but I make plans step-by-step,” said Sokkim. “First is to make my daughters finish high school. No matter which field of study they choose, I will try my best to send them to universities. No one knows what the future holds, but at least both of my daughters will have a better education than me and my wife.”
THE CHALLENGE: ILLITERACY

In India, 37% of adults are illiterate. DESTINED TO BREAK THE CYCLE
Amil
THIRD GRADE STUDENT, INDIA

YOU CANNOT HELP BUT NOTICE THE WINNING SMILE OF 8-YEAR-OLD AMIL. Standing just three feet tall, he makes for a rather tiny figure amidst his 3rd grade classmates. Despite his small stature, Amil is quite popular with his friends, but this has not always been the case. Amil used to keep to himself because he didn’t like school.

Amil dreamed of becoming a daily wage laborer like his father. At an impressionable age and without support at home, he did not care about learning to read. In fact, he gave his Hindi-language teacher, Ms. Shikha Vats, a hard time because he was so disinterested.

“Amil was extremely shy,” shared Ms. Vats. “He wouldn’t interact with his classmates and had no interest in engaging in any classroom activity. His lack of motivation caused him to lag behind most of the students.”

Amil’s father, Mohammad, never went to school. His mother, Sayara, only studied through 2nd grade. They did not encourage Amil to study until Ms. Vats and a Room to Read literacy facilitator began making house calls to explain the value of education. With minimal success, they increased their efforts, making a house visit every time Amil missed a day of school. Facing serious financial challenges, Mohammad and Sayara were only interested in sending Amil to school because it provided a safe place, a uniform, and a daily meal until he became old enough to work for money.

Unwilling to give up, Ms. Vats tried engaging Amil through the reading materials and learning activities provided by Room to Read: big books, sound games, songs and poems. What finally clicked for Amil was a challenge game. In the game, Amil had to identify the sounds of letters and form songs from those sounds. Encouraged for each positive move he made with “smile” cards the teacher pinned on his shirt, Amil finally felt valued and recognized for his achievements in learning.

Ms. Vats then started encouraging reading aloud activities. Amil was hesitant at first, but later gained confidence watching other students read. Amil’s motivation was sparked by competition. He practiced hard and within a few days started reading on his own. Now a fluent reader at his grade level, Amil reads in his free time, completes reading and word-making assignments and dedicates at least one hour each day to study and to complete his homework.

Amil’s parents are also now supportive of his education. “It was our fault that we never realized that education can be good beyond the free school benefits,” Sayara admits. “I am more convinced after seeing my child interested in learning and reading both at home and school.” Amil has had a change of ambition as well. “I wanted to be a laborer and play all day long,” said Amil. “Now I love to study, and I want to become a doctor.”

“I wanted to be a laborer and play all day long. Now I love to study, and I want to become a doctor.”
THE CHALLENGE: POVERTY

In Tanzania, 68% of people live below the poverty line.
Wedaa Abdala
VILLAG CHAIRMAN, TANZANIA

IT IS NOT EVERY DAY THAT WE COME ACROSS A LIBRARY VOLUNTEER WHO IS ALSO THE VILLAGE CHAIRMAN. But Mr. Wema Abdala, the leader of the Kidongo Chekundu Village in Bagamoyo, Tanzania is not your average chairman. The community refers to Mr. Abdala as an exceptional muktaba (library) volunteer.

Mr. Abdala knows the value of an education. “I may be a village chairman but there is nothing ‘village-like’ about me,” he says. “I left school in 1989 while in secondary school due to lack of finances. But I was eager to complete my schooling, so I decided to clean rich people’s yards in order to earn enough to return to school. Upon graduating, I was offered a job at a water and sewerage company before moving to Kidongo Chekundu Village. This has been my home for almost 20 years now.”

“I fell in love with this school,” Mr. Abdala continues. “As a volunteer, I counsel the students and make sure to know every member of my village. One of my goals is to encourage the parents and teach them the importance of education and sending their children to school.”

Chairman Abdala joined with the district council to approach Room to Read for support. Once a plan was in place for school improvements, Mr. Abdala mobilized the community by forming a school committee to ensure that every family played an active role in the project’s success. This included each family contributing 5,000 Tanzanian shillings (US $3) as part of Room to Read’s “Challenge Grant,” which helps increase long-term sustainability.

“Here is one trick I used to make sure the donations came in,” Mr Abdala confides. “I would go to the local bar and approach those buying more than one beer. ‘Instead of buying two bottles, I suggested, ‘why not keep that money and donate it to the school? That will help build two classrooms and a library.’”

“Before Room to Read came on board, the school did not have enough classrooms. I am so proud to say that now we have two additional classrooms and we are the only school in the village with a library,” says head teacher Monica Selestine Alex.

Everyone in the village seems to take pride in the new library. Isdory Joseph Mwepongwe, a grandparent of two pupils at the school, is a frequent visitor. “I like to come here to read old stories I used to hear while growing up,” he says. “I am able to reminisce about the past. Now I can even read these books myself. And I also love to read to my grandchildren.”
DESTINY SHAPERS

Education has been instrumental in the lives of so many of our staff members across the globe. It is one of the reasons why they work so passionately within their home countries so that others can change their own destinies through our Literacy and Girls’ Education Programs. Three of our staff members share their own stories.

Leading with Purpose and Passion
SHEVANTHI JAYASURIYA, COUNTRY DIRECTOR, ROOM TO READ, SRI LANKA

I came to Room to Read after more than 20 years in the private sector, including leadership positions at global companies in telecom and the airline industry. Mid-career, I was “loaned” out by my company to head up communications, helping Sri Lanka communicate our peace process to international and local audiences. My two-month loan assignment turned into two years because I loved the work so much.

Interacting with organizations working at the grassroots level got me thinking about making an official move towards the not-for-profit space. While I didn’t join Room to Read immediately, the organization was on my radar. Years later, when there was an opening for a country director, I applied.

My mother was a teacher and always told me, “You can travel the world in your mind through reading a book.” I grew up in an environment where education was valued more than money—or anything else for that matter! Reading, from the time I was born, was a part of my daily life. My mother set up a library in our village school and every book I got was donated to the school library once I’d finished it.

Girls’ education and gender equality have been important to me from a young age as well. I was involved with the student Christian movement working with girls from underprivileged homes. In the private sector I managed a corporate social responsibility initiative around women’s advocacy and empowerment. I also became a member of Zonta International, a group of business and professional women who volunteer both time and money to uplift the lives of women and children. Room to Read fills two of my passions and gives me amazing opportunities to contribute.

It also puts me in the position to address the challenge of gender inequity in leadership in Sri Lanka. There have been a few women who have risen to the top in finance or government, but these are exceptions—not the norm. This is due to lack of understanding, lack of mentors, lack of quality education and lack of opportunity. In rural areas, the average age for marriage is 16 and girls often have two children before the age of 18. If these girls had education, mentors to guide them and a wider perspective, they could aspire to do so much more. We need to expose girls to what is possible and create opportunities for them to break this cycle. Education is the key to unlocking their futures and the future of Sri Lanka.

Mentoring Independent Thinkers
HOA HUYNH, GIRLS’ EDUCATION PROGRAM, ROOM TO READ, VIETNAM

In university, I majored in biotechnology and volunteered at an organization that did development projects. I really liked the work. I even postponed a year in university to work for them full time. After I graduated, I had a scholarship to do a fellowship in France and the plan was to get my PhD after that. But when I finished the...
fellowship, I realized that I was destined to work in community development projects with those who are disadvantaged, so I returned to Vietnam. After six years with Room to Read, I discovered I am interested in coaching and mentoring, so I am now studying for another bachelor’s degree in Psychology.

The variety of students we serve through Room to Read and their individual stories have made this work both exciting and challenging. You have to feel passionate to do this sort of work. Without that, the job is not sustainable. My goal is to support these girls to become independent thinkers, not to be the sole problem solver for every situation.

Going to school in rural areas is very difficult because of all the obstacles: not enough food, the long journey to school, not enough family support and so on. I admire these girls for how hard they work to overcome life’s obstacles. Some get up at 4 a.m. and don’t have enough to eat, but they are determined to come to school, finish their education and achieve something.

There are students who see me as a role model and say they want to be like me when they graduate, doing what I do. But from my perspective, the girls shouldn’t limit their focus to one thing. They should know that there is plenty of work that is just as interesting and needed for the development of a country.

**Changing a Nation’s Schools**

**CATHERINE MATHSHIPO NGWANE, LITERACY PROGRAM, ROOM TO READ, SOUTH AFRICA**

Because my parents could not afford to pay for my studies to complete the 12th grade, I had to take a shortcut. At age 16, I registered for a two-year Primary Teachers’ training course. When I started teaching at a primary school and earning a salary, I began to save money to finish my high school degree. I studied part time for the required final high school exam while continuing to teach and take care of my family.

After gaining my high school degree, I again saved money to continue on to college. I was a full-time university student for the first year, but it became difficult to afford. Determined to obtain my bachelor’s degree, I went back to work during the day and studied at night and on weekends.

I now hold a degree in commerce and a senior secondary teaching certificate. I also have 18 years of teaching and management experience in primary schools.

I left teaching in 1997 because I was interested in impacting the lives of primary school children in a broader way. I joined READ Education Trust in 2000 as a teacher trainee and began working with primary school teachers in the most remote areas of South Africa. I was responsible for the coordination of projects and monitoring implementation.

At READ I felt that I was beginning to realize my goal of enhancing other’s lives. I managed literacy programs in more than five provinces and was involved in a program training teachers to develop story books for intermediate phase learners in indigenous languages. It was extremely satisfying to see the change in schools and real improvement in learner performance.

Joining Room to Read in 2010 was the culmination of 10 years of work experience specializing in literacy intervention programs, and the realization of my fondest dream as an educator. At Room to Read, I am now part of a team with immense reach, that crafts and designs a program that significantly improves the lives of children throughout South Africa.
We would like to thank the following companies for sharing their office space with Room to Read: Credit Suisse (Hong Kong, Sydney and Tokyo), T & J Meyer Family Foundation (London), C12 Capital Management (New York), Reliance Capital (Mumbai).