

A trek to the world's highest peak gives rise to one of education's greatest endeavours.

TEACHING A

BY DEBBY NG . PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEPAL LITTLE SISTERS FUND



Girl TO FISH

Little Januka (not her real name) grew up on the streets of Katmandu, selling trinkets to feed herself and three younger sisters. Her mother had passed away and her father had abandoned them. She moved in with her grandmother but had to work as a housemaid to warrant her keep. At age 15 she met with an opportunity to change her world.

She received a grant from The Little Sisters Fund (LSF) to enroll in a local government school. But she had to return each day from school to her grandmother's where she continued to work as a maid without any salary. As a result, her initial tuition grant was extended to include room and board at a boarding school. From then on Januka's future began to look more hopeful.

Today, not only has she made a difference to her three sisters, but she's also working to improve the lives of young girls who, like her, lacked the privilege of having a basic education and a chance to be independent.

"Today all my sisters are proud of me. I am a commerce graduate and work as a receptionist in one of the best high schools in Nepal. I am very confident and can face any hurdle that comes across my path. People in my village can't believe that the little girl who used to work as a housemaid and was once helpless is now



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Januka was recently married at the age of 22, in a country where the average age of marriage is 15. She often responds as a mentor to other "little sisters" who have received grants from the LSF. "I decided to remain [as a mentor] because this fund helped make my dreams come true, and it's enabled me to lead an independent life and most importantly it gave me the opportunity to study."

Over 40% of children in Nepal are

working, and of these 60% are girls. Januka might be considered lucky, for more than 10,000 girls per year are trafficked for the sex trade, with Nepal ranking sixth in the world for child labour and having the most per capita human trafficking cases worldwide. 20% of sex workers in Nepal are under 16.

The percentage of literate females in Nepal is also troubling at a mere 28%, compared to 64% in males. Januka now joins the ranks of the 51% of working females who

have received an education. But Januka's success wasn't due entirely to a lucky streak. Her fortune is the result of a consolidated and diligent effort by committed people worldwide, an effort initiated by a young American who was out on a trek in Nepal.

Trevor Patzer, 34, the founder of the LSF, had a rather lucky childhood himself. He relates, "When I was 12 or 13 a family friend said that if I was accepted at St. Paul's School, an elite US boarding school, he would pay my tuition expenses. I was accepted in the spring of 1989 and he kept his word. He gave me the gift of education and it changed my life profoundly. Since my first day at St. Paul's I've known that I wanted to help others, as I was helped, through the gift of education."

At age 25, Patzer took a trip to Nepal to trek to the base camp of Mount Everest, "It was then that I was exposed for the first time to the educational support needs in Nepal. There is simply not enough to go around. Not enough money, food, clothing, housing or affordable educational opportunities. Just having food on the table for dinner is a luxury."

Patzer explains, "Much of the country survives on subsistence farming and millions of people work long hours doing manual labour for less than the equivalent of one US dollar per day."

After travelling over 5,000 km, Patzer realised that for a fraction of the cost he could help a student go to school. Today, his goal is to provide a million years of educational support amongst all LSF grant recipients by 2050. That equates to raising about \$150,000,000 in the next 42 years, a hefty but not unachievable figure. The LSF is funded entirely by donations from individuals and foundations in

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the US and abroad, and today it supports 430 Little Sisters. Patzer states that number will grow to at least 650 next year, and that the number of scholarship recipients will reach over 122,000 by 2050.

If you think about it hard, that isn't really a tall order. The fate of Nepal's future women lies in a few dollars. \$150

pays for a year of tuition, books, supplies and a uniform for one Little Sister in a government school. \$300 pays for the same in a private English speaking school. \$1,250 supports all educational costs for one girl for the full term (six to eight years) in a government school. \$2,500 supports the same in a private English speaking school where the girls



Facing page: Januka & Shiva

Clockwise from top: Trevor Patzer describes Pheuntsho (in green) the eldest of five sisters as incredibly kind, diligent and well spoken; the fellowship of hope; a little girl with her brother on her back.



write monthly letters to their sponsors. \$2,500 is about the average amount of fees for a term of university education in most developed nations. In Nepal, that one term spent in university could change the fate of a disadvantaged girl forever. But why just girls? Aren't boys important too? Last year, a friend of mine working with the United Nations Development Programme in communities in Laos and East Timor, explained to me how educating and providing monetary support to a woman, usually a mother, also meant providing education and support for her family. But educating a man and giving him money, would end with him.

It is not the first time the education of females has been privileged over the education of males. In a 2004 speech, former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "I believed and still believe that there is no way that we can address the question of equity and social justice, that we can address the question of economics, that we can address the question of poverty, until all of us – the men and women in this room and millions and hundreds of millions outside – understand that the role of women has been grossly underestimated and under-reflected in many societies around the world...But I am absolutely clear that if we are to make a difference in society, that the role of women as has often been said is not just the role of educating one man to make him educated. The role is educate a woman and you educate a family."

After working in Nepal for the past eight years, Trevor tells me that many people have asked if there is resentment that the LSF focuses on education for girls, and he explains that the LSF works within the cultural confines of Nepal. He says, "To date, we have experienced very little

From top: Peuntsho and sister; Manisha at the resource center; Trevor Patzer, the founder of LSF with some of the beneficiaries; Manju's mum in their tiny home.



murmuring. We take the needed time to stress and to communicate the importance of female education. Kofi Annan stated in 2003, 'We know that there is no tool for development more powerful than the education of girls and the empowerment of women.' The Little Sisters Fund addresses both and the people understand this and instead of being resentful, are appreciative of the opportunities we provide. Our support of girls also frees up additional resources for the other children (both male and female)."

Januka's gratitude and impulse to pay it forward is evident. She says, "My future plan is to do well in life

and also to do something for the LSF which changed my life. Though I may not be able to help financially, I will always be there whenever I am needed. So far the programme has done so much for girls like us be it in education, health or other related things. I hope that later the programme will expand to other parts of Nepal, spreading the light of education to all the other underprivileged girls as well, contributing to the country to produce enough human power for the development of the country."

I could hear the young Januka again, the little girl who was inspired. More important however, is the con-

fidant and hopeful revolutionary of the future that resonates within her – all fired up and craving for change to improve the lives of others like her.

The best part about all of this is that it isn't something as difficult to grapple with and solve as say, climate change. Changing the life of even one girl is an effort that almost anyone privileged enough to pick up this magazine and comprehend it can afford. Finally, a state of affairs that doesn't leave you sitting back and saying, "So? What can I do?"

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