

GIRL *power*

FOLLOWING THE DEVASTATING EARTHQUAKE THAT RIPPED THROUGH NEPAL IN 2015, ONE LOCAL NGO TURNED CRISIS INTO OPPORTUNITY – REBUILDING WHAT COMMUNITIES HAD LOST WITH THEIR SIGHTS ON A BETTER FUTURE. **SAM FRY** SPEAKS TO THOSE WHO ARE MAKING A DIFFERENCE, WORKING WITH COMO FOUNDATION

PHOTOGRAPHS: DEBBY NG, ASIA MAGAZINE, LITTLE SISTERS FUND



T

he landlocked nation of Nepal patches together India and China – Southeast Asia's two economic powerhouses – like a sticky plaster pressed down along the ridge of the Himalayas. Nepal lacks, however, the natural resources and investment opportunities of its neighbours. It is ranked by the UN as one of the world's Least Developed Countries. According to a Unicef survey in 2012, young women in Nepal are 11 per cent less likely to be literate than young men, and girls are seven per cent more likely to be involved in some form of child labour.

Little Sisters Fund – a small Nepalese NGO providing scholarships to young girls who would otherwise have been able to gain an education – was already working to redress this balance when, in 2015, Nepal was shaken by a 7.8-magnitude earthquake which killed 9,000 people and left 3,500,000 more homeless. “For 20 years we had focused on empowering young women in Nepal, helping girls who would never have even graduated from school to become doctors, teachers, nurses, engineers, lawyers: anything they wanted to be.

But the earthquake was a completely different kind of challenge, one which required a totally fresh solution," explains founder Trevor Patzer, whose own education was made possible by a scholarship, and who set up Little Sisters Fund in 1998, with his friend, Usha Acharya, a passionate advocate for women's rights in Nepal.

When the earthquake sent avalanches down the slopes of Mount Everest and shockwaves throughout the country, Little Sisters Fund turned a national disaster into an opportunity for development, putting young girls at the heart of their communities' rebuilding efforts. "There was no question we had to respond quickly," says Patzer. "We wanted to reach the parts of communities that most desperately required aid, and our Little Sisters [existing scholars] knew where their communities needed assistance better than anyone."

On a national scale, news quickly emerged that much of the international aid was being mismanaged. Stories of substandard food packages, grounded aid flights and 'missing' donations all made headlines. It became difficult to give when it wasn't clear how the money would be used. COMO Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the COMO Group, looked beyond traditional emergency relief to the Little Sisters Fund, already a partner for more than a decade. Together, they tapped into the Little Sisters' network of current and former scholars who knew exactly what the earthquake response priorities needed to be.

Funded by COMO Foundation, Little Sisters throughout the country were trained to design and manage development projects. They then led the efforts to repair the most vital parts of their community that had been damaged by the earthquake. Every Little Sisters' project was totally practical, grounded in the community's most pressing needs. In Kavrepalanchok district, where a Shelter Cluster survey suggested 93 per cent of households were displaced by the earthquake, three Little Sisters managed the building

of a girls' restroom at the local secondary school. The girls personally oversaw every stage of the construction, even recruiting 20 community volunteers to help with the build. Not only did the new restroom provide better hygiene, it dramatically improved girls' attendance at the school.

In Makwanpur district over half the households were left unprepared for the June monsoons that arrived in the wake of the earthquake. Here, a team of Little Sisters led a project that provided a source of safe drinking water at their school. Many similar projects across the country restored sanitation, safety and dignity to the most desperate parts of their communities. Every project was led by a Little Sister, equipped with the education, training and financial backing to make a difference. "In all their rebuilding efforts, Little Sisters Fund's earthquake response brought home the power of female education," says Harriet Beavis, Programme Officer at COMO Foundation.

The villages themselves responded positively to the girls' leadership too, and many even contributed funds, labour and materials to support the projects. In fact, Little Sisters Fund's hands-on approach has been so successful, the organisation now intends to make their community-building initiative a permanent programme – offering the next generation of Nepalese girls the chance to lead and make a difference.

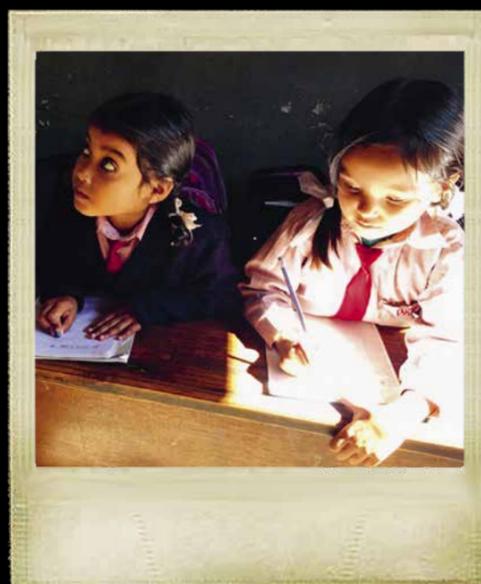
"In male-dominated Nepali society, girls dream of developing leadership qualities and confidence," says Ranjana Nepali, a Little Sisters Fund School Coordinator and former scholar. "The community fund has given Little Sisters the chance to manage projects and take responsibility. We have become role models in our community, and society is beginning to see the ripple effects of our education."

COMO Foundation (comofoundation.com) seeks to improve the lives and opportunities of women and young girls globally. Prior to this earthquake response, it supported the educational, mentorship and career development programmes of Little Sisters Fund (littlesistersfund.org).

“Study after study has taught us that there is no tool for development more effective than the

education of girls

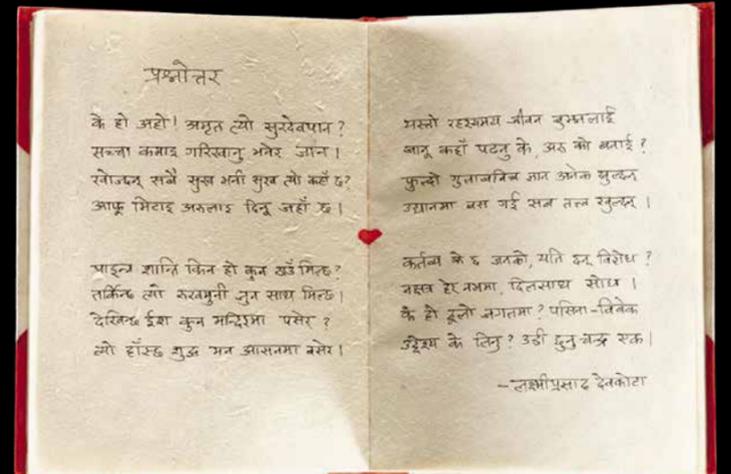
and the empowerment of women.



No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, or improve nutrition and promote health,



KOFI ANNAN, FORMER GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE UNITED NATIONS. JANUARY, 2004



PHOTOGRAPHS: LITTLE SISTERS FUND