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## World

# Schools are a luxury not a right in Nepal

David Pilling on Room to Read scholarships

DECEMBER 23, 2009 by: **David Pilling**

The children walking along the dusty road, each with a thick stack of textbooks under their arm, are probably an hour away from school. For miles around, there is no sign of anything much: a scattering of stilted houses in the yellowing paddy fields, some buffalo trudging through a road-side ditch, a bridge over the trickle of a river.

In western Nepal, as in much of the country, indeed as in many rural areas in the developing world, schools are a luxury, not a right. In these parts, a 90-minute walk to school is an unremarkable fact of life. Among the children making this daily pilgrimage are girls sponsored by Room to Read, an educational charity that the Financial Times is supporting in this year's seasonal appeal.

Girls are more likely to drop out of school than boys in Nepal. As a consequence, the illiteracy rate among Nepalese women is 57 per cent, compared with a hardly inspiring 35 per cent for men. Many poor families equate educating their daughters with fattening their neighbour's cow, a wasted effort, since girls are likely to marry and join their husband's household. Rather than send them to school, some parents marry them off early or even, in this part of Nepal at least, send them into bonded labour.

The girls supported by Room to Read, which buys them a school uniform, textbooks and pays any school fees – an annual scholarship costs an average \$250 – are indistinguishable from the other children streaming along the roadside.

“We tried to give them school bags, but they wouldn't use them,” says Reema Shrestha, who runs the girls scholarship programme in Nepal, one of nine countries in which the San Francisco-based charity operates. “We thought they needed it because they have to walk such long distances to school, but they didn't want to identify themselves as Room to Read scholars. We don't buy them shoes for the same reason.”

In the Shree Sarada Lower Secondary school, there are several scholarship girls among the children who pack the rudimentary classrooms.

The school is so overcrowded it operates two shifts, one in the day and one in the evening. Among the charity's beneficiaries is Mina Tharu, a 15-year-old who has received only sporadic education since the age of eight when her farmer-parents sent her to work as a live-in maid. Now, thanks to the scholarship, she is a regular school attendee with a penchant for history and maths, and a determination to graduate.

"I always told my parents: 'I don't want to go [to work as a maid]'," she explains. "But they said they couldn't afford to feed me or buy me clothes, so I had no choice."

Room to Read supports 9,000 girls in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Sri Lanka, Laos, Vietnam and Nepal. In all of those countries, as well as in Zambia where it recently began a programme, girls have significantly higher drop-out rates than boys.

The charity cites research from Unesco, the United Nations cultural and learning arm, suggesting that keeping girls in school is the single most effective way of increasing the income and health prospects of a family and of improving the likelihood that the subsequent generation receives an adequate education.

It falls to Ms Shrestha to select the Nepali girls who will receive potentially life-changing scholarships, no easy task when the need is so great. Without scholarships, none of the children Room to Read supports would be able to attend school.

Tripti Chaudhary, one of the charity's field workers, says scholarship funds are so precious, they must be used stingily. "We can't give them bicycles," she says. "They do ask. But a bicycle is a luxurious thing and we are not in a position to provide everything."

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