

# Beyond the Classroom

## Room to Read Girls' Education Yearbook 2011



Hajera, Bangladesh, pg 3



Lisang, Cambodia, pg 5



Tara, India, pg 7



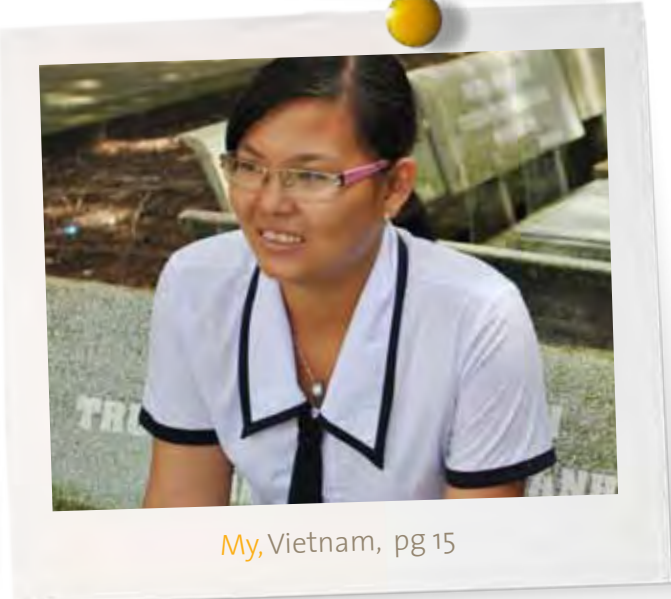
Kaisone, Laos, pg 9



Sangita, Nepal, pg 11



Sriramy, Sri Lanka, pg 13



My, Vietnam, pg 15



Veronica, Zambia, pg 17

### Girls' Education Program

#### Report Card

LAUNCHED IN 2000

95%  
Retention Rate

95%  
Advancement Rate

13,727  
Girls Enrolled in 2011

86%  
Secondary school girls who  
participated in life skills activities

88%  
Girls whose guardian(s)  
participated in activities

9,687  
Girls who received  
academic support

509  
Total number of girls who  
completed the program  
and graduated



# Our approach to education goes beyond the classroom.

At Room to Read, we believe that education is a fundamental right for every child, no matter their nationality or gender. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that over 67 million children of primary school age are not enrolled in school, the majority of whom are female.



There are a variety of factors that keep girls and women worldwide trapped in a cycle of illiteracy and poverty—from lack of quality health services to restrictive home environments—and there is only one proven solution: equal access to education. Yet for many girls in marginalized communities worldwide, the problems keeping them from attending school go far beyond just literacy rates and school fees.

### More than just academics.

Because of the complex nature of these challenges, our Girls’ Education program has developed a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond just academic and material support to help girls thrive in every aspect of their lives. One of the most important components of the program is life skills training, a multi-year series of workshops designed to give girls the tools and knowledge they need to make informed life decisions necessary to succeed in school and beyond. These workshops cover a wide range of topics, teaching valuable skills in five areas:

- Self-Awareness and Empathy
- Communication and Interpersonal Skills
- Decision-Making and Problem-Solving
- Critical and Creative Thinking
- Coping with Emotions and Stress

While many of us may take such skills for granted, in communities where young women are often embarrassed to ask questions about their own bodies or too scared to speak to adults, these life skills sessions are a rare and valuable opportunity. By learning the importance of these skills and how to apply them to their daily lives, girls will be better equipped to handle the challenges they may face, from negative peer pressure to budgeting finances.

Every country where we offer our Girls’ Education program focuses on these topics in a different way, ensuring that these critical skills are treated sensitively and tailored appropriately for each culture and community. For example, in Cambodia, workshops on healthy eating and better hygiene helped girls miss fewer days of school because of sickness. In Laos, our team organized a co-ed debate on the topic of “gender equality in education,” teaching students to express themselves openly and confidently. And in India, group sessions on sexual harassment and physical abuse provided a safe space for girls to speak about this difficult and personal issue.

Life skills trainings are just one component of Room to Read’s long-term approach to bridging the gender gap in education. Material support, in the form

of books, bicycles and dormitory housing, means that these young women can give their education the attention it deserves. By working with families and communities, we ensure that girls receive the support at home that is equally critical to helping them reach their full potential.

### Leading by example.

Beyond the academics and workshops being held by Room to Read, it is still a challenge for many girls to stay in school and succeed—whether it is family or financial pressures or just the challenge of juggling school and house work. To help counter these stresses, Room to Read’s approach involves employing social mobilizers, women on the ground who work directly with our Girls’ Education students as their personal advocate on the path to graduation. This can take the form of a social mobilizer in Sri Lanka meeting with a girl’s teacher to get updates on where she might benefit from extra tutoring. Or, it might be a social mobilizer in Bangladesh advocating against early marriage so that girls can remain in school longer. In Zambia, it could mean a social mobilizer working with a girl to solve a problem with attendance because of a walk to school that is either too dangerous or too far.

As members of the community themselves, our social mobilizers understand the challenges and pressures facing these girls, and they exemplify the educated, empowered women we hope our students will grow up to become. By providing our students with these positive role models, we give them support that extends far beyond material resources.

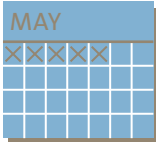


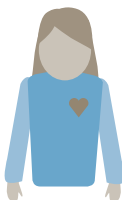


### A better life for future generations.

The challenge of bringing education to every child in the world, male and female, is not an easy one, and there are still many communities Room to Read has yet to reach. For the more than 15,000 girls that have benefited from our Girls’ Education program since 2000, we at least know that their lives have been changed for the better. And, when each of those girls has their own children, the next generation will have the benefit of an educated mother, thus breaking the cycle. What does this change mean on the ground? Educated women are healthier, earn more income for their families, and are greater contributors to their community and country.

Room to Read is proud of our comprehensive approach in the area of gender equality in education because we know it can and will make a real difference. On the following pages, we welcome you to meet some of these change-makers—the girls who are leading the way in their communities, and the social mobilizers who are empowering them to make a difference.

# Girls’ Education Program: Life Skills Competency Framework

These 30 life skills competencies were developed through a collaborative process by Room to Read’s Girls’ Education program staff who work most closely with participants. They are based on the 10 core life skills, identified by the World Health Organization, which girls need to develop their personalities during adolescence, and the six core content areas that Room to Read believes are most important to their success. We recognize that these competencies do not represent everything girls need to succeed in life, but they do establish a solid foundation. We encourage our country teams to develop additional competencies as appropriate to their context.

CONTENT AREAS (core competencies for skills are listed in the column below each content area)							
SKILLS							
	My Daily Life	My Education	My Rights and Protection	My Body and Health	My Society and Responsibility	My Future	
	<i>Self-Awareness and Empathy</i>	I can describe my most and least favorite parts of each day.	I can explain how completing secondary school will improve my life.	I know when physical contact becomes inappropriate.	I know which foods make me healthier and less healthy.	I can explain at least two sides of an argument.	I can explain what would make me happy in my future.
	<i>Communication and Interpersonal Skills</i>	I feel confident in speaking with adults inside and outside my family.	I can help other students to succeed in school.	I can resist negative peer pressure.	I know how to communicate that I do not want sex.	I can plan activities to give back to my community.	I can describe how early marriage affects girls' lives.
	<i>Decision-Making and Problem-Solving</i>	I can choose my friends.	I can make a plan for my education and decide which subjects to study.	I understand the risks of being sent away for work.	I can determine when I need health services.	I know how to use common community services.	I know the value of saving and investing money.
	<i>Critical and Creative Thinking</i>	I can make a daily schedule and keep to it.	I can find time for study and homework.	I know how to report a crime.	I understand the negative consequences of using drugs and alcohol.	I can make a household budget.	I can make a life plan.
<i>Coping with Emotions and Stress</i>	I can explain what I am feeling and why.	I can prepare myself mentally for exams.	I know what to do in dangerous situations.	I understand how emotions affect my well-being.	I can find a safe place in my community when I need it.	I have the skills to cope with possible stress related to important life decisions.	

## Coming Soon: Girls’ Education in Tanzania

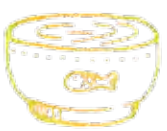
We are excited to announce the launch of our Girls’ Education program in Tanzania in 2012! Already, we’ve hit the ground running by hiring a country director, key program staff and eight social mobilizers. We have also carried out school assessments and site selections in the Mvomero District, where we will be working in three schools and with 300 girls, to start. Currently, literacy rates in Tanzania at the end of primary school hover around 68 percent in the

country’s official language, Kiswahili, with girls far more likely to fall below passing grades than their male peers. Complicating matters for all students is the switch from Kiswahili to English as the primary language of instruction in secondary schools. Room to Read will focus its efforts in the first year on providing girls with regular academic support and life skills trainings.





My favorite  
dish is  
**FISH**  
curry





# Hajera



Age: 11  
Rajshahi,  
Bangladesh

GRADE: 6  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2011

I was born in Diguhlia, and I have never gone beyond the river that surrounds my small village. My mother passed away two years ago and I’ve been very lonely ever since—I miss her terribly. She was kind and gentle, and because I was the youngest she always indulged me. After she died, I was forced to stay at home to take care of the house. I was sad that I had to stop going to school, because even though I hadn’t been a very serious student, school was a place where I had friends and could be carefree.

In the last few years I have done much growing up. My father is busy with his farming all day. And, after my mother died, he married again almost immediately. My stepmother has never been happy with me, even though I do chores around the house to help her. I have learned to handle my problems by myself. Most importantly, I started to realize that my only salvation was education, and I was very depressed when I lost that opportunity.

I used to watch Room to Read’s Social Mobilizer, Ms. Jannatul Firdoz Lovely, whom everyone calls “Lovely Appa,” (a term of respect in South Asian countries, it roughly translates to “elder sister”). I overheard the girls saying that they could discuss any problems they had with her, and she would know the solution. It seemed like she had a magic wand! She looked like a warm and caring person and she always smiled at me when she passed, even though I was not one of her students.

One day I got up the courage to talk to her and tell her that I really wanted to go back to school. I told her about my background, and that I was unable to attend

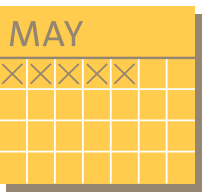
school because my father and brothers didn’t want to spend money on my education. She comforted me and said she would see what she could do. Days passed into months but, in between, whenever I saw Lovely Appa, she always had a word of encouragement for me.

My lucky day came when Lovely Appa came to our house and told me that I had been selected for the Girls’ Education program! That was the happiest day of my life. I felt like I could breathe freely again, and dare to dream of a better future for myself.

Now, I study harder than I ever did before and I no longer take school for granted. I know this scholarship is a blessing, and I will never abuse the opportunity I’ve been given. I even get additional support with my lessons, so there is nothing to stop me from doing well and improving my life.

My father and brothers are also very happy for me, and my oldest brother even gives me pocket money and clothes to help out. Unfortunately, my stepmom was not happy, and she complained that I wasn’t available to help with the chores. At first, I reacted poorly to her demands, but thanks to my life skills classes, I have learned to get along with her better. I now help her with the chores as much as I can, but we have agreed that she cannot disturb me when I am studying.

After two difficult years I’m now a happy person again. I want to thank Room to Read for giving me a new outlook on life.



**My daily life:** I feel confident in speaking with adults inside and outside of my family.

**Life skills:** Communication and Interpersonal Skills

Twenty-seven girls from the program in Bangladesh performed a play at a book launch celebration in front of hundreds of honored guests and the media. Drawing on the knowledge and self-assurance gained through their regular life skills activities, these girls confidently interacted with renowned writers, media personalities and professors. The public nature of the event also helped the girls practice expressing themselves and learn about a world beyond their immediate community.



ROOM TO READ



Tania Sultana SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2011

Tania Sultana became a social mobilizer for Room to Read after years of working in marketing for an industrial company. It may seem like a strange career shift, but for Tania, the enjoyment she gets from helping girls succeed in school and beyond is reason enough.

“The girls come to me with various issues and challenges—they could be related to academics, going to school, or issues at home—and I find solutions,” Tania says. “I am a good problem solver and can think on my feet.”

One common issue facing Tania’s students is harassment on the way to school. “One girl had to take a longer route home during the rainy season and two boys would follow and harass her. When she told me about this, we

spoke to her family and took preventive measures. It was surprising—none of the boys have bothered her since. And, now the boys are respectful towards me as well!”

Tania also has to make sure her students are healthy. “We also often deal with health issues,” Tania says. “Three of my girls developed eye problems so we got them checked during the eye camp. I have seen a drastic improvement in these girls and their hygiene habits now.”

Tania is currently finishing an honors program in economics, and though she says she might want to work for the government in the future, she loves being a mobilizer for Room to Read. “I don’t want to leave any of the girls here behind—I want to help them achieve what they have set out to do.”

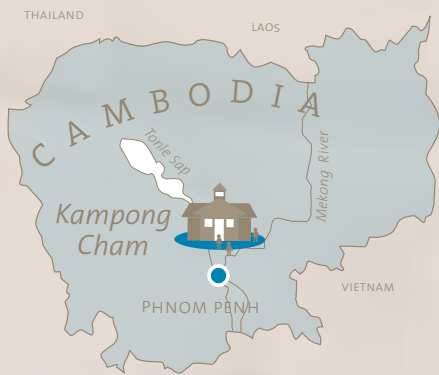
Bangladesh  
Report Card  
LAUNCHED IN 2009

100%  
Retention Rate

91%  
Advancement Rate

544  
Girls Enrolled





I would like to go to  
Australia to study.





# Lisang



Age: 16  
Kampong Cham,  
Cambodia

GRADE: 9  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2008

As the oldest of four children, I’m expected to manage our household, and I have many responsibilities. I help my mother in the kitchen and take care of my siblings. I don’t have much time to play with my friends or visit with neighbors. My parents also work very hard farming rice on the small piece of land we own. We can only harvest twice a year, which means my family is always struggling to get by.

In my house, my father’s word is law and his rules are not to be broken. He doesn’t like my siblings and me to leave the house, so I was totally housebound for much of my childhood. Until recently, my father didn’t consider education a priority. Last year, during my summer vacation from school, he sent me to work as a housemaid in Phnom Penh. I was very hurt by this, yet I had no choice but to obey him. I worked for a young couple—washing, cooking, and cleaning—all while looking after their baby. Though my employers treated me decently, I worked late into the night—twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and earned just US \$50 in wages for three months of work.

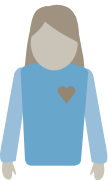
When my school reopened in the fall and Room to Read’s Social Mobilizer didn’t find me in school, she reached out to my parents to find out why I was absent. I’m not sure what she said to convince my father, but thankfully he brought me home and allowed me to return to school. My father’s change of heart changed my life. I feel indebted to Room to Read for giving me this amazing opportunity

and the Girls’ Education program staff for being vigilant about students like me who have been forced to drop out.

At my age, many girls in my community feel pressure to marry. I believe that marriage—at the right time to the right person—is a good thing, but many young people aren’t mature enough to handle that responsibility. Right now, marriage is not my top priority.

My cousin is my role model. His parents sent him to a monastery because they couldn’t afford to care for him, but he did not despair. He studied hard and ultimately opted out of taking vows. He is currently attending school in Japan on an academic scholarship. My cousin’s wisdom and determination always seemed so heroic to me, and now I see that I have overcome major challenges, too!

My immediate plan is to continue my studies and enter university. After I finish school and take more classes to improve my English, I hope to become an interpreter and tour guide because I’m proud of my Cambodian heritage and would like to share it with visitors. This career path would allow me to travel throughout my home country and beyond to countries like Australia. Though “tour guide” is considered an unusual profession for women in my culture, the world is changing for girls like me, and I know that my education will take me to new and unexpected places.



**My health:** I know which foods make me healthier.  
**Life skills:** Self-Awareness and Empathy

Cambodia led a workshop called “Body Hygiene and Eating Well” where girls were taught about the correct handling and cooking of raw meat, locating and growing healthy fruits and vegetables at home or in the marketplace, using clean water, and how best to cook healthier meals that will nourish their bodies. After the workshop, girls were encouraged to share what they learned with their families, and early evidence shows that there has been a drop in sickness from previous years.



Photos courtesy of Kristin Harrison and Jeremy Ginsberg

ROOM TO READ



Sokhea Hak SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2009

It’s hard to believe that just a few years back, Sokhea Hak was a Girls’ Education program participant herself in the same school where she now works as a social mobilizer supporting more than 50 teenagers. Even with her knowledge of the school and the challenges these girls face, her task at times can feel daunting.

“I was supported through the Girls’ Education program for six years so I know what it involves. One of the reasons I wanted to become a social mobilizer was because, unfortunately, I did not feel close to mine. I wanted to show these girls what a good social mobilizer could do!” says Sokhea. “Now that I am in her shoes, however, I realize that it is a harder job than I thought.”

The program has evolved since Sokhea was a student. “When I was a student, there were no life skills workshops, but now the girls have such a wonderful opportunity to learn important lessons on how to handle challenges outside of school. I wish I had that same opportunity at their age,” she says.

The biggest challenge Sokhea confronts is girls dropping out of school to work in the local factories. She spends a lot of time meeting with parents to discuss the value of educating their daughters. Luckily, she can use herself as a prime example. According to Sokhea, her own parents never imagined she would one day graduate from high school. Now that she is independent and supports the entire family on her earnings, Sokhea says her parents are “very happy and proud of me.”

Cambodia  
Report Card  
LAUNCHED IN 2003

90%  
Retention Rate

97%  
Advancement Rate

1,922  
Girls Enrolled





I love  
knitting  
I want to start my own  
knitting business one day.





# Tara



Age: 17  
Uttarakhand,  
India

GRADE: 10  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2005

I live in a picturesque hill town in the Kumaon region of the Himalayas. I love to knit, and my dream is to start a knitting business one day. I'd like to be able to employ all the women in my community and support my family. The Girls' Education program has given me the courage to dream big—really big!

Until 8th grade, I had been a good student, but after that academics got tough for me, and there was little help from my teachers. I couldn't keep up in the classroom, and I was always stressed about finishing my course work. My stepmother taunted me and threatened to stop paying for my education. My sister had done well in her exams and I was constantly being compared to her. I was hurt and disappointed in myself.

Despite all my efforts, my grades were not satisfactory and I did not pass my 10th grade exams—a requirement to continuing secondary education in public school. That is when two social mobilizers introduced me to Room to Read and I joined the Girls' Education program. They told me how the program could help me study and even develop my interest in knitting, without being financially dependent on my parents. Now I am working hard to finish my schooling, thanks to individual tutoring sessions. I miss studying in the classroom with my friends, but participating in the program has been a turning point for me and it has really changed my life.

The life skills sessions have given me tremendous knowledge about health and hygiene, communicating with strangers, dealing with the opposite gender,

and resisting violence. They are a window into another way of living. The role play exercises help me to cope with stress, and during the sessions I forget all my troubles. I'm much more organized now, and I've learned to divide my time between studies and household work. I am the only girl in my village with the courage to go out alone, and I attribute my confidence to the life skills lessons, which are different from any classes I've ever taken.

Thanks to Room to Read, I have had lots of help and some unforgettable experiences. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw my name published in the local program newsletter, *Gupshup*. I imagined all the girls across India reading my story and tears came to my eyes. I was also able to meet a local entrepreneur from Kumaon, Mrs. Kamala, who runs a bicycle repair business. Her struggles and her success really inspired me, and I want to be like her.

Thanks to my social mobilizer, Ms. Chandu, I am part of Kumaon Gramin Udyog, an organization that helps small entrepreneurs succeed. She convinced my parents that it is important for me to finish school if I am to start my business. I am working hard on my studies and my knitting, and I am positive about my future. My family wants me to get married soon, but I have too many milestones to reach and dreams to fulfill before that. I can't wait for the day when I will have my own knitting factory and everyone in India will be wearing my designs!



**My rights and protection:** I know what to do in dangerous situations.

**Life skills:** Coping with Emotions and Stress

Each year in India, girls in the program participate in workshops where they learn about various forms of abuse and violence against women, and get trained on how to protect themselves and cope if they are ever the victims of abuse. They also receive information about their legal rights, how to seek advice, and local services they can take advantage of that provide specialized support. In addition, the girls are coached on how to support their peers or siblings should they face this danger.



ROOM TO READ



Parveen SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2008

Twenty-year-old Parveen has full days. She wakes up at 5 a.m., studies for two hours, cooks breakfast and then rushes to the college where she is studying for her bachelor's degree. On top of all that, her evenings are spent working as a social mobilizer, making sure her students are staying safe and responsible.

Parveen lives and works in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood where many girls are scared to ask questions about sexuality. The Room to Read life skills sessions on this topic give these girls an opportunity to talk about sexuality and learn about issues such as HIV and pregnancy—taboo subjects in their community. She explains, "We live in a very conservative society. Young girls are often not comfortable talking about the changes they observe

in their bodies. Some feel traumatized at the onset of their menstrual cycle. Many have desires about men but do not know how to act."

Parveen believes that accurate and age-appropriate information needs to be made available to the girls at this crucial point in their lives. "These are the most vulnerable years of a girl's life, so I try to make my students confide in me. They tell me about their boyfriends, or seek fashion advice for dates—these are normal teenage behaviors. I also tell them to make their studies a priority and if they go out on dates, I always give them my phone number in case of any emergencies."

When asked about her plans for the future, Parveen smiles, "I think I was born to help others. I can't dream of doing anything else."

India

Report Card

LAUNCHED IN 2004

97%

Retention Rate

97%

Advancement Rate

3,607

Girls Enrolled





I like country songs, especially KOREAN and THAI  songs.





# Kaisone



Age: 18  
Salavan,  
Laos

GRADE: GRADUATE  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2007

Just a few months before my sixth birthday, while I was in 1st grade, my mother passed away. I still remember her well, and today I look back and think that it was such a futile death. She died on the long drive to the hospital after giving birth to my younger sister. I vowed then that I would study hard to become a doctor, so that the people in my village would not have to die because of poor access to medical aid.

After my mother’s death, our lives changed dramatically. My newborn sister was taken in by an aunt and I moved far away to live with another aunt, because there was a school in her village. My father and my two younger brothers stayed in our old home. For me, the upheaval was heartbreaking. Even as young as I was, I knew we had no other choice.

Life in my new home was not easy. My aunt had her own family to take care of, in addition to my grandfather who is paralyzed and bedridden. I had to help my aunt with the house chores and work in the rice fields, and collect wood and fish to earn extra money for the family.

During the summers, I went back home to be with my family. It was always a happy event, although it made me sad to watch my father struggle, quietly going about his hard work to coax the maximum produce from the farm. When I was there, I would do my best to help. It gave him joy that I was studying hard and doing well at school. He was relieved when I was selected to receive scholarship support; and I was very happy that I could study without burdening him.

Aside from my mother’s death, being chosen for the Girls’ Education program was the event that most changed my life—and fortunately, this change was for the better. I was determined to make use of the opportunity and not disappoint the Room to Read team. I never missed school or any activity. I loved the life skills workshops—they helped me become confident and self-reliant, and now I am not scared of talking to people or asking questions. I also learned tailoring; I can stitch my own clothes and help out as the family seamstress. I am so grateful to Room to Read for changing the course of my life.

My hard work and dedication paid off, and I am happy to say that I graduated with the highest marks in my school, and the second highest in my district among 1,275 students! My grandparents were in tears with pride at my graduation, and my aunt gave me a gold ring as a gift to remind me of my determination. After four long months at the National University of Laos in Vientiane, I made the 12-hour drive home to see my family. In celebration, my grandfather prepared fresh coconut juice, my favorite drink, from the backyard coconuts.

Because I lost my mother and watched my grandfather suffer every day, I really wanted to be a doctor, but medical school is too expensive and I can’t afford the fees. Instead, I’m majoring in English so that I can teach the children in my village. I am optimistic that I will be able to bring about a positive change in my community.



**My society and responsibility:** I can explain at least two sides of an argument.  
**Life skills:** Self-Awareness and Empathy

In Laos, students from five different secondary schools participated in a debate examining various arguments on the topic of gender equality in education. In front of their peers, teachers, community members and education officials, girls and boys were given the opportunity to articulate opposing ideas around the importance of gender equality, the roles of boys and girls in schools, and the value of educating boys versus girls. Beyond just practicing their ability to formulate an argument and research facts, these girls gained critical skills in public speaking and building logical arguments to advocate for a cause—while developing their confidence by openly and bravely expressing themselves.



ROOM TO READ



Sengda Sychalern SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2009

Sengda Sychalern has been working as a social mobilizer for more than two years, helping girls in a boarding school that is supported by Room to Read. It is her first job, and despite the difficulties of having over 50 students under her wing, she feels lucky. “I enjoy my work, and at the end of the day I feel very good even though it is exhausting. No two days are alike, and each morning you are not sure what challenges await you. It is never boring!”

Sengda’s main challenge is ensuring the girls study and finish school because many families do not have the resources to support their daughters’ education. Often, parents pressure girls to drop out and get married. “Our girls are very vulnerable and ultimately have to fall in line with what

their parents want. It is therefore important for us to work closely with the parents. Most of the parents cannot think beyond farming—everything else is secondary. The challenge is to ensure these girls appreciate and value their education and offer parents a new perspective,” explains Sengda.

Sengda is proud to be part of the Girls’ Education program, especially the innovative and practical life skills trainings. “The girls get a lot of information that they can use in daily life,” Sengda says. “These skills help them to overcome their inhibitions.”

Despite the difficulties and even other job offers, Sengda says the thought of leaving has never crossed her mind. She calls it a “sacred bond” that she has with these girls and she wants to see each of them graduate as it will be, “the proudest moment.”

Laos  
Report Card  
LAUNCHED IN 2007

97%  
Retention Rate

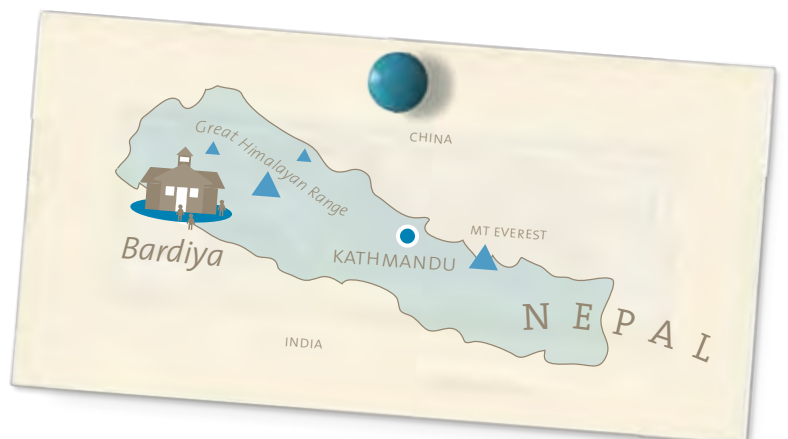
100%  
Advancement Rate

1,249  
Girls Enrolled





I *love* to DRAW.  
The beautiful illustrations  
in the Room to Read books  
inspired me to start sketching?





# Sangita



Age: 16  
Bardiya,  
Nepal

GRADE: 7  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2009

When I was eight years old, my parents sent me away to live my life as a Kamlari (indentured servant). Every minute that passed felt like an eternity. It was hard to carry on day after day, doing the same chores over and over again. During that time, I felt like I was the only one suffering this misfortune.

When I was liberated four years later by a local nonprofit group, Friends of Nepal, I was surprised and excited to meet so many other girls who had shared my experience. I never thought that there were thousands of other girls like me. The majority of us had been forced to quit school, but I felt lucky that I had attended at least to the 4th grade—some of the other girls were not so fortunate.

When I returned home, I felt my heart lurch when I opened my old textbooks. I could not read them, not even halfway through. I had difficulty recognizing the stories I had once loved. It was a sad realization, but it gave me a new purpose in life. I knew that the only way I could gain back all those lost moments was through studying. I threw myself into the bridge courses offered by Room to Read, which are designed to help students like me catch up to my peers in school.

Learning how to read again was a painful process, but my social mobilizer helped me a lot through it. She was very patient, and so were the other teachers. With their help, I was able to grasp the words and sentences one letter at a time. Each

new word I learned was a victory, and so was each paragraph I could comprehend. With time, I was able to work my way through the bridge courses and I finally learned to read again. I also love to draw, and the beautiful illustrations in Room to Read’s local language books inspired me to start sketching.

The best thing about going to school is that I can better help my parents with household chores. Since I became good at calculating, they began sending me to the market place to do the shopping. I feel so proud to roam around the weekly markets in my village, buying the necessary supplies and calculating the amount I owe.

I realize the importance of education with each passing day. Our social mobilizer and teachers say that if anything can get us out of our current situation, it is education. I fully understood the meaning of this one day when I was in the library reading a book about Shanti, a girl who endures a lot of hardship as a Kamlari. She fights to educate herself and eventually becomes a teacher. The story made a lasting impression on me, and made me want to live my life in the same way. Now I want to become a teacher—not only to satisfy my own thirst for knowledge—but to help students like me gain an education as well.



**My future:** I can describe how early marriage affects girls’ lives.

**Life skills:** Communication and Interpersonal Skills

One of the greatest challenges to girls’ education in Nepal, particularly in the rural areas, is early marriage. Aiming to further prevent this practice through life skills programming, the Girls’ Education program team in Nepal works with girls to set life goals and priorities, teach them how to say “no” to peer pressure, and to educate them about the negative physical and psychological health effects of early marriage. Through these sessions, the girls learn how to articulate their life plan and how to make choices about their futures.



ROOM TO READ



Gita Tharu SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2010

Gita Tharu has beaten the odds. As a young girl she was sold by her parents to work as a Kamlari (indentured servant) with no promise of a future. She was liberated and enrolled into the Girls’ Education program to continue her schooling. This tale echoes those of many girls from Gita’s region in Bardiya,

Nepal, where she has worked hard to overcome her circumstances and succeed despite all her hardships—she was even the first female in her district to pass the national level exams in 10th grade, and all while working as a servant. With Room to Read’s support, she graduated secondary school.

Now a vocal advocate against the Kamlari practice, Gita takes her message into the communities where she works. “My personal experience as a Kamlari

helped me when I started working as a social mobilizer,” she says. “I am more comfortable and can reason on equal footing with the community elders. In the district where I now work, the rate of families practicing Kamlari has dropped significantly.”

She believes that her success stems from her background. “Most families I talk to have never met a former Kamlari with a career, so they are intrigued to learn about me and to listen to what I have to say,” Gita says. “I tell them my story and how my education helped me to get where I am. It doesn’t take much to make them realize that I have their daughters’ best interests at heart. Once they realize this, it’s easier to get the message across about the importance of education.”

Nepal  
Report Card

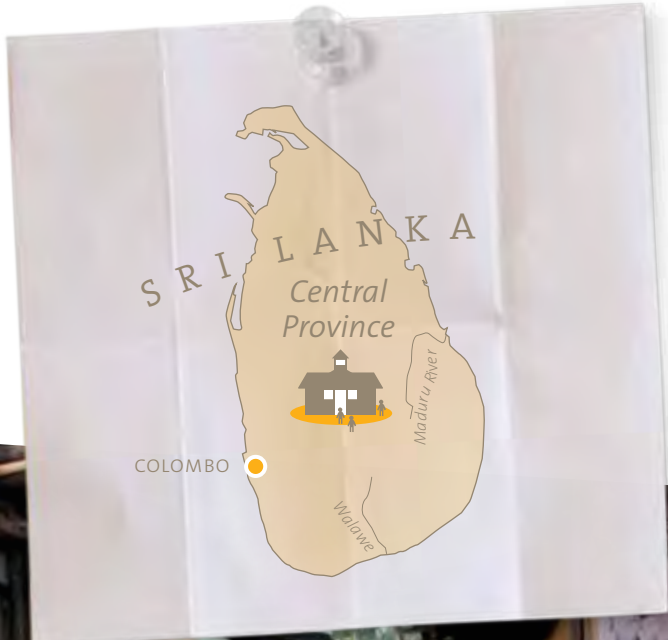
LAUNCHED IN 2000

94%  
Retention Rate

89%  
Advancement Rate

2,055  
Girls Enrolled





In my spare time  
I like to watch

CRICKET MATCHES





# Sriramya



Age: 15  
Central Province,  
Sri Lanka

GRADE: 10  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2008

I live with my grandmother, my aunt and my younger brother on a big tea estate where my family has lived and worked for generations. It’s called the Darawalla Tea Estate. My grandmother is the head of the house and she takes care of us. I hardly ever get to see my parents because my father works in Colombo in a small restaurant and my mother works in Dubai as a house helper. I especially miss my mother and I wish I could be with her. I keep her photograph at my bedside and I always talk to her picture. She left me and my brother when we were very young, and even though she can’t visit us every year, we get to talk to her at least once a month.

My grandmother is the one who holds our family together. Even though she often doesn’t feel well, she never misses our school events. She always attends meetings about my academic performance with my social mobilizer and my teachers. For a woman who is not educated, I admire my grandmother’s zeal and self confidence. She can also be very strict with us, especially if our grades fall!

My day starts at 4 a.m. with house cleaning and drawing the *kolam* (a pavement design made with colored rice powder outside the door of Tamil homes). Then, I

quickly settle down to study because my grandmother is always watching to see if we are reading our books—there is no way we can escape her hawk eyes! She even insists that we read out loud so that we don’t fall asleep. At 6:30 a.m. we get ready to walk to school, which is not far from our house.

School is fun and I have lots of friends. I get to read a lot of books, and I especially enjoy adventure stories. I also like school because it gives me an opportunity to play. We don’t have room to play at home, but at school we have a big playground. One of my happiest experiences is being a member of the cricket team. It is such an honor to represent my school. I am the wicket keeper and we recently went to Colombo for the regional matches. We came in first in the zonal meets and third in the all-island competition. We were so elated! My grandmother was very proud of me, and so was my school principal.

My goal is to study hard and to one day become a doctor. I see my grandmother postponing doctor visits because she can’t pay the bills and it makes me sad. I think that the poor people in my country need doctors who will take care of them without overcharging. My hope is that someday everyone in Sri Lanka will be able to afford a visit to the doctor.



My future: I can make a life plan.

Life skills: Critical and Creative Thinking

Life skills in Sri Lanka help girls think about the future and how to accomplish their life plans. Workshops focus on empowering the girls to dream big and set priorities toward achieving their dream. Activities include charting their life, and highlighting the successes and failures. They set goals for their future in key areas (physical, educational, social, spiritual and financial) and rank them against their skills and abilities in order to develop a plan for how to succeed in reaching those goals.



ROOM TO READ



Sridevi Selladurai SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2008

Growing up on a tea estate herself, Sridevi Selladurai knows the challenges facing children of the workers. “It is not easy and, more importantly, these children have very little exposure and opportunities,” Sridevi says. “When I got this opportunity to help estate children, I was overjoyed because I want to help girls

from my own community.” She has been a social mobilizer for five years and continues to enjoy going to work every day.

“I have 54 girls under my care and I know each one of them,” she says. “I engage with them and try and help them when they are in trouble. They are like family and we look out for each other.”

The toughest part of her work—and a daily challenge for the girls—is personal safety, especially during long walks in isolated areas. “These estates are big and we have to walk endlessly,” she explains. Parents return from tea-picking in the evening so after spending time with them, we have to walk back in the dark between the tea bushes. This is scary for me but it’s also not safe for a girl to walk alone in the dark across some of these estates.”

Despite the challenges, nothing deters her. “I always wanted to be a teacher in one of the estate schools,” Sridevi says. “Now I get to do something which is even better. I work as a teacher and guide for students across several tea estates! It cannot get better...can it?”

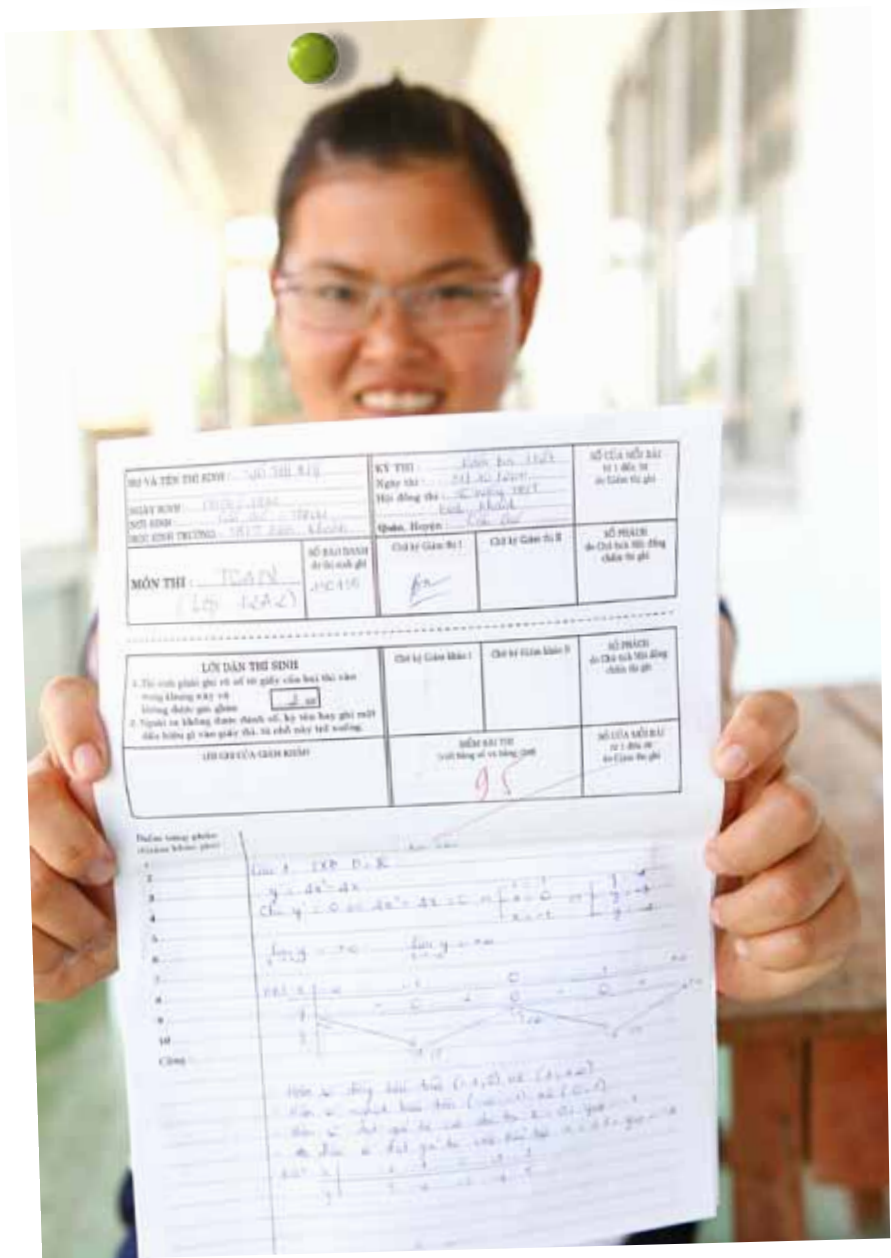
Sri Lanka  
Report Card  
LAUNCHED IN 2006

95%  
Retention Rate

95%  
Advancement Rate

2,198  
Girls Enrolled





I keep **Sỏi** from my hometown by my bed in the dorm.







Age: 17  
Ho Chi Minh,  
Vietnam

GRADE: 12  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2005

Six years ago, I was one of two girls selected from my class to join the Room to Read Girls’ Education program. I was very happy because I knew an education would help me escape from poverty. I felt so lucky that I wouldn’t have to drop out of school like my sisters.

I am the youngest of five girls. Of my sisters, the older three did not complete school. The fourth is also in the Girls’ Education program, and we feel so blessed to have this opportunity. My father studied only up to 2nd grade and can barely read or write, while my mother has never been to school at all. My parents work as laborers in the salt pans close to the sea. It’s not an easy job and it takes a heavy toll on their health, but because they are not educated, they don’t have many options.

I used to live with my grandmother, about 24 miles from our school. We had to travel for more than an hour by boat, and then walk for another 30 minutes, which was very difficult because school started at 6:30 a.m. Now that I’m in 12th grade and need to focus on my studies, I live close to school in a dorm with other students. My life is much more comfortable now that I don’t have to worry about travelling or cooking! Instead, I get time to study—and even to play—in the evenings.

I make it a point to play for 45 minutes a day because I think it is important to exercise. This is something I learned at our life skills session on health. So now

I play badminton before having dinner, and then I settle down with my books. I study every night from 7 p.m. to midnight. This time is sacred for me and I don’t like to be disturbed. I sleep for only four hours on weekdays because I can’t afford the luxury of sleeping late—I guess that will have to wait for another time!

I want to thank Room to Read for all of their support. I learned so much from the life skills lessons—they are very practical and address issues that young girls like me face. I’ve grown more aware of my health needs, and I can speak with strangers without fumbling or getting nervous. I’m much more confident than I was before. I also enjoyed summer camp. It was such a wonderful opportunity for a girl like me to see new places and meet new people, along with learning lots of new things.

I miss my parents and family, but I am able to call them once a week. Sometimes, I travel to meet them halfway and we spend the day together. My parents appreciate all the effort I put into my studies because they don’t want me to suffer their fate. I want to study because I think that education is empowering and it can open up new opportunities and improve my lot in life.

My dream is to do well so I can help my parents—I want all of us to live happily together under one roof.



**My health:** I can determine when I need health services.

**Life skills:** Decision-Making and Problem-Solving

Preventable and curable diseases are common ailments that keep many girls out of school in Vietnam. To increase awareness around these health issues, the Girls’ Education program staff organized trainings to teach girls how to recognize the signs of diarrhea, mouth and hand sickness, dengue fever and appendicitis. In addition, girls learned where to go for medical treatment and how to prevent diseases from spreading further among their family and friends if they ever become ill.



Thi Be Tran SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2002

A teacher since 1987, Thi Be Tran has been a social mobilizer with Room to Read since the program first launched at her school in 2002.

“I can empathize with many of these girls as I come from a similar background,” she says, remembering her struggle to go to school because of poverty. She

recalls even having to swim across a river one day to attend school because the boat driver refused to take her. She then had to sit in class all day in wet clothes.

“To be able to attend school is a privilege in this area, and not everyone is blessed with the opportunity,” explains Thi Be. “It was disheartening to see girls drop out just because of their financial situations.”

As a mother of a 15-year-old daughter, she also knows how to relate to the girls and she prides herself on being sympathetic and a good listener. But, she admits, juggling motherhood, teaching and her job as social mobilizer is a big challenge. Yet seeing the changes to the Girls’ Education program is what keeps her motivated. “I am one of the few who has seen the program evolve to improve its impact on girls and their families, and I am proud to be associated with it. When girls drop out, it is very depressing. But I do not give up without a good fight,” she says.

Thi Be feels the program’s greatest value comes from the life skills workshops. “Our life skills workshops are well-researched and needs-based. I learn a lot from the lessons and make it a point to share everything I learn with my own daughter.”

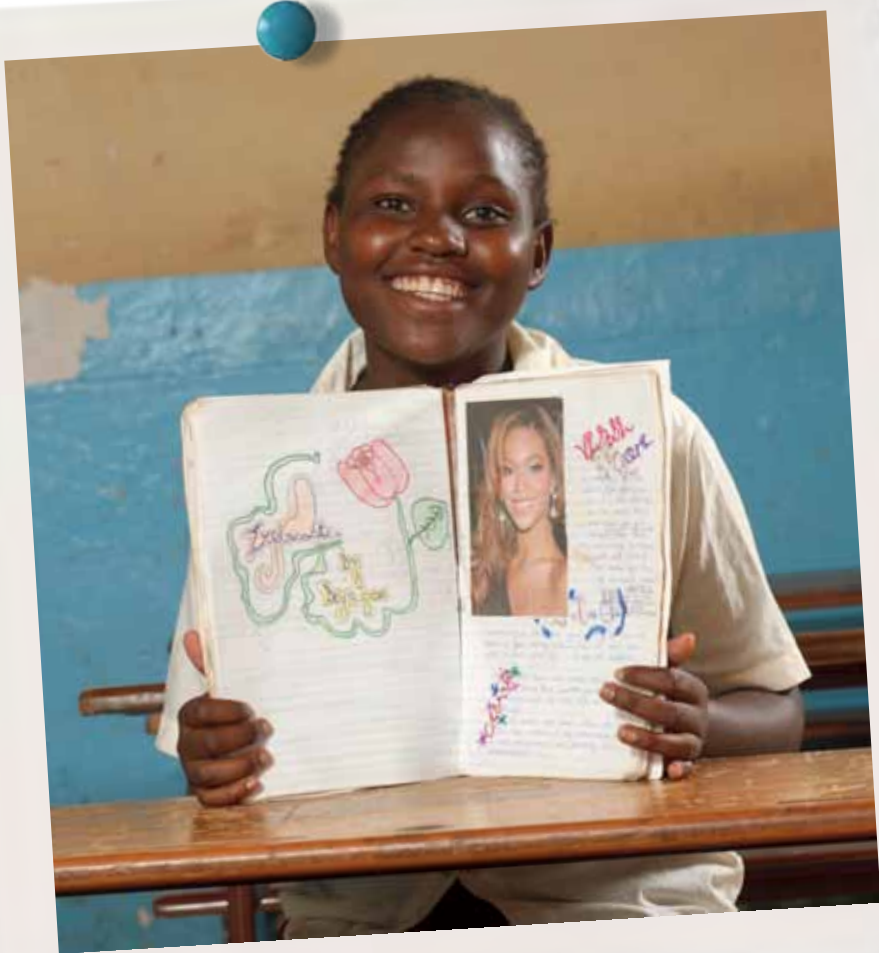
Vietnam  
Report Card  
LAUNCHED IN 2002

95%  
Retention Rate

96%  
Advancement Rate

1,557  
Girls Enrolled





My **TEACHER** is  
my rolemodel.





# Veronica



Age: 17  
Chilanga,  
Zambia

GRADE: 11  
SCHOLAR SINCE: 2008

I am an only child, and when I was nine years old my father passed away. Three years later, I lost my mother, too, and had to leave the only home I knew. I traveled to Lusaka, the capital city in Zambia, to stay with my aunt for a year. Then I moved to my cousin’s home when I was in 7th grade. While living there, I was abused, and my cousin refused to pay my school fees since she had her own children to support, as she would often remind me. I didn’t know what to do and I had nowhere else to turn for help, so I frequently thought about quitting school even though I did not want to. Although this was a very unhappy time for me, I always prayed to God and believed He would help me.

Yet despite all these challenges, I managed to pass 8th grade, and in 2008 I was selected for the Girls’ Education program. It was like a dream come true—I believed that my prayers had been answered!

Being in the program enabled me to devote time and energy to my schoolwork without worrying about how to pay for it. My focus paid off because I successfully graduated from lower secondary school to high school! Without the help of Room to Read, I am sure I would have dropped out of school long ago and I would not be where I am today. I am thankful to Room to Read not only for all the academic

and material support they have given me, but because of the time and freedom I now have to be with friends, play soccer and sing and dance. My favorite part of the program is the life skills workshops. These lessons have especially helped me to become more confident and assertive, and they have taught me about the importance of good hygiene. I know much more now about my rights and how to take care of myself.

Cynthia Chambika, the social mobilizer at my lower secondary school, helped me build my confidence and self-esteem. Now that I am in high school and only one grade level away from graduation, I have received more help from my school mentor and math teacher, Ms. Siakuba, and my new social mobilizer, Miyanda Kalaula. I like spending time with Ms. Kalaula because she makes learning fun—we do quizzes and have debates to stir critical thinking.

These three women are my role models, and they are helping me turn my goals into accomplishments. I know that the support I am receiving now will help pave the way for my success in the future. I like to think that my parents, if they were still alive, would be very proud of me. When I finish school, I want to become a nurse so that I may help others. I have my “life plan” written out, and even if it means having to adjust it from time to time, I will never lose sight of my goals.



**My education:** I can find time for studying and homework.

**Life skills:** Critical and Creative Thinking

In Zambia, life skills trainings focus on making sure the girls learn how to prioritize their time and develop good study habits. To accomplish this, participants create timetables with goals for dedicated studying and homework time. They also perform in role-playing exercises to practice good decision making and how to respond to peer pressure that might take them off course. Additionally, Girls’ Education program scholars from many schools in Zambia participate in inter-school quizzes where they compete in math, science, history, English, and civics.



ROOM TO READ



## Mackenzie Chimbali

SOCIAL MOBILIZER SINCE 2011

As a new social mobilizer to Room to Read’s Girls’ Education program, Mackenzie Chimbali sees an opportunity to pay forward the support she received as a young student. Her motivation stems from a life-changing tragedy experienced at an early age:

both of Mackenzie’s parents died, leaving her orphaned and forced to drop out of school.

The loss devastated Mackenzie but thanks to a financial scholarship she was given, she was able to resume her studies and finish high school.

“It was through sponsorship that I learned how other people could help me with my struggles, as well as teach me the skills to cope with life,” she says.

Mackenzie learned different life skills that built her confidence and team-building skills.

“I believe in seeing the invisible beyond the visible—meaning that every child has potential, given the opportunity,” she says. Mackenzie also believes there is a solution to every problem she faces, and she encourages the girls she works with to have the same attitude.

One of the biggest challenges she is now tackling as a social mobilizer is the lack of information that she and the girls receive due to the remoteness of their area, as there are no internet services or daily newspapers available. “I am hungry for more knowledge and to learn more about how to help girls and women—not just in Zambia, but worldwide.”

Zambia

Report Card

LAUNCHED IN 2008

98%

Retention Rate

85%

Advancement Rate

595

Girls Enrolled



Dhanyavad!

Kop Jai!

Dhonnobad!

Sthuthiy!

TARA, INDIA



KAISONE, LAOS



HAJERA, BANGLADESH



SRIRAMYA, SRI LANKA



MY, VIETNAM



VERONICA, ZAMBIA



SANGITA, NEPAL



LISANG, CAMBODIA

Xin cảm ơn!

Zikomo!

Dhanyabaad!

Or Kun!



Thank you!

More than 15,000 girls will leave secondary school with much more than just a diploma, thanks to your investment in Room to Read. Each of the girls profiled in these pages, and the thousands more they represent, are gaining important life skills to help them address complex issues and make informed decisions

about their future—all because of the decision you made to support our Girls’ Education program.

On their behalf, we extend our collective thanks for helping Room to Read bridge the gender gap and empower this generation through education. Learn more at [www.roomtoread.org](http://www.roomtoread.org).



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with Educated Children.®

Room to Read Global Office  
111 Sutter Street, Floor 16,  
San Francisco, CA 94104 USA

New York | London | Mumbai | Hong Kong | Tokyo | Sydney

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