



COMO  
FOUNDATION

TOGETHER  
A Journey of Partnership





## Contents

Foreword	11
The COMO Foundation Story	12
About the Project	18
Support	21
Strengthen	42
Scale	65
Acknowledgements	84









*Campaign for Female Education (Camfed)*

## Foreword

Over the last 15 years, COMO Foundation has enjoyed the privilege of working with some of the most thoughtful, creative and driven individuals I have encountered. Though their work is diverse, they have much in common. They all share the ability to inspire, marshal resources and collaborate. With their teams, they challenge deeply-entrenched social norms to create opportunity for others.

To mark our 15th anniversary, we wanted to chart COMO Foundation's grantmaking journey, while celebrating the remarkable individuals whose daily lives and relationships represent the kind of partnership we seek to nurture. Sometimes the journey has been more challenging than expected, but it has always been fulfilling. And the results are tangible: girls and women with resolve, confidence and hope, making a difference to their families and communities.

I would like to thank all our partners, collaborators and supporters. We are delighted to share our journey with you.

Mrs Christina Ong  
Founder, COMO Foundation



## THE COMO FOUNDATION STORY: 15 Years of Partnership

COMO Foundation was set up in 2003 at the behest of Mrs Christina Ong, Founder and Group CEO of the COMO Group. Across businesses spanning fashion, hospitality, speciality foods, dining and wellness, the COMO Group has always been driven by the commitment to make a meaningful difference to the lives of colleagues, customers and the community. COMO Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the COMO Group, is an extension of this ethic.

Over the last 15 years, the Foundation's vision of helping to build healthy, educated and resilient communities has centred on the issue of gender equity. This focus is underpinned by a keen understanding of women's catalytic role in the lives of their families and communities. To date, we have worked with 57 partners across 22 countries, supporting over 10 million women and girls, with a broader goal of strengthening societies as a whole.







One Heart World-Wide

## Building our Foundations

COMO Foundation's vision and mission were clear from the start, but our strategies have evolved. We built our initial portfolio in collaboration with other grantmakers, such as the American India Foundation and the Brazil Foundation. We also partnered with experts such as Aid to Artisans, the Global Fund for Women, and the World Wildlife Fund, supporting organisations in complementary ways.

As an example, in 2012, the Foundation partnered with the World Wildlife Fund and Oxfam Novib in a project to address aquatic biodiversity conservation, food security and sustainable living along the Mekong River in Laos. While the World Wildlife Fund oversaw the conservation agenda, our support enabled local female leadership through wetland management committees, formalised in partnership with the Lao Women's Union. We supported female-focused sustainable jobs, such as goat rearing, mushroom cultivation and rattan production, which improved household food security and livelihoods.

## Evolution

From COMO Foundation's inception, colleagues in the philanthropic and impact investing fields were generous in sharing their experience and strategies. As our portfolio grew, we adopted some of their principles and methodologies.

At the same time, our partners spoke frankly about the pressure that impact measurement put on organisational development. The emphasis on performance drove a focus on quantifiable outcomes and measurable impact. The organisations became more efficient at what they did, but resources for strategic planning and team building were still scarce.

In 2010, COMO Foundation began to take a different tack. We transitioned from funding programmes to supporting whole organisations in their journey towards growth, impact and scale.

Today, our partners demonstrate excellence in their work and have a thirst for growth. They value accountability, impact measurement and efficiency. Their funding for programmes is steady. Against these strong fundamentals, we look to further strategic planning, institutional capacity and innovation. This approach allows us to grow alongside our partners, working with them at key organisational milestones and enabling long-term partnerships.

### 1. Support:

Effective organisations need strong teams. COMO Foundation works with leaders seeking to build impactful teams with complementary skill sets and experience. See more on page 21.

### 2. Strengthen:

Robust systems allow organisations to run transparently, efficiently and effectively. COMO Foundation endorses the importance of such systems to support core functions like human resources, volunteer management and donor engagement. See more on page 42.

### 3. Scale:

When the teams and systems are ready, organisations are poised for growth, either organically or through partnerships for replication. These partners are also ready to explore new ways of funding, such as results-based financing, partnership and revenue-generating business models. COMO Foundation encourages such innovation. See more on page 65.

COMO Foundation's work as a philanthropic grantmaker has only been possible with the support of our founder, Mrs Christina Ong, and our board, together with the transparency and candour of each of our partners. They, and the communities they serve, are our reason for being.




Campaign for Female Education (Cansfed)









## About the Project

*Together - The Journey of Partnership* is itself a product of partnership between two very different organisations. We are grateful to Leica Camera Asia Pacific for sending three female Leica photographers to COMO Foundation partners in India, Indonesia, Nepal and Vietnam. We asked each Foundation partner to identify, amongst their teams and community, pairs of individuals whose personal relationships reflect the kind of partnership we hope to forge with each organisation. The Leica photographers Dilla Djalil-Daniel from Indonesia, Ha Phuong Thao from Vietnam and Laxmi Kaul from Singapore captured these portraits of friendship, generosity and camaraderie — stories of diverse individuals working together for a shared vision of gender equity.

*In some instances, names have been changed. These are denoted with an asterisk.*





SUPPORT





## SUPPORT

### Strong teams embrace diversity, display mutual respect and share a commitment to a common purpose

Teamwork brings ideas to fruition. However, we often encounter vibrant organisations whose teams are accomplished but over-stretched, with leaders multi-tasking across strategic planning, programme delivery, financial management and fundraising. The opportunity to bring in the right people with complementary skill sets, experience and networks can therefore prove pivotal for an organisation. Yet at the same time, a bigger team requires leaders to adjust the way they run their organisations. Managing a team is often a good test of an entrepreneur's ability to grow an idea into a sustainable organisation. This is where COMO Foundation comes in.

Medha, based in Uttar Pradesh in India, is a good example of how COMO Foundation helps strengthen organisations through team growth. Medha was formed in 2011 to improve the employability and life skills of youth — primarily young women from small cities and towns across the north and eastern part of the country. Although 75 per cent of women in urban India are literate, only 27 per cent are formally employed. Through on-campus Career Services Centres, Medha provides 21st-century skills training, workplace experience and ongoing placement and alumni support to students. By 2020, the organisation aims to quadruple its budget, reaching 30,000 youth across four Indian states.

To achieve these goals, COMO Foundation supported the expansion of Medha's management team. A new Assistant Vice-President of Finance managed increasingly complex accounting and reporting requirements. A Vice-President of Partnerships and Business Development expanded fundraising and donor management capacity. Within a year of filling these positions, Medha received the Guide Star India Gold Level Certification for transparency and credibility in organisational governance.

Over the next pages, we highlight individuals whose own unique perspectives advance the work of their organisations.





## THRIIVE: Building businesses that give back

In developing economies, small business owners, from bakers to tailors, are often the key source of employment for their communities.

Thrive uses 'pay-it-forward' loans to help local businesses grow.

Instead of repaying the loan, the business owners must 'pay-it-forward' with contributions of job training, services and goods to the most vulnerable members of their communities. In this way, local businesses immediately benefit their communities through social investment and outreach, while creating jobs through business expansion and increasing employment prospects for their trainees.

One such entrepreneur is Mrs Luu Thi Dao in Vietnam, who expanded her honey business, Mountainous Bees, with the support of Thrive.

Thrive's loans enabled her to buy two honey-processing machines and to open three new honey stores across Vietnam. In 2017, she began exporting her honey to Korea. Mrs Luu paid her loans forward by investing in local bee farmers and training new workers like Mrs Bui Thi Phu. Together, they are developing a sustainable industry in the highlands of Vietnam.









*“I worry about lots of things,  
but hard work helps me feel  
less stressed.”*

**Bui Thi Phu, 51**  
Born Hoa Binh Province, Vietnam  
**Bee Farmer**

At first, I didn't know anything about raising bees. I used to make money by selling fruit I'd picked from the forest. Then I heard of a community initiative run by Mrs Luu Thi Dao. She and the trainers taught me very carefully how to practise beekeeping. Now I can get a better income, with bees that help to protect the environment. I take home seven litres of honey every time I work there, which I use when my children get stomach aches. I worry about lots of things, but hard work helps me feel less stressed. Every day, I watch the bees flying around — working with them makes me happy. For me, the biggest joy is just being there, learning, helping and making friends, so that I can support my family.

**Luu Thi Dao, 50**  
Born Bac Ninh Province, Vietnam  
**Owner, Mountainous Bees**

I'd been working at the National Bee Research Centre in Vietnam for 18 years when I met some farmers in Hoa Binh — a mountainous province to the west of Hanoi — who were raising high quality, healthy bees. I was shocked to find no one was buying their honey. I wanted to create a honey business so I could help them sell, but without capital it's impossible to start a company. With the help of Thrive, I was able to invest in those farmers, and now they run successful bee farms. If all female entrepreneurs could get financial support like I've enjoyed, life would be totally different. The farmers I've been able to train as a result, like Mrs Bui Thi Phu, now have a stable job with good wages. That's the biggest reward for me.

*“If all female entrepreneurs could get  
financial support like I've enjoyed,  
life would be totally different.”*







## LITTLE SISTERS FUND: Changing the lives of Nepali girls

Little Sisters Fund has been supporting girls' education in Nepal since 1998, working with over 2,600 girls. Education and mentorship reduces the girls' risk of child labour, early marriage and trafficking. On average, the girls are able to delay marriage by a year for every year they stay in school past fifth grade. This also means that they tend to have healthier and fewer children, enjoy higher household incomes and are able to invest more in their families and communities. Graduates from Little Sisters Fund even consistently outperform national averages in school-leaving examinations.

The work done by Little Sisters Fund is a collective effort from their full-time staff and school-based mentors who themselves are alumnae of Little Sisters Fund. While the mentors support the girls in their day-to-day challenges at school, Indira Sharma, Parent Liaison and Inventory Manager, works with their parents to support their daughters' educational journeys.

Over the years, Indira has built a strong friendship with Januka Khatiwada, the office helper who cleans and cooks for the staff. The women have very different roles in the organisation, but they share the same passion: to live in a world where all children can claim their right to education.







**Januka Khatiwada, 37, born Kathmandu, Nepal**  
**Office Chef**

When I was young, I was one of the first female drivers of a three-wheeled auto-rickshaw called a Tempo. It was dangerous work — the traffic in Nepal is terrible. I also had to give my earnings to the owner of the Tempo so it was hard to make money. I had small children so I needed a job that could support them, which is when I found out that Little Sisters Fund was looking for helpers. That is how I met Indira. I love that my job means I'm contributing to helping with education in Nepal, especially as I have a young daughter. Working with Indira is an honour — she's so helpful and supportive. I hope our work means that one day all young women in Nepal can get an education. To me, the most beautiful thing I could imagine would be to see children learning without fighting.

*“To me, the most beautiful thing I could imagine would be to see children learning without fighting.”*

**Indira Sharma, 52, born Tanahun, Nepal**  
**Parent Liaison and Inventory Manager**

I eloped when I was 14, which meant I never finished school. For a long time, I had a difficult life. Eventually, I became interested in social work, which is why I volunteered to work at Little Sisters Fund. I have three daughters and a son, and I've made sure they got the education I didn't — Bindhaya (31) is a nurse, Sandhaya (27) scored the highest marks in Nepal in her MA in Zoology, Chanda (25) works for the airlines, and my son Sidhartha (16) is a very hardworking student. I'm a proud mother. For me, it's not about money but about doing good work for the girls in Nepal. Januka and I often work together in the kitchen. It's one of my favourite parts of the job — she's such a good cook, very hardworking and disciplined. I hope that all girls can one day get a good education and proper health service.

*“For me, it's not about money but about doing good work for the girls in Nepal.”*





## MEDIC MOBILE: Supporting frontline community health workers with technology

For remote rural communities, where as little as one per cent of households have access to basic healthcare, community health workers are critical in providing life-saving medical services and information. Medic Mobile supports these community health workers by developing easy-to-use mobile tools to efficiently coordinate patient care. As of 2018, Medic Mobile has developed mobile solutions for over 60 implementing partners in 23 countries, with over 20,000 frontline health workers currently using its software.

However, Medic Mobile's software for community health is only as good as it is relevant to those who use them. Design-led product development is therefore critical. This cooperation is evident in the work of Ranju Sharma and Ashish Bhujel at Medic Mobile's Nepal office. Ranju, Design Manager, works with the community health workers as end-users, ensuring that Medic Mobile's tools are designed, built and customised to accurately respond to their needs. Ashish, as Project Technical Lead, is responsible for the deployment, support and maintenance of Medic Mobile's solutions, communicating technical requirements to the software development team.









Ashish Bhujel, 31, born Lalitpur, Nepal  
Project Technical Lead

Growing up in Nepal, I never thought I would be working for a tech company in the future, especially not as a computer engineer. I love knowing that now I'm helping Nepal, collaborating with different teammates in different countries and time zones. Working with Ranju is especially fun because she is so enthusiastic. We share our experiences and help each other. I wish every person in the world could access basic healthcare services at a reasonable price, especially in rural parts of Nepal. I hope one day Nepali women's healthcare is upgraded and the literacy rates are increased. If we keep supporting one another, one day that might be possible.

*“I wish every person in the world could access basic healthcare services at a reasonable price.”*



Ranju Sharma, 30, born Kathmandu, Nepal  
Design Manager

In Nepal, I wish there was quality, affordable and accessible healthcare for everyone, and I wish it was provided by healthcare workers we can trust. Unfortunately, that isn't the case. That's one reason I joined Medic Mobile. I have worked here six years now and it's been a consistent source of joy. I'm excited as ever to be a part of this team, and to be working with Ashish towards our goal of creating lasting impact in healthcare systems across the globe. I think we can do it — we Nepalis are extremely resilient and patient people, each of us trying to overpower the mountains we live among.

*“We Nepalis are extremely resilient and patient people, each of us trying to overpower the mountains we live among.”*







A photograph of two women in a rural, hilly landscape. The woman on the left is wearing a red patterned dress and a red headscarf, carrying a large woven basket on her back. The woman on the right is wearing a red top and patterned pants, also carrying a large woven basket on her back. They are both holding their heads with one hand, suggesting they are carrying heavy loads. The background shows a dirt path, trees, and a small building in the distance. The word "STRENGTHEN" is written in white capital letters on the left side of the image.

STRENGTHEN





STRENGTHEN

Great teams become stronger when supported by robust and relevant systems

Even the best teams need the right tools to do their work effectively. Non-profit funding is often designated to direct delivery of services because there is a tangible impact. Less funding is readily available for building organisational capabilities, which are less easily measured, so organisations have to reach into their reserves. Organisations like TechSoup and Philanthropy University all recognise this need. That is why COMO Foundation encourages partners to invest in their unique assets, be they technology, intellectual property, data or a volunteer network.

Global Press Institute, for example, trains and employs women in over 40 communities worldwide to be ethical, investigative journalists. Uniquely, they recruit women for their diversity and commitment; basic literacy is the only technical prerequisite. Upon successful completion of Global Press training, the women report for *Global Press Journal*, the award-winning publication of the organisation. These stories are in turn syndicated across a network of 180 news agencies, including *NPR*, *BBC* and *The Guardian* — and read by some 20 million people each month. With the income earned through their reporting, over 70 per cent of Global Press journalists are now the primary breadwinner in their families.

Global Press’ approach requires its journalists to produce quality content on par or better than traditional sources of news. COMO Foundation has helped Global Press establish regional editorial offices in Asia and Africa, which has resulted in a 200 per cent increase in the number of news stories generated. More recently, the rapid changes in the news media industry necessitated an overhaul of the Global Press training curriculum to include new skills, such as video creation, 360-degree photography, data journalism and podcasting.

Over the next pages, we highlight individuals whose partnership have catalysed real change for girls, businesses and communities.









## EDUCATE GIRLS: Getting girls to attend and remain in school

Educate Girls improves Indian girls' access to education through volunteers in 15 districts of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The community volunteer network, known as Team Balika (Balika meaning 'girl' in Hindi), identifies out-of-school girls and encourages their parents to take up the free universal primary education available to the children.

Former Team Balika volunteer and now Field Coordinator, Gopal Lal Regar, was instrumental in getting nine-year-old Megha\* into school. After Megha's father died, her mother, Lata Devi\*, had to take a job to support the family. Megha, in turn, had to stay at home to take care of the domestic work, like cooking, cleaning, fetching water and collecting cow dung to make dung-cakes for fuel. Gopal identified Megha as an out-of-school girl during a door-to-door survey and convinced her mother to send her to school. Since enrollment, Megha has shown great growth in Hindi and English, and is catching up with maths.





*“Nothing will change unless men can change their outlook.”*

**Gopal Lal Regar, 21, born Rajasthan, India**  
**Field Coordinator and former volunteer**

Young girls in India face much discrimination. Often boys are deemed more important to the family, which means girls are given less attention, be it their nourishment, health, education or other opportunities. I grew up seeing this gender-based discrimination, and that's what made me step up to become a Team Balika volunteer. I believe it's important to talk to the men when we are addressing the problems being faced by girls and women. In our communities, they decide the fate of their daughters, wives and sisters. Nothing will change unless men can change their outlook. I truly hope families will place as much importance on a girl as they do on a boy. And I really hope to see the girls in my village become teachers and police officers. When I see an out-of-school girl being enrolled in school, I know that my work has made an impact. It feels like I have conquered Mount Everest.



**Lata Devi, 34, born Rajasthan, India**  
**Megha's mother**

My daughter can write her own name. She's the first woman in the family to be able to do that. I'm so proud and happy that she's not going to be called 'angoothachaap' (illiterate). I have had countless problems due to my lack of education, and I don't want my children to face the same. Women from my generation never went to school, we didn't have much independence, and our exposure was limited to household chores. So if we lost our husbands, like I did, life becomes very difficult. We're not equipped to sustain our families, and even when we're offered a job, there is a constant threat of us being cheated, exploited or abused. I can't even use the public bus to travel when I'm on my own because I don't know how to read the signs. When Gopal asked me to send Megha to school, initially I wasn't very happy because she was such a great help at home. But now, seeing her in her school uniform brings me the greatest joy. If she can have a job someday, all the pain I'm going through will be worth it.

*“Seeing her in her school uniform brings me the greatest joy.”*









# **THRIIVE: Helping local businesses grow and prosper**

Transport and logistics are critical to the success of any agricultural business. Speedy delivery ensures product freshness and reduces wastage, securing customer satisfaction. This is where Thriive (page 25) helped Vinh Ha Farm, founded by Vietnamese entrepreneurs Dong Thi Vinh and her daughter, Nguyen Thi Mai.

The idea for the business came when Dong visited her daughter in Hanoi, and realised that the vegetables for sale were not as fresh or healthy as the ones from her hometown of Phu Xuyen, an hour outside the city. In late 2012, she gave up her job as a brick seller and decided to take over a vegetable farm.

Her daughter, Nguyen, helped from the start. She woke up at 4am to work at the store and deliver vegetables, before returning to her full-time information technology job at 8am. In 2013, she gave up her career to commit completely to the farm. It was Nguyen who secured the loan from Thriive for a delivery truck. The truck improved delivery efficiency and cut costs by 50 per cent. Today, she runs the business side, while her mother works with the farmers and manages production at the farm.





**Dong Thi Vinh, 62**  
**Born Phu Xuyen, Vietnam**  
**Vegetable business owner**

This is the most meaningful job I have ever done. I can help the people around me have safe vegetables for their meals, while creating jobs for those who want to work at my farm. It brings me joy, and joy is the most important thing you can have. I'm proud of my daughter for her work with the business. She is so devoted to her job that sometimes she stays awake until two or three in the morning to finish an order. I have always loved her because she is my child, but the more we spend time together doing the business, the more respect I feel. I really hope she gets good opportunities in life, so she can take care of her family. It's the simplest thing I could wish for her, but the most important.

*"Joy is the most important thing you can have."*

**Nguyen Thi Mai, 38**  
**Born Phu Xuyen, Vietnam**  
**Vegetable business owner**

My mother is my inspiration. She's hard working, positive thinking and full of love. She plays a decisive role in our business, and everyone wants to work with us because of it. And now because of Thriive, I have my own truck to transfer our goods. I wish that every female entrepreneur in my country could have this kind of support. People need to give sympathy and treat women equally. It's all about giving and receiving — it's our social responsibility to help each other. It makes people happy, and being happy is vital. Happiness helps us attain power, and brings other people to us. I hope my mother and I will be healthy and happy for a long time.

*"It's our social responsibility  
to help each other."*







## YAYASAN RUMAH RACHEL: Ensuring no child lives or dies in pain

Yayasan Rumah Rachel's nurses provide holistic palliative care in Jakarta, Indonesia, supporting patients and their families through the end-of-life journey. The nurses are assisted by hundreds of community volunteers, including Yuswati and Milyanti (who only go by their first names).

Yuswati has been with the organisation for four years, and Milyanti for three. While Yuswati volunteered out of compassion, Milyanti received support from the organisation to care for her son. Three years later, Yuswati and Milyanti support their patients together, sharing knowledge as they walk to work. The nurses and volunteers represent female expertise and strength, who have chosen to use their skills for the good of the community.





**Yuswati, 47, born Sumedang, Jawa Barat, Indonesia**  
**Palliative Care Volunteer**

I joined Yayasan Rumah Rachel because I wanted to support others. It enriches my soul whenever I visit a patient who, in the presence of a disease that is so life-threatening, shows so much strength and spirit. That makes me reflect on my own life and think that I should be more grateful with everything I have. Happiness, to me, is not feeling fear, but being content with what you have, what you face, and what you do. These patients inspire me, because even those who suffer more than me are happy. I'm grateful to have met Milyanti doing this job. She never says no when there are patients in need of her support. Her passion teaches me to continue learning and to engage with others. Her work, together with the other volunteers and patients, motivates me every day, and allows me to set a good example for my children.



*“Happiness, to me, is not feeling fear, but being content with what you have, what you face, and what you do.”*



**Milyanti, 47, born Palembang, Sumatra, Indonesia**  
**Palliative Care Volunteer**

I understand what it's like to watch your child die. My son was diagnosed with leukaemia when he was five years old. He passed away when he was nine years and three months old. That was my motivation for joining Yayasan Rumah Rachel, and I hope through my work, I can show other patients that they're not alone. I can understand their weight of suffering. But in truth, the scariest thing for me is the fact that I don't know if I could cope with the things I see happen to other people. Some people truly suffer. It's my most fundamental fear, because I know I could help them get through it, but what if I couldn't get through it myself? Still, I will continue to do this work, because I'm happy to see other people happy. When our existence has a meaning for others, it's the happiest feeling in the world.

*“When our existence has a meaning for others, it's the happiest feeling in the world.”*









SCALE





## SCALE

### Encouraging ambitious but sustainable growth

Successful organisations have programmes that are grounded in sound theory, optimised in delivery and responsive to changing contexts. COMO Foundation encourages these partners to explore suitable funding and growth models.

Living Goods is one such partner. Working in Uganda and Kenya, Living Goods provides basic healthcare through community health workers who also provide last-mile distribution for essential products such as malaria and diarrhoea treatments, contraceptives, fortified porridges, water filters, and solar lights. As they go door to door, these health entrepreneurs also share information, diagnose and treat simple childhood diseases, and register pregnancies. By combining best practices from business and public health, Living Goods creates livelihoods for thousands of enterprising women while also dramatically lowering child mortality.

Living Goods' model requires robust systems and processes to support its networks of community health workers. The Enterprise Resource Planning system, partially funded by COMO Foundation, is transforming its business processes, integrating organisational capabilities, improving efficiency of corporate functions and enabling accurate reporting. This capacity will help the organisation realise its ambitious plans to reach 25 million people across five countries by 2021.

Over the next pages, we highlight pairs of individuals whose lives and futures have been transformed through the work of our partners.









## EDUCATE GIRLS: Closing the education gap

To bridge learning gaps and increase girls' enthusiasm for studying, Educate Girls (see page 49) developed fun, child-centric activities collectively called 'Gyan Ka Pitara' ('repository of knowledge'), which build micro-competencies in English, Hindi and maths. These learning tools are particularly important for girls who have missed school, ensuring that no child is left behind.

Sarita\*, aged 11, was enrolled in school but often didn't go because she had to manage the kitchen and other chores at home, while both her parents went out to work. When Sarita was in third grade, she could hardly recognise numbers or letters. This affected her confidence and hampered socialisation, meaning she often sat alone in a corner and feared speaking up in class. Educate Girls' Team Balika volunteers used the Gyan Ka Pitara tools to help Sarita clear the basics of Hindi, English and maths to keep pace with her peers. She now attends school regularly and freely interacts with her classmates and teachers.





Sarita, 11, born Rajasthan, India  
**Sixth Grader**

My education is my most prized possession. My teachers tell me that it's the only thing people can't take away from me. I want to grow up to be a doctor so that I can treat people in my village. If I could do that, I know my dad would be so proud of me. I work really hard and I'm very studious, but it's not always easy. I have a brother and he can wake up, take a bath and sit down to study. He's not expected to contribute towards housework, but it's quite the opposite for me. I have to clean the house, fetch the water and complete my other chores first. Only then can I find time for my studies and play. I like that I can learn and play with my friends at school now. My favourite game is kushti, which is a kind of wrestling.

*“My education is my most prized possession.”*



Mahendra Lal\*, 37, born Rajasthan, India  
**Labourer and Sarita's father**

Lack of education and gender-based discrimination are the two most prevalent problems facing young girls in India. All my life, I've heard of girls being killed while still in the womb, of injustice and unfair treatment. Giving boys preferential treatment is something that happens very naturally in our communities and so the discrimination often becomes difficult to identify or understand. As a father, I want to give my daughter and son equal opportunities to education. I want to see my daughter as an independent woman, not having to depend on anyone for her needs. When she becomes a doctor, that will be a proud moment for me. Educate Girls and its Team Balika volunteers are driving a very important mission. Unless we educate our girls, our society will not improve. Everybody should support them.

*“I want to see my daughter as an independent woman.”*





## LITTLE SISTERS FUND: Multiplying the gift of education

The transformative power of education changed the lives of Usha Acharya and Anima Bhattari. Though generations apart, it was their education that set these two inspirational women on new paths in life, enabling them to make a difference to the lives of hundreds more.

Usha, co-founder of Little Sisters Fund in Nepal (page 31), left her village at the age of seven, walking four days to reach Kathmandu to become the companion of a relative's child bride (she lost one of her shoes crossing a river en route. She was devastated — it was the first pair of shoes she'd ever owned). At her new home, she was allowed to go to school for the first time, so long as she'd completed her chores. She soon excelled to the top of the class, becoming the first girl from her village to go to college. She then went on to achieve two Master's Degrees and worked with Save the Children and the Asia Foundation. In 1998, she started Little Sisters Fund with co-founder Trevor Patzer. The educational organisation has since supported the education of over 2,600 girls in 21 districts across Nepal.

Anima is one of these girls. Her parents came to Kathmandu in search of jobs; her father worked as a cook's helper, and her mother worked with woollen handicrafts. With three children, finances were tight. Anima successfully applied for a Little Sisters Fund scholarship in 2002 and later went on to receive a Master's in Education. She is now working as a teacher. She maintains that it was her education that changed her life.



**Usha Acharya, 70**  
**Born Tahanu, Nepal**  
**Co-founder of Little Sisters Fund**

The education system in Nepal has improved. The literacy rate, as well as secondary and tertiary levels of education, are increasing. However, female education is still low and there are many children in underprivileged communities who are out of school. I remember that struggle for education, and it is this deep and serious concern for girls' schooling that motivates me to keep pushing on. The fact that many of our Little Sisters have gone on to receive full-time scholarships in universities around the world is truly inspiring. I really admire Anima for her maturity and responsibility. She has an ability to deal with hardships and move on. We need teachers like her, because they can bring about change in the lives of women across Nepal.

*"I remember that struggle for education, and it is this deep and serious concern for girls' schooling that motivates me to keep pushing on."*



**Anima Bhattari, 29**  
**Born Kathmandu, Nepal**  
**Former Little Sister and now a Teacher**

My most treasured memory is when I was selected as a Little Sister. My family's financial system was very bad, and I was about to drop out of school. The scholarship changed everything. I wish all girls in Nepal could feel empowered through education. True freedom is the ability to go to school safely and learn productively. Little Sisters Fund built my confidence, broadened my thinking and inspired self-belief. I wish I could express to Usha how grateful I am. She is one of my greatest role models. I really want to be like her — she's superwoman.

*"True freedom is the ability to go to school safely and learn productively."*









## ONE HEART WORLD-WIDE: Ensuring no woman has to die giving birth

Globally, over 800 women die from preventable complications during pregnancy and childbirth every day. 99 per cent of these deaths occur in rural communities of developing countries, where pregnant women don't receive the essential care they need. One Heart World-Wide has been working, successfully, to reduce this. The organisation develops 'Networks of Safety' — strengthening local healthcare infrastructure and building capacity through local female community health volunteers. As a result, in two remote districts of Western Nepal, maternal mortality was decreased by over 90 per cent in just five years.

Clad in light blue saris, the female community health volunteers are the front line of Nepal's healthcare initiatives, crisscrossing the Himalayas to provide basic services and collect information. They register new pregnancies, provide health education to mothers, encourage pregnant women to attend their antenatal care appointments and deliver babies at the health facilities. One of these volunteers is Sangita Karki, based in central Nepal. She has improved the lives of countless women, including Goma Chepang, who delivered three babies with the support of the community health volunteers.







*“Being a mother is  
the hardest job in the world.”*

**Sangita Karki, 42**  
**Born Aadhamara, Nepal**  
**Female Community Health Volunteer**

I was selected for the female community health volunteer position by the ‘Mother’s Group’ in my village when I was 21. Nepali women are shy, and they face all kinds of problems from their in-laws. Usually, they have no other option but to work full-time until delivery, which can lead to complications. I met one woman, six months into her pregnancy, who was bleeding extensively. People had convinced her she’d angered god by doing something wrong, and there was nothing that could be done for her. I managed to persuade her the situation was critical and that she would die if she didn’t go to a local health post. After regular treatment, she had a successful delivery — her baby is now 18 years old. Working as a community health volunteer hasn’t always been easy. Even now, people assume we are paid for our work, when in fact we are just volunteers trying to help. But gradually things are changing. Women now go for check-ups when we ask them to. They recognise the importance of delivering at designated health posts, and listen when we give them advice. Being a mother is the hardest job in the world, so I’m proud of what I do to help. My mother is proud of me too.

**Goma Chepang, 20**  
**Born Aadhamara, Nepal**  
**Mother of three**

I got married when I was 15 years old, which isn’t unusual where I’m from. My husband was 18. It didn’t even occur to me that I should go to school and try and get an education. Even now in my community, the idea of sending girls to school is only just starting to take hold. My husband works as a labourer and I work in the fields. We earn around NRS 200 (US\$1.82) each day. I came from a family of six children; two girls, four boys. Two of my brothers didn’t survive beyond infancy. My mother also had a miscarriage. I had my first daughter when I was only 16, my second at 18 and my son at 20. It was an extremely difficult time during childbirth. With my first child, I was in labour for four days; for my second, I had a postpartum haemorrhage. My son didn’t cry at all, and was kept at the intensive-care unit for several days. Fortunately, I had given birth at a health post, and the workers there took very good care of me. I was extremely weak and probably wouldn’t have survived without their help.

*“Fortunately, I had given birth at a  
health post, and the workers there  
took very good care of me.”*







Acknowledgements

Photography © organisations and respective photographers

Cover - Aditya Kaul	Page 26 to 29 - Ha Phuong Thao
Page 6, 7 - Laxmi Kaul	Page 30, 32, 33 - Laxmi Kaul
Page 8, 9 - Aditya Kaul	Page 34, 36, 37 - Medic Mobile Photo Archives
Page 10 - Eliza Powell/Campaign for Female Education (Camfed)	Page 38 to 41 - Laxmi Kaul
Page 13 - Medic Mobile Photo Archives	Page 42, 43 - Aditya Kaul
Page 14 - Laxmi Kaul	Page 44 - Global Press Institute
Page 15 - Eliza Powell/Campaign for Female Education (Camfed)	Page 46 to 48, 50, 51 - Laxmi Kaul
Page 16, 17 - Laxmi Kaul	Page 52 to 54, 56, 57 - Ha Phuong Thao
Page 18, 19 - Aditya Kaul	Page 58, 60, 61 - Dilla Djalil-Daniel
Page 20, 21 - Laxmi Kaul	Page 62, 63 - Ha Phuong Thao
Page 22 - Medha	Page 64, 65 - Laxmi Kaul
Page 24 - Ha Phuong Thao	Page 66 - Living Goods
	Page 68 to 70, 72 to 74, 76 to 80, 82, 83 - Laxmi Kaul




Leica Camera Asia Pacific photographers:




**Dilla Djalil-Daniel, photographed Yayasan Rumah Rachel**  
Dilla Djalil-Daniel has been taking photographs all her life. She has published a photography book *a Trunk and other Tails* and her work has been published in various publications as well as exhibited in China, Indonesia and Finland. Based in Jakarta, Dilla is an accomplished photographer with a determined commitment to the documentary and photojournalism approach.

*“Despite the circumstances of the children, it was so uplifting to see how cheerful and full of life they were. Their ability to find joy in simple things makes me remember not to take things for granted.”*



**Ha Phuong Thao, photographed Thrive**  
Ha Phuong Thao is the CEO of Nha Trang Bay Investment and Construction JSC. She has been an avid photographer since 2009. Based in Vietnam, she enjoys documenting everyday moments. Portraiture is an important aspect of her photography.

*“As I photographed the female farmers, their resilience and strength could be felt in the way they spoke about their work.”*



**Laxmi Kaul, photographed Educate Girls, Little Sisters Fund, Medic Mobile and One Heart World-Wide**  
Laxmi Kaul regards photography as a quest to capture emotion in a moment, naturally and as if telling a very human story. A professional photographer, she holds emotional and environmental portraitures and documentary photography closest to her heart. Her photographs have been showcased in various publications and has held two exhibitions in Singapore.

*“What inspired me was how the women and girls in these organisations were able to use their limited resources so creatively to contribute back to their communities.”*



*Together - A Journey of Partnership* charts COMO Foundation's evolution as a grantmaker, working with partners towards gender equity. The Foundation's mission is underpinned by a shared belief that families and communities benefit when women and girls are healthy, educated and economically secure. In this book, the Foundation's approach to philanthropic partnership is brought to life through personal stories of mutual support, strength and transformation.