

JOURNEYS

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Women in the Jorasanko neighborhood of Kolkata, India, make kindling for their cookstoves – a chore they have performed for centuries. CI programs are helping change gender norms like this so boys and girls have an equal role in society.

Not So Opposite After All

Young men and women around the world have long been thrust into predetermined roles handed down to them by previous generations. It's an unfortunate reality, but in communities struggling with poverty, girls are commonly expected to focus their attention on helping with chores and raising their siblings instead of pursuing an education. They were, and still are, pressured into early marriage to alleviate the economic "burden" on their households, which further limits their opportunities and increases their chances of having more children, thus repeating the cycle of poverty.

Boys, too, face gender rules that influence their fate. Those who grow up in disadvantaged neighborhoods are often expected to prove their masculinity by joining a gang, drinking heavily or doing drugs, or taking on grueling manual labor. As a result, they may adopt abusive behavior to maintain their "virile" image. There's not much leeway for anything else.

Young men and women deserve more than that. They deserve the chance to pursue a better life, despite the roles they've been assigned by society, history and culture. We believe equality is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty.

"We believe equality is essential to breaking the cycle of poverty."

In this issue, we'll examine the ways gender is defined and perceived in the areas we serve and explore the ways our unique approach is creating equal opportunities for boys and girls alike. The children and youth in these pages are proving that they can do whatever they set their minds to. They can be who they want to be – and not what they're told to be.

Sincerely,

Jim Cook
President

Closing the Gender Gap

Girls in impoverished countries face disadvantages – but support is changing the norms

The photos of girls outnumber those of boys as you scroll through the images of unsponsored children on our website, www.children.org. The reason for that imbalance can be found in the text of copious studies from esteemed organizations such as the United Nations, which cites that – worldwide – 33 million fewer girls than boys are in primary school. Or reports from the World Bank that note a child born to an uneducated mother is 50 percent more likely to die before age 5.

Whatever your source, though, the numbers boil down to one core fact: Girls need more help.

But you don't need to thumb through stacks of statistics to understand why we must improve the situation of girls living in poverty. The stories of their mothers make the numbers heart-wrenchingly real.

A street education only gets you so far

Orphaned as a young girl, María Esperanza never gave a thought to school. She grew up on the streets of Guatemala, relying on her siblings for care. At 16, feeling she was a burden to them, she got married.

As time passed, and María had children of her own, she came to realize how disadvantaged she was. "Without an education, nobody respects you – or they respect you less," she says. "It's harder to find a stable job."

The mother, who lives in Chimaltenango with her children, sees the benefits offered by Children International helping break the cycle of poverty in her family. "With Children International's support, my children now have greater opportunities – opportunities I did not have," she explains. "When they have children of their own, they'll be able to help



María expects her daughter, Lucia, to become a self-sufficient woman who won't rely on a man to support her.

them with their homework, something I haven't been able to do," she says. "That makes me feel helpless and ignorant."

Her daughter, Lucia, 11, will not go through what she did. "She'll be able to become a better person," she says, "a professional – to support her husband but not be completely dependent on him."

Married at 17, a widow by 35

Edith was luckier than many girls in Lusaka, Zambia. A good student, she made it through the ninth grade before her father lost his job and pulled her from school. Her parents tried to reassure Edith her brothers would pay for her education when they graduated. Angry at their lack of support and with no faith in her brothers' commitment, however, Edith got married at 17.

"I knew that, without education, my future would be tougher – just as it is." Thus, when her husband died, Edith's resolve to keep her own girls in school only grew stronger.

Today, with her daughters, Florence, 17, and Romance, 10, enrolled in Children International's sponsorship program, Edith feels confident their paths will be different. "I see a brighter future for my children as a result of what they are benefiting from



Edith's lack of education is a hardship her daughters, Florence and Romance (pictured), won't have to face.

through sponsorship," she shares. "Sometimes, I sit down, close my eyes and imagine my children in a far better place than we are now as a result of education."

Decades of desperation, but hope for the future

By age 6, María Socorro was the woman of the house. She remembers standing on a "big piece of thick wood" to reach the stove, cooking, sweeping, washing clothes and caring for her little brother.

Her father, a "traditional" Honduran, allowed her to go to school for two years. But, after his second wife tired of his conservative ways and abandoned the family, María says, "He took me out of school because, when he got home from work, the house wasn't clean, and no food was ready."



María places great value on her great-granddaughter's education.

Fast forward 51 years, and María has different expectations for her great-granddaughter, Belkis, whom María is raising. She credits Belkis' positive attitude toward education to the influence of Children International's caring staff. Without that influence, María would have worried that the 9-year-old might follow the same path as Belkis' mother, who got pregnant at age 12.

"Education is very important, very important," María says. "Because, if you don't know anything, what can you do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And when you can't do anything, life is more difficult." ■

Article by Gina Kellogg. Photos and reporting assistance by Chileshe Chanda, Javier Cárcamo and Jesús Almendárez.

Gender Equality Sometimes Means Giving Girls an Extra Edge

Gender equality means females have the same advantages as males. But, to reach that goal, society must focus on giving girls a boost. That's why Children International focuses on an enrollment ratio of 60-40 girls to boys in the sponsorship program. Consider these facts about educated girls:

- Earn 10 to 20 percent more for every extra year at school
- Marry four years later, on average, if educated beyond seventh grade
- Give birth to 2.2 fewer children
- Are three times less likely to contract HIV
- Are less likely to be a victim of violence
- Boost a country's gross domestic product.

Playing the Odds

Statistically, nature starts things out on fairly equal terms: globally, the birth rate of both genders is about the same. But what happens after birth isn't always so fair.



(Un)Lucky Day

Time to Learn

Deadly Choices

New Opportunities

Paying Their Way

BOYS

In most cultures, the birth of a boy is a joyous event. Welcome to the world, little boy!

While boys are slightly more likely than girls to complete their primary school education, they are also more likely to be held back.²

Boys are more likely to experience violence and death; the highest homicide rates in children are boys aged 15 to 17 years.⁴

Most of the world's youth live in regions that favor boys, so chances are better they'll attend secondary school.

Men typically select better-paying careers: engineering, computer science, manufacturing and construction.⁷

GIRLS

Not everyone is happy to see a bundle in pink. In some places, an "extra" girl may be abandoned or killed shortly after birth.¹

Primary school attendance for girls has improved dramatically over the last 10 years, but the majority of the world's out-of-school children are still girls.³

Girls are more likely to experience sexual violence, neglect and forced prostitution.⁵

More girls than ever are attending secondary school. In Latin America, 93% of girls attend compared to 86% of boys.⁶

Women frequently select lower-paying fields such as social sciences, journalism and business administration.⁸

The CI Approach Makes the Difference

Children International may not be able to prevent systemic poverty and gender bias, but the CI Approach does guide kids to better futures. Our programs help ensure that children are healthy, educated, self-reliant and employable. By providing a protected and nurturing environment, Children International staff around the world are helping youth discover their talents and abilities ... no matter their gender.

¹Thompson Reuters Foundation; ²UNESCO; ³Ibid.; ⁴United Nations General Assembly; ⁵Ibid.; ⁶UNESCO; ⁷Ibid.; ⁸Ibid.



"I thought, if I can play soccer with the boys I can do anything," says Edilma

Breaking the Rules

Challenging gender stereotypes is one of the many ways CI youth programs help girls break boundaries and achieve success

The overarching goal of all of CI's youth programs is to help poor youth become healthy, self-sufficient young adults. But in cultures where women are typically expected to be subservient to – or dependent on – men, programs that teach girls to think independently and become leaders can be controversial.

In most parts of the world, violence against women is decreasing, though gradually. That makes combating inequality particularly important in places like Honduras, Guatemala and Colombia, where violence against women is actually becoming *more* common. In 2010, a survey conducted by the Colombian government showed that 37 percent of women reported being physically abused by men.

For the roughly 4 million Colombians displaced by the 50-year internal armed conflict, the rates are even higher, according to Human Rights Watch.

The most effective way CI helps reverse these trends is by training youth to respect themselves and others, regardless of gender, and look beyond stereotypes that view women as second-class citizens. Girls between 12 and 19 participate in leadership training, serve as presidents of their Youth Councils, learn to manage money through financial education and participate in job-skills training in fields traditionally dominated by males. But the CI program that often presents children with their first alternative point of view to cultural stereotypes about women is our Sports for Development program.

It's still considered rare for Colombian girls to play the same sports as boys – and even rarer for them to play together. That didn't deter Edilma from Cartagena. When she joined our sports program in 2010, there were 63 youth playing soccer – all boys. "When I went the first day, I was told that there was not a [separate] team for girls, and all the boys started looking at me funny," Edilma recalls. It may have been uncomfortable, but for Edilma, the opportunity to play on an organized team was worth a little social awkwardness.

Others had tried to talk her out of playing and failed. "My friends told me soccer's a sport for boys ... that I should look for a sport for girls. But I feel happy playing soccer. To me, it means a chance to forget all the problems that go along with being poor Some people with problems join gangs or use drugs. For me, I choose to vent my problems through sports and get rid of bad energy doing something positive."

If anyone doubted Edilma's ability to compete with boys, their doubts fell away when she got her first chance to play. "The coach told me he liked the way I played, and the boys praised me as well."

When she wasn't on the field, Edilma was preparing for her future. In a 2011 interview, she outlined her immediate goals: to graduate and pursue her education so she could help her family and be a role model for her younger siblings. "My dream is to have a professional career as an electrical engineer, to progress my family ... and to play soccer in a world cup," she tells us.

Now 19, Edilma is well on her way to achieving those dreams. She still plays soccer – only now it's on the team of the university where she studies electrical engineering. And she'll never forget it was CI that gave her that first chance to step on a soccer field and show the boys what she had.

"Soccer is something so beautiful that has happened in my life ...," she shares. "It taught me discipline and perseverance – to be strong and do things with passion – and not let things defeat me ... to fight for the things I want." ■

Article by Garrett Kenyon. Photos and reporting assistance by Marelvis Campo and Patricia Calderón.

Changing Young Minds

We asked youth participating in our Sports for Development program in Barranquilla, Colombia, if playing on coed sports teams had taught them anything positive about the opposite sex. Here are their answers:



"I used to not be able to have fun with guys, but thanks to these sports, I don't feel intimidated by them anymore."

Maibeth, 13



"I was one of the boys who didn't want girls on my team. But some of them scored a lot of points for us. It taught me that girls have the right to participate."

Landys, 13



"I learned to respect women's decisions, and that they have just as much right as I do to participate."

Leiber, 13



Separate but Equal

Overcoming gender bias while escaping poverty requires grit and determination; it also requires support and encouragement. CI programs are helping youth better themselves and challenge gender inequalities for the good of their communities.

Escaping an island of poverty

Like many girls growing up in the island community of Salvacion, in central Philippines, 20-year-old Mary Rose learned to weave mats out of palm leaves. The culture on the island is conservative when it comes to the way girls should behave. Women and girls are often expected to do the chores, take care of the children and weave mats.

Mary Rose, by contrast, wanted more than that. As far back as she can remember, her attitude has been that she can do anything boys can do. And so far, she has been right.

Staying afloat

“On the island, you either break a sweat or you go hungry,” Mary Rose explains, recounting an oft-repeated Salvacion mantra. She chose to break a sweat.

“My parents didn’t impose that I should only stay inside the house, helping with chores,” Mary Rose says. Instead, she worked alongside her father in agriculture and fishing, doing backbreaking work in all kinds of weather. It was work she saw only males doing.

“It was very difficult for our family to afford basic things,” she adds as context, “because we always prioritized food.” During the worst times, they would go for days with nothing to eat except for a reserve of carefully rationed sweet potatoes. Mary Rose’s sponsorship helped alleviate some of the burden.

“Children International made it possible for me to have new clothes and shoes every year,” she says. “What’s more, I also had the privilege to see the doctor and dentist.”

She also recalls the assistance her family received after Typhoon Dorian in 2006. “We were helpless,” Mary Rose says. “We didn’t have money to repair our house, and we had nowhere to go. If not for the agency, we could have ended up homeless for months.” Having a sponsor, and receiving the opportunities and benefits that presented, instilled her with confidence.

Still, as Mary Rose grew older, she became increasingly fearful of never having the opportunity to leave the island – or the ocean of poverty that

surrounded her. In order to make that happen, she knew she’d have to get good grades and finish her education. “It was the only thing I could think of,” she says, “that would help us improve our lives.”

A courageous crossing

Despite frequently fighting the elements just to get to school (Mary Rose had to cross the sea in a small boat that capsized on more than one occasion), her tough single-mindedness paid off. A chance at a better life presented itself when Mary Rose learned of Children International’s Into Employment program, part of our growing career readiness initiative.

“It was an opportunity I couldn’t miss,” she says.



Our Into Employment program showed Mary Rose that she could choose any profession – even welding.

Without hesitation, she applied for a training course and, after being accepted, signed up for welding.

“Welding is usually a man’s job,” Mary Rose admits. “But I didn’t think twice when I enrolled for welding. I wasn’t even afraid that I might not make it through the course because of my gender. I knew I could make it.”

Welding wasn’t the only important thing Mary Rose learned from Into Employment. Life-skills classes improved her communication and other social skills. She adds that perhaps the most important

lesson she learned may have been gender equality in the workplace. “Into Employment confirmed my belief that girls can do what boys can do,” she boasts.

After graduating from the program, Mary Rose landed a welding job with a large company near Manila. She works with 200 welders, 192 of whom are men. She also earns nearly three times her father’s monthly income and sends half of her salary home to her family.

Reflecting on her training as a welder, Mary Rose admits that it was very difficult. But her graduation and certification is proof of what she felt as a little girl, when she joined all the boys and men fishing and farming ...

“It just goes to show that a determined woman can do everything a man can do,” she concludes. “I always had the courage, but it was the Into Employment program that provided me with the opportunity to cross seas, figuratively and literally.”



Helping out by performing household chores is one way Jaasiel defies stereotypes in Guatemala.

Balancing bravado

Jaasiel doesn’t think like a typical 16-year-old, much less one who has grown up in a culture in which men are encouraged to push the boundaries of bravado.

“We have to promote and value the great contributions that women make in society,” the Guatemalan youth says with conviction. “Because, behind every family ... there is a woman who fights on a daily basis to provide well-being and love. That’s why it’s important for all men to support equality.”

Admittedly, the youth’s parents seem to reflect the traditional norms of his country. His mother is a homemaker, responsible for cooking daily meals over an open fire in their small home and caring for the children. His father works as a bricklayer, a job that conjures images of masculinity.

Jaasiel’s family, however, is anything but typical when it comes to avoiding stereotypes and supporting the rights of females. “Ever since I was a young boy, my parents taught me that men, as well as women, have the same rights,” he boldly claims.

An example of equality

“My mom,” Jaasiel says with obvious admiration, “has instilled in me the importance of gender equality, because she has shown me that women are strong and brave. And my dad, by his example, has taught me to be respectful.”

The young man, who often helps out with household chores, recognizes that most Guatemalans don’t share his family’s beliefs. “In this society, because our ancestors have been and continue to be *machista*, for a man to treat a woman with too much respect or as an equal is a sign of weakness, like cowardice,” he acknowledges. He says others also irrationally maintain a point of view that “if a man is sensitive or has a social conscience and does activities that are generally done by women, he’s seen as weak.”

With such negative perceptions all around him, you might expect Jaasiel to keep his opinions to himself. Instead, he tries to change others’ views. He cites the day he inquired whether his friend’s sister was going to start attending school the next year. His friend’s father became enraged, calling Jaasiel a

“busybody” and telling him it wasn’t any of his business.

“His sister never did go to school,” Jaasiel adds. “I have seen her helping her mom wash clothes and take care of the kids. It’s sad, but it’s a reality that will change someday, but it won’t happen quickly.”

The peer pressure of apathy

Even among his peers, Jaasiel sees a wall of indifference. When he suggested integrating the sexes during group activities at school, his classmates refused. “Their reasoning, curiously, was the same,” Jaasiel says. “The men said that you can’t trust women, and the women said you can’t trust men – they don’t work, they aren’t responsible with their schoolwork, etc.”

He isn’t giving up, though, because he’s seen how fellow teens in Children International’s programs have adjusted their attitudes. “All CI’s programs have shown me that women and men have the same abilities and that they deserve the same opportunities,” he explains.

Jaasiel points specifically to the subject of leadership and, in particular, the Youth Health Corps (YHC). “It’s more than just a group,” he says. “All of us youth are like a family. I have learned, for example, the right to health is a right for men and women, and that mutual well-being is the well-being of society.”

He says YHC has also helped him express his opinions and feelings. “And the women learn that they have the right to decide their own lives, to plan a family, to change cultural traditions.” It may take time, he admits, but “little by little, we can change the way some families think.” ■

Mary Rose’s story by Deron Denton. Jaasiel’s story by Gina Kellogg. Photos and reporting assistance by Ed Uy Jr. and Javier Cárcamo.



Mariana credits CI with helping her decide to postpone starting a family.



Peer Pressure ... With Potential

Youth Health Corps participants use peer education and experience to help teens follow the right path

Like many teen girls in the urban slums of the Dominican Republic, at 15, Mariana was sure she was ready to have a baby with her first boyfriend. Now that she's a bit older and wiser, Mariana is grateful for the Youth Health Corps meeting that convinced her not to rush things.

Instead of becoming a young mother and getting mired further in poverty, Mariana became a peer educator and spent her time alerting other teens to the serious consequences of teen pregnancy. "Thank God I enrolled!" she says. "I learned that you need good communication with your partner to have a positive foundation for a relationship. I learned how to take care of myself."

The links between poverty and teen pregnancy are well-documented. Experts have long known that increased teen pregnancy in poor regions is a byproduct of the lack of access these girls have to accurate health information, health care

and education.

Less quantifiable is why girls from poor areas who do have access to those things still decide to have babies at higher rates. Recent studies indicate that this is less a conscious choice than a reaction to the bleak living conditions and lack of opportunity characterized by poverty.¹ "The reality is that adolescent pregnancy is most often not the result of a deliberate choice, but rather the absence of choices, and of circumstances beyond a girl's control," says Dr. Babtunde Osotimehin, Director of the United Nations Population Fund.²

Promoting equality through health

The Youth Health Corps (YHC) addresses health issues like teen pregnancy by training youth to become peer educators who spread accurate health, nutrition and reproductive information to other youth in their communities. Each YHC group uses different

techniques to achieve this, with campaigns tailored to the major health concerns facing youth in their countries.

In India, where child marriage is common, the YHC has campaigns to educate young girls and their parents about its dangers. In the Dominican Republic, where the teenage pregnancy rate is double the world average³ (some sources put it as high as 25 percent⁴), the YHC combines education about reproductive health and women's rights with an electronic babies (e-babies) simulation program that emphasizes the challenges of caring for infants.

Mariana, who recently graduated from the program, credits the YHC with opening her eyes and changing her life. "I saw myself reflected in a girlfriend of mine who married at a young age and was abused by her husband," Mariana says. "I said to myself, 'No! Stop! When I'm old enough, I'm going to finish my schooling and get a job, and then I'll be able to make my own decisions.'"

Mariana believes the YHC helps youth become better-equipped to make positive health decisions. "They know more, and they can talk more about the subjects of pregnancies and STI prevention. They know the difference between AIDS and HIV."

Turning the tide

"We see the change in their behavior," says Juan Peralta, YHC facilitator in the Dominican Republic. "We see youth who decide to postpone a pregnancy or their first sexual relationship or protect themselves. That change in behavior, in attitudes and practices is seen throughout the whole training process."

For youth not swayed by information, the e-babies program drives home the point. "It teaches youth what it means to have a baby," Mariana says, "that it's not a game."

Being responsible for an electronic baby that cries and needs to be fed, changed and rocked to sleep for two days can be a rude awakening. Juan has a favorite anecdote about a stubborn girl who bragged about how easy having a baby would be, until an e-babies experience caused her to reconsider. The first night, the electronic baby woke her up several times needing to be fed, rocked and changed. When it began loudly crying in church the next

morning and she was asked to step outside, she asked the facilitator if she could return the e-baby.

"That's just one of the cases we've seen," says Juan. "One of many." ■

Article by Garrett Kenyon. Photos and reporting assistance by Erenia Mesa.

¹ United Nations Population Fund, ² The National Bureau of Economic Research, ³ Dominican Today, ⁴ United Nations Population Fund



"I learned that you need good communication with your partner to have a positive foundation for a relationship," says Mariana.

The Curriculum of Change

Youth who join the Youth Health Corps to train as peer educators learn about a variety of topics. They attend a series of workshops and activities to learn more about personal issues, including:

- Prevention of sexually transmitted illnesses, HIV and AIDS
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- The dangers of teen pregnancy and early marriage
- Healthy living and nutritious eating
- Respecting yourself and others.



A Source of Strength

Water is the source of life, but managing this valuable resource can mean limited opportunities for girls

Water ripples through the lives of the poor, affecting everything from health status to opportunities for girls. Lacking potable water, families are trapped in an endless cycle to find it; 70 million people live without access to improved drinking water.¹

No safe place to drink

Jhoanna (at left) and Shiena spent most of their lives in Manila, Philippines, without clean water.

Jhoanna, age 18, was responsible for collecting her family's water. "When I was a child, our source of drinking water was a pump well, both for drinking and for all other uses in our house. By fetching water, I helped ensure that we drank clean water."

Shiena remembers how difficult it was to get something to drink. "If we wanted to get water in the school, it was difficult," the 17-year-old recalls. "There were years when what we had was just a toilet that had a water faucet. This was the source of water for all uses. There was no washing area or basin with tap water. So, at times, children took their water from the faucet in the toilet."

Stemming the tide of inequality

The burden of water's work is disproportionately carried by women and girls like Jhoanna and Shiena. It's estimated that girls in low-income countries spend 80 billion hours a year collecting water.²

Aware of water's importance to good health – and how lack of access can impede girls' advancement – Children International and Planet Water Foundation entered a collaboration to bring clean water to

communities in the Philippines, India and the Dominican Republic. Planet Water specializes in AquaTowers that can serve a community of 1,000 with up to 10,000 liters of clean water a day.

Fresh water means new opportunities

Jhoanna and Shiena were excited to participate in the installation of an AquaTower at a school in their community.

Shiena helped other volunteer youth construct the tower, challenging herself to put the structure and machinery together: "At the start, the task looked difficult to me. I did not know what to do. But as we progressed, what we were doing gradually took shape, and it was easier to work because I would imagine how it would look. When it was all over and the water tower was standing there at the corner of the school, I felt good that I was here to help build it."

Jhoanna focused her attention on educating children at the school. "I taught about the importance of water, proper hand-washing, how diseases are spread and how their spread can be prevented," she says. Assisting with the project was of personal importance to Jhoanna. "I was happy to volunteer

because clean water is very important to schools," she shares. "I spent my elementary years in this school, so I did not hesitate to help."

Returning stolen time

Lacking clean water at school, children used to go thirsty; now students can have clean water whenever they need it. The tower has been so popular that each class has a designated time to use it.

Access to safe, clean water means students have more time to focus on their classes, studying and extracurricular activities.

Jhoanna and Shiena are also pleased with the tower's positive impact on the community. "I see things getting better in our school," Jhoanna says. "I see many changes. They have the support from the government and from organizations like Children International." ■

Article by Lindsey Quinn. Photos and reporting assistance by Joel Abelinde.

¹ WHO/UNICEF

² Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council

Thanks to Children International and Planet Water Foundation, children in the Philippines have fresh, safe water.





“What I am used to is hard work,” says Andrea, “not acting like a woman.”

Surpassing Stereotypes

Youth in CI programs not only overcome gender discrimination – they often exceed their own expectations

Longing for more

Her father disappeared years ago, leaving her mother to care for four children. As the eldest, it fell to Andrea to find a way to support the family. Forced to drop out of school at 15 for survival, she initially had no decent job prospects. But, tenacious and determined, she convinced a small construction company to give her a chance at a job.

Although she often gets paid less than her male coworkers for doing the exact same heavy labor, she does have a steady income. Andrea’s wages are the sole income for the entire family.

Now 17, the blisters that once covered her hands have mostly turned to callouses. “People, especially men, don’t think of me as a woman,” she says. “The

dirt never completely comes off when I take a shower. I like pretty clothes, though. For once, I would like to look feminine.”

Andrea told us she’d like to do something else with her life. Her long-term ambition is to finish school and then receive training or an apprenticeship to become a tailor. Although our staff in Quito, Ecuador, is trying to find a way to make this humble dream a reality, it involves a catch-22: returning to school or entering training would mean a loss of income that her family simply can’t afford.

Andrea is a great example of the importance of our career readiness programs like Into Employment and HOPE (Helping Overcome Poverty through Education) scholarships.

Poised for success

Cristian, 18, comes from a very poor, traditional family in rural Guatemala. Neither of his parents continued their educations beyond grade school. Cristian’s mother was forced to leave after second grade to help her own mother around the house; his father didn’t make it past the sixth grade. He was needed to help his family survive by working the coffee fields.

A bright student, Cristian faced many pressures to follow in his ancestors’ footsteps. Beginning in the seventh grade, when compulsory education ends, many of his uncles, friends and neighbors criticized his decision to continue studying. They thought he was being lazy and selfish. The cultural expectation was for him to help ease his parents’ burdens by working the fields.

Fortunately, Cristian’s parents supported his nontraditional vision for a brighter future. It’s paying off, too: Cristian’s exceptional grades helped him earn a HOPE scholarship. Approaching his final year in college, he is close to earning a degree in accounting. “I want to be a professional,” says Cristian, “able to earn in a month what my dad earns through great effort in several months. I want to help the whole family, even those who criticized me.”

Cristian volunteers as the co-facilitator of his agency’s Youth Health Corps, where he helps young people overcome gender bias.



“My family was adamant that I should get married. I was equally adamant that I wanted to study,” says Susmita.

Forging ahead

Managing a vegetable cart on the bustling streets of Kolkata, India, 18-year-old Susmita sustains a quiet, if fierce, dignity. It’s a dignity born of opportunity, as well as rugged determination.

Unlike her two older sisters – and nearly half of all young women in India – Susmita didn’t marry before her 18th birthday. “After completing public school,” she recalls, “my family was adamant that I should get married. I was equally adamant that I wanted to study.”

Susmita credits her involvement with our youth programs for helping her foster the inner strength to persevere against traditional gender type. “The Youth Program,” she says, “raised my level of confidence ... and also has enhanced my negotiation skills. And these have helped me overcome challenges that I face every day in the family.”

Now, thanks to her hard work and a HOPE scholarship, Susmita tends the vegetable cart in the morning and attends college courses in the afternoon, where she is studying to become a teacher.

“The aim of my life is to be self-sufficient,” she says with pride. Adding, “... the HOPE scholarship is like a boon that has changed the course of my life.” ■

Article by Deron Denton. Photos and reporting assistance by Andrés Rosero, Javier Cárcamo and Nivedita Moitra.



A Life Defined, but Not by Dowry

A young woman proves she's no one's property, then sets out to buy her own

A disturbing memory haunts 27-year-old Shanaz when she compares herself to other young women in her community. She pictures her cousin, just 16 years old. One moment her face is aglow with love. Then the young woman's expression changes from hope to horror as flames shoot out from a kerosene stove. Shanaz hears her cousin's final gasps of air as she helplessly attempts to flee the claustrophobic home that had been locked from the outside.

"It was a dowry death," Shanaz explains. Her cousin's parents couldn't afford to provide the customary gift of money or property that is passed to the groom's family at the time of the wedding. "His family didn't accept her," she says, "and she was burned to death."

Stories like that – shocking to most – aren't unusual in India. A woman dies from a dowry-related death every hour, according to the country's National Crime Records Bureau. Those who aren't murdered or driven to suicide might be starved, beaten or locked inside the family's home.

"I've always observed in the community that girls would get married by the time they were 15, then have no say or control over their lives ... have

Shanaz is focused on a future that she envisioned for herself – not one projected by others.

kids, get beaten by their husbands" Shanaz shares.

"I wanted to be in control of my life. And this came about through the various trainings I received ... I realized that I had the leadership qualities in me. So, why should I let someone else take control of my life?"

Breaking the bamboo ceiling

Shanaz gained control through sponsorship. It gave her the chance to get an education, a rare privilege for girls in her village. Rarer still was the support she received from her father, Abbas, a coconut vendor. "I took the opportunity of what the sponsorship program provided and let my daughter do and grow as much as she could," Abbas says.

Abbas' attitude was so unorthodox, even his wife disagreed with him. She insisted that Shanaz stop studying once she reached ninth grade, but Shanaz's father was behind her every step of the way. "People kept telling me, 'Marry her off, marry her off,'" he shares. "So I had to stand up for her and say, 'No! If she wants to study – whatever she wants – leave her alone! Let her do it.' This daughter of mine, after getting her job, has done all this," he adds, motioning to the family's expansive two-story brick house, the biggest in the area.

"If sponsorship wasn't there, I probably wouldn't have made it past eighth grade like my brothers and sisters," Shanaz concedes.

Assistance provided through sponsorship helped her finish secondary school, covered the costs of her first year of college and helped her get vocational training so she could work as a seamstress and a tutor. She used those skills to pay the rest of her way through college and then finish a master's degree in social work.

Today, Shanaz is a human resources assistant at a steel manufacturing company. She's using her income to radically improve her family's home and pay for her siblings' expenses. "What I have done," she says with a surge of pride, "making this house – forget women – there are many sons who haven't done this for their family!"

She knows what she wants, too. The minute Shanaz pays off the loan for her family's home renovations, she's going to get an MBA in hopes that



The success Shanaz has achieved in her career is helping her build a nicer home for her extended family.

she'll be promoted to H.R. manager.

"Initially, those who pointed a finger at me now tell their daughters that they should be like me," she boasts. "I'm very happy in my life, and I would like to give a heartfelt thanks to my sponsor." ■

Article by Damon Guinn, with reporting assistance by Nivedita Moitra. Photos by Andrea Waters.

A Cause for HOPE

According to UNICEF, up to 70 percent of out-of-school youth are girls, despite the fact that a young woman's wages are estimated to rise by 10 to 20 percent for every additional year she stays in school past fourth grade. Our HOPE Fund makes that possible. **Sixty-three percent of our HOPE scholarships were awarded to girls during the 2012-13 school year.** The scholarships averaged \$372 and enabled recipients to complete secondary school, get vocational training or pursue a university degree.

A Bouquet of Emotions - By María Dolores

We women are a bouquet of emotions. But in spite of all our instability, we know how to cultivate tenderness; we know to look toward the horizon and think that, in the midst of so many tribulations, there will always be better times ahead of us, where our present situation will have then become part of our treasure trove of memories.

An excerpt from the Mujeres a la Voz project.

Inspired Voices

An innovative partnership helps Mexican mothers find their voices

For women, life in poverty frequently means life in silence. According to UNESCO, adult women are significantly more likely to be illiterate; in some countries, the literacy gap is as great as 22 percent. And, underrepresented in governments and other organizations, United Nations' reports say women are often marginalized.

Children International in Mexico is changing that through Mujeres a la Voz – “Women Speaking Out” – a reading and writing workshop hosted in partnership with Letra Uno, a local organization that promotes literacy. The workshop challenged 52 volunteer mothers to read and write weekly. Each meeting focused on a theme; the mothers met at their local

A volunteer mother reads from her autobiography at a university event.



community center to read short excerpts from famous writers and write essays.

Like many participants, María Mercado had never written an essay. “It was difficult at the beginning because I couldn’t find the words to describe the things I wanted,” she says. She also felt a bit uncomfortable writing about her experiences. “I felt embarrassed; I was shy. But then I started to write better and that made me feel proud.”

Over time, though, María and the other women became adept at expressing themselves. “Now writing is my way to express my feelings,” María explains. “When I can’t talk about something with my children, I write them a letter to let them know how I feel and what I think.” The program also ignited María’s passion for reading and writing, skills she intends to pass on to her children. “My kids haven’t been inspired to write yet, but I have read fairy tales aloud to them, and now they are interested in reading.”

Mujeres a la Voz isn’t just about women finding their voices – it’s about making sure they are heard. At the workshop’s conclusion, volunteer mothers shared their essays and spoke about the program during a two-day literacy event hosted by Letra Uno and a local university. Letra Uno published the women’s essays in January, giving a copy to each participant. When she received her edition, María

commented, “I can’t believe that something I wrote in my house is going to be read by many people and is in a book!” ■

Article by Lindsey Quinn. Photos and reporting assistance from Azucena Gollaz.



María Mercado reflects on her essay.

Inspiring Volunteerism

Nearly 8,000 residents in the communities we serve volunteer with Children International. These women and men make our work possible. They help us distribute benefits, guide new families through sponsorship requirements and help our organization better understand the needs of our children and their families.

In December, we hosted the inaugural Children International Inspire Award™. The 15 women who were nominated have dedicated more than 240 years of service to impoverished children in their communities.

The 2013 winner, Pampa Sinha, a volunteer from our Sahay agency in Kolkata, India, has volunteered for the past 15 years. She was inspired to give back by her father who, although he struggled to make ends meet as a rickshaw



driver, “still helped countless people without expecting a farthing in return,” Pampa says.

For a list of all Inspire AwardSM nominees, visit our website at www.children.org/inspire.



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