field notes

a collection of real-life experiences

Celebrating International Day of the Girl
“A girl should be two things: who and what she wants.”

~Coco Chanel, Entrepreneur

As we celebrate International Day of the Girl, we can’t help remind ourselves of our own childhood. We think back on moments filled with laughter and tears, hopes and dreams. We recall stories of playing teacher to our stuffed animals, sport star with our siblings, or doctor to our best friends. These are the stories that make us laugh, make us cry, and push us to champion dreamers.

Here we bring together ten exceptional stories from the four corners of the world—stories that celebrate girlhood and spotlight the strength young girls can possess to realize their dreams.

While all the names are changed to protect the girls, the stories and experiences remain true. These are the dreams of girls around the world, and these are the stories that continue to inspire us.

Happy reading!
Bangladesh

Anika is in grade 8 and lives in a small village in Bangladesh. While the legal age to marry is 18, nearly 20% of girls are wed before their 15th birthday. Because of the costs of education, Anika’s parents wanted her to marry and to leave school. Anika felt differently, wanting desperately to continue her education.

Anika communicated with her peers at the CARE girls-leadership group meetings about her situation. Her peers agreed that she should not marry, but rather stay in school. They went to speak to her parents. The group had successfully convinced Anika’s parents to stop the marriage. However, due to the continued financial burden, they were forced to pull Anika from school. Anika did not give up, and continued to meet with her fellow schoolmates and attend the CARE leadership trainings. She continued to participate in the cultural events organized by the local youth development center and was actively involved in activities regarding girls’ leadership, capacity building, and communication with other stakeholders.

Through the support of her peers, she continued to fight for her education, telling her parents and elder brothers about its importance as well as advocating other girls who had dropped out of school. With the vigorous efforts of her peers, under Anika’s leadership, and the support of CARE programs, she along with 30 girls have returned to school.

Now at age 16, she is a student of class nine and continues to be a champion for the girls in her village.
Solyna lives in a village in the remote northeastern area of Cambodia. Ten years ago her village was quiet and didn’t have a school. With no opportunity to go to school, most children helped their parents on the farm and didn’t learn to read or write.

In 2002 CARE Cambodia implemented the Highland Community Education Program. This project established six community schools and employed thirteen community teachers in remote areas, including Solyna’s village. For the first time highlander children were able to learn in their own language, as well as learn Khmer.

“I am so happy there is a school in my village and the children have easy access to a school. They now know Khmer and know how to read and write,” Solyna said. “I have many friends at the school. I was especially surprised when I started to learn to read and write in my own language.”

Now Solyna is in grade nine which she found very different to her primary school. “In the secondary school there are good school buildings, one classroom taught by many teachers, different subjects and lots of students of different ethnicities.”

As a part of a CARE scholarship, Solyna and thirty-two other grade nine students went on a study tour to the Teacher Training College. During the visit Solyna and her classmates met students and teacher trainers. They learned about what they study at the Teacher Training College and what it is like to live there. “They are so likely to have a professional job in the future”, Solyna observed.

“I will try to study hard because I want to study at the Teacher Training College as well. I would like to have more friends from many provinces. If I have a chance to be a primary school teacher, I would like to teach students in my own village.”
Honduras

Gabriela lives in a small town surrounded by rolling hills, waterfalls, pine forests, and exotic flora. Despite the country’s natural beauty, however, the municipality ranks as one of the most neglected areas of the country. Her mother did not have much opportunity to study when she was growing up – she only completed the second grade of elementary school. She wanted more for her daughter.

When Gabriela finished sixth grade, her parents did not have the resources for her to continue school, and at that time, the nearest school was too far. “But I had in my mind to work and study,” commented Gabriela. “I want to support my community and country, and make it progress….There are many people in our community that do not know how to read and write. Thank God, my mommy and poppy [helped] me to continue my studies.”

With her parents’ support, Gabriela enrolled in a CARE-funded school for out-of-school youth. Through these schools, instructors volunteer to teach basic literacy and numeracy to eager students. CARE covers about $60 per child per year, which covers the costs of facilities and materials. Gabriela studies from one to three in the afternoon on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The municipality pays Gabriela to teach preschool, which helps her to continue her preparation. Gabriela’s mother is proud of her daughter and is one of her biggest supporters.

Gabriela feels that, as a result of CARE, her town is changing. Where once, few girls were sent to school, now girls attend school, play sports, and postpone getting married at an early age. In addition, where once girls could not hold a position in school governance, today nearly all school officers are girls. As the facilitators explained, “girls were discriminated before. It was strange for a girl to study. Now things have changed.”
Putri is 16 years old, and has been working as child domestic worker for a family living in a larger village. She has worked for the family since early 2008, after leaving a family she had been working for in another district. At first she was treated well, but after her first month, her employer began to abuse her. They often slapped or hit her, and gave Putri only a small mug of rice for breakfast and for dinner. She also worked from 4 am to 1 am (21 hours a day) every day while surviving on two bare meals per day. Needless to say, Putri was often hungry.

Putri’s employer accused her one day of stealing some sweet heavy cream and beat her all over her body, including her head, with metal bard and pieces of wood. She was badly bruised and battered all over her body. Putri had had enough of the abuse and was determined to escape the family, even though she had never been paid for her services. She decided to make her escape by creeping out of the house in the middle of the night and attempted to climb the backyard wall, which was 4 meters high. An older neighbor initially took her for a their, until he heard her calling to him for help. She had suffered multiple injuries and was severely malnourished. Having heard her story took her to see the mayor, who initiated an accident report with the local police.

CARE Indonesia is helping Putri and her case pursuing non litigation action. In collaboration with the Provincial Government, CARE plans to develop a media campaign to raise awareness about her case and about the plight faced by so many of the countries young girls, especially those in the surrounding villages.
Beatha is 17 years old. Pressure from her family had forced her to drop of school to get married. Caring for a girl and paying for her education was becoming expensive, and with both her parents being HIV positive, they could no longer afford life’s basic needs such as food and clothes for Beatha.

“I got married because my father always shouted at me because he suspected that I walk with boyfriends when coming back from school.” “It was because of these factors that I decided to accept a marriage proposal from [my husband], a vendor and piece worker,” said Beatha.

Although Beatha thought she could find peace and love with the husband, things didn’t turn out that way. “I ended up in trouble because this man left me for days going on business without food. Worse still, he was a crook in that he had many debts and people came to claim their debts from me as his wife while he was away- my life was in danger.”

Beatha ran away from the marriage and came back home. “I thought that was the end of everything and all my dreams were shattered,” she recalled.” “But the [CARE-sponsored women’s] group came to encourage me to go back to school.” Beatha re-entered school in standard 6 and is now a member of the women’s group.

“I am happy that I am now back in school because I will accomplish my dream of becoming a doctor.”
Mariam is 15 years old. While there are both formal schools and informal education centers (CEDs), her father did not approve of her education. He chose rather to send her to a Madersa, where the pedagogy is strictly based on the principles of the Islam. This is what she says:

“I did not like the methods. So I started skipping classes and my father got very angry and our relations became extremely difficult. He simply ignored me. He even opposed my going to the CED school but thanks to my uncle’s intervention, he finally accepted it. But he is still thinking I am not able to work in the CED.

Today I am glad to tell people that the CED has played a great role in reconciling my father and me, and this is very important for me. When I received a 3rd award of out of 78 new literates sitting for test organized by the District Academy of our Ministry of Basic Education, Literacy, and National Languages my father understood then the seriousness of the CED. He even admitted to my teacher that he thought that I was just walking to the CED with other learners.

The award has been the kickoff of our reconciliation and he is always praying for my success. We are now in very good terms. I have just chosen to learn how to design and sew fabrics and I am convinced that with willingness and motivation, everything is possible. I am optimistic for the rest of the training and the insertion program and I look forward to it. I am very proud of myself and I will do whatever I can to succeed in life.”

CARE has worked with the government in Mali to establish more informal education centers (CEDs) for children like Mariam who would have never had the opportunity to go to school otherwise.
Mozambique

Sonia is 15 years old. In grade 6 she was going through a particularly difficult time—she felt emotional and ill often. Her stomach pained her, and she would get tired during the day. To get advice, she sought out the local peer educators program.

During counseling the peer educators suggested, through the symptoms and signs that she presented, that she was pregnant. Sonia had not known she was pregnant, because she did not know the signs of a pregnancy.

They continued to discuss the matter to Sonia, and discovered that one of the teachers in the school had gotten Sonia pregnant. The group approached other teachers in order to investigate the issue. The teachers confirmed the pregnancy, but never took the issue forward. Nevertheless, the peer educators keep looking for help. They communicated the issue to members of the local CARE project. The project reported the case to the District Office for Education, Youth and Technology (SDEJT) and the Provincial Department of Education and Culture (DPEC).

A commission of inquiry was established followed by a cautious analysis of the case. In late January that year the teacher in question was dismissed from his function and expelled from the state apparatus. Sonia, through the advice of the peer educators, continued studying rather than dropping out of school. She delivered her child in February and promptly returned to school in March. She has since passed her exams and progressed to grade 7.
Elizabeth is from a tribe that has well-established gender norms that place value on girls over boys. Among 6 children (3 boys and 3 girls), Elizabeth is the youngest in her family. Even at a young age, she noted that it was only boys that decided family matters, never girls. This seemed unfair to her, but because of the norms she would keep quiet. Elizabeth attended CARE leadership training activities which discuss gender norms and equality. She decided then, she would begin to speak up when she experienced inequality.

In 2010, she went to compete at the national level for UMITASHUMTA (Competition for Sports and Academic performances for Primary Schools in Tanzania). She says at the beginning they had separated boys and girls, assuming that boys could not compete with girls in subjects because they believed boys are always smarter than girls. Having decided to challenge inequalities, Elizabeth confidently followed one of the teachers and told her to mix girls with boys. The teachers laughed at her and refused her request. Elizabeth didn't give up, and went directly to the District Education Officer and asked for girls to be mixed with boys in the subjects’ competition. The district education officer listened to her, and the next day boys and girls were mixed together making a total of 50 pupils altogether. Much to the surprise of those teachers and invited guests who previously rejected her idea, Elizabeth became the number one pupil leading boys and girls together.

Because of her demonstrated confidence, Elizabeth had the unique opportunity to lead the grade seven graduation ceremony at her school as “Mistress of Ceremony.” This position had never before been held by another school-aged boy or girl.

Elizabeth says this is important to her because it helped to change the mind of community members on the strength and position of girls. She suggests that leadership skills be spread all over- even to the youth who are not at school in order to inspire them to make change.
Riene is 13 years old and from a small village in Togo where education is difficult to get as a girl. Riene loved school, though. She worked hard in her classes and became first pupil in her junior secondary school. Occasionally, a representative of the NGO AJA would pass by school and discuss sensitization and child trafficking. Being a good student, Riene listened carefully and remembered the lessons given to her.

Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, her cousin had been working as a child domestic worker. One day she suffered a terrible trauma, which left her dumb. No longer of use to her employer, she was repatriated to Togo. Riene was told that she must go to Saudi Arabia in her place and complete the employment contract of her cousin.

Being aware in advance of the consequences of going to take her cousins place she pleaded to her parents. She did not want to leave school, let alone become a child worker in a household. Unable to convince her parents and members of the child trafficking network, the young schoolgirl confided in the CARE project coordinator in the area. The project succeeded in canceling the journey of the young girl thanks the collaboration with many partners in the area, namely the police and security forces, and the officer of the Ministry of Social Action. Riene was able to stay with her family and finish her schooling.
Nadeen is 15 years-old, and from a poor family in a small and rural village which survives by goat-herding and sustenance farming. Like other girls in her village, Nadeen and her four sisters must support their family with daily domestic and agricultural chores, including cleaning, collecting water, gathering firewood, shepherding goats. They also face the social challenges of traditional communities in Yemen such as early-marriage. Many girls in this region are not encouraged to further their education beyond the initial grades, and rates of drop-outs amongst girls are high.

Before her involvement with CARE, Nadeen was a fatigued and shy girl who could focus on little other than her domestic responsibilities. However, after participating in gender workshops and leadership training she is now proud and self-confident. She attended a literacy teacher training and she now hosts a daily literacy class that supports the education of 14 other village women. She will also soon run the village library. This a pivotal achievement for Nadeen and her community.

With the support of CARE, Nadeen recently drafted an open-letter to the local government and leaders in a government newspaper, requesting attention to support girls in her community.

“We are rural girls who live in society and have a lack of necessary things which should be there. For example, education, no electricity, no water, the school building is not enough, and we don’t have incentives to further our studies. We also have a lack of female teachers and much unemployment in our area. Please accept high school graduates to be teachers in [this village].”

This letter represented a small milestone in the voice of rural girls in the region and is hoped to contribute to the improved government attention to girls’ education in her community.