



Lumbini Girls' School – Nepal

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Lumbini Girls' School

Background

Situated in Rupandehi, Nepal about 205 km from the capital city of Kathmandu, Lumbini is one of four Buddhist pilgrimage sites, and it is recognized as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Lumbini's residents are predominantly Hindu, but many Buddhist shrines and monasteries from various nations are constructed around the birthplace of the Buddha. Many pilgrims from Southeast Asia, Japan, and Bhutan, along with a handful of westerners, come to Lumbini every year. However, despite the area's global attention and appeal, Lumbini is mostly characterized by widespread poverty, limited road access, and a lack of health services and education.

As is often the case in areas lacking infrastructure and education, girls and women suffer most. Local customs in Lumbini promote gender biases and discourage girls from attending school, which limits girls' and women's access to proper health and sanitation education, thus also limiting their potential to improve the health and education of their families and children. Girls in Lumbini are pressured into marrying at a very young age, as early as 10, further pushing them into a life of illiteracy, poverty, and teenage pregnancies. Lumbini has been identified by UNICEF as one of the most critical areas for child marriage and discrimination against women. It also has the **lowest average female literacy rate in Nepal: 18%**. The lack of education for girls and women perpetuates many of Lumbini's problems, such as severe malnutrition, lack of medical care, and high infant and mother mortality rates.

Further characteristics of girls' lives in Lumbini:

- **Girls commonly study only until 5th grade** and are discouraged from pursuing any further education, partly because parents will not allow girls to be around boys after reaching a certain age. This is why separate schools for girls are needed.
- **About 90% of girls in Lumbini are married before age 12.** The girls are married twice to the same husband: once at age 12, and again after a period of 3-5 years. Even though the girl stays with her parents after the first marriage, her life decisions are made by her husband's parents. This is another reason why married girls are discouraged from attending school, especially a co-ed school.
- Girls' education is also minimal in the smaller Muslim community, where gender biases and a dowry system make parents reluctant to take on the additional financial burden of educating their daughters.

RMF's Presence

One of RMF's priorities throughout our work is to improve the education and health of girls and women, especially those in marginalized, underserved communities. We know that when girls and women thrive, families and communities thrive too. Soon after the April 2015 earthquake, RMF began working with Global Karuna, a Nepali organization that focuses on educating Lumbini's underprivileged children. After initially working with Global Karuna in emergency relief efforts, RMF began supporting the organization's Karuna Girls'



School in Lumbini. The school provides education to girls and women, with a curriculum that emphasizes reading, writing, computer literacy, health, hygiene, nutrition, and family planning. 11th and 12th grade classes are taught in English. The school also provides vocational training for underprivileged girls and women and for disabled women. Karuna Girls' School is the only inclusive all-girls school in the region, where young girls of any religion and caste can meet and learn.

Karuna Girls' School currently has a total of **186 students** from various backgrounds. This has **increased from 150** students at the beginning of 2016. The student population reflects the larger Lumbini population, which is predominantly Hindu, but the school welcomes girls of all faiths. Currently, the student body includes:

- 176 Hindu (including 7 Dalit) students,
- 6 Muslim students, and
- 4 Buddhist students.

Students at Karuna Girls' School travel to the school daily from villages located as far as 15 km away. The school offers girls a chance to continue their education from grades 6-12 (currently the school is authorized to offer all but 10th grade; it is seeking government approval to offer grade 10, and is transferring 10th grade students to other schools in the meantime), and provides vocational training to women and girls in subjects like computer literacy and tailoring.



Computer lab



Monthly school magazine

School activities include:

- Each Friday, students participate in extracurricular activities. During our Kathmandu team's most recent visit, a talent show was held, giving students a chance to showcase their talents in front of their peers.
- Music and dance classes are held after school hours. Other schools discourage girls from attending extracurricular activities, including music classes.
- Journalism classes are included in the school curriculum.
- Karuna Girls' School distributes a monthly student magazine where students' articles, drawings, and poems are published and circulated to neighboring schools.
- Menstrual health, hygiene, nutrition, and sanitation education is provided to the girls.
- Vocational training is provided, including subjects like tailoring and computer literacy.
- A bus service is provided for students as much as possible.



Friday extracurricular program



6th grade class

Success Stories

1. **Pushpanjali Yadav** is a 17-year-old girl in the 11th grade. She was married at age 15. Pushpanjali is from Bisunpura VDC, Ward-5, 11 km from Karuna Girls' School. Each morning, she walks 30 minutes to catch the school bus. She studied in a government school up to the 8th grade, where she experienced gender discrimination. Pushpanjali prefers Karuna Girls' School because it allows her more freedom. She would like to be an English teacher. Pushpanjali also attends music class and plays musical instruments.
2. **Aphana Khatoon** is a 15-year-old girl in the 6th grade. She rides her bicycle to school each day; it is a 30-minute ride from her home to Karuna Girls' School. Aphana's family is Muslim. Her father discourages her from pursuing further studies, partly because of financial difficulties, but Aphana's mother insists on her daughter attending school and has said that if necessary, she will sell her jewelry to support Aphana's education. Aphana joined Karuna Girls' School because she was not allowed to attend a co-ed school anymore. She also experienced religious discrimination at her previous school. Aphana wants to become a doctor and provide free health care to the community. She is interested in taking music classes after school, but is not able to attend due to the distance from her home.
3. **Maya Yadav** is a 14-year-old girl in the 9th grade. She rides her bicycle to school each day; it is a 1-hour ride from her home to Karuna Girls' School. Maya comes from a family of 5, where resources are scarce. She was not in school for 1 year because her parents would not allow her to attend a co-ed school anymore. Maya wants to be a Nepali teacher. She is interested in taking music classes, but her family does not allow this.



Pushpanjali Yadav



Aphana Khatoon



Maya Yadav

4. **Uma Bhandari** is a 14-year-old girl in the 6th grade. She walks 10 minutes to Karuna Girls' School each day. Uma's parents work for the Lumbini Development Trust, helping with construction in monasteries. Uma has 4 siblings, and the family is poor. She receives a full scholarship to attend Karuna Girls' School. Uma is not able to participate in extracurricular activities because she has to help with household duties at home.



Uma Bhandari

Next Steps

New school building

The student population of Karuna Girls' School increased from **150** students in early 2016 to **186** students by the summer of 2016, and student numbers are expected to continue climbing as the school expands its programs, the community sees the value of educating girls, and the school gains approval to offer 10th grade classes (currently the school is authorized to offer grades 6-12, except for grade 10). The school's long-term goal, which RMF fully supports, is to serve a student population of 500 girls.



Proposed site for the RMF-funded school building



Another view of the proposed RMF building site

In keeping with our promise to construct an additional building for Karuna Girls' School, **RMF sent a group of engineers and surveyors to Lumbini in June 2016** to take necessary measurements and collect relevant data for construction. The engineers also prepared a model and 2D design of the proposed building. At the request of school administration and students, the building's plans are being modified to include toilets on the ground floor. RMF Nepal's team is currently working with relevant government authorities to obtain approval for construction of the school building. We hope to receive government approval by November 2016, and plan to begin construction as soon as this is obtained. The building will be used for additional classrooms, the

library, school administration, and additional toilets. Karuna Girls' School has committed to provide land for the building. Through our support of Karuna Girls' School, RMF helps girls and women begin to thrive in the Lumbini community by offering a safe environment where they can meet and learn about reading, writing, computer literacy, basic health and hygiene, family planning, nutrition, and more.

Nursing and midwifery

In addition to building capacity at Karuna Girls' School by providing a new school building, RMF also plans to partner with Karuna Girls' School to develop a nursing and midwifery training school in the Lumbini region.