

By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.

World

Servant to schoolgirl

NOVEMBER 27, 2009 by: **David Pilling**

It was during the 1999 Maghi festival, whose revelries grip western Nepal in mid-January each year, that Asha Tharu's parents sold her. Asha, who was then five years old, fetched \$40. In return for the money, Asha was sent to work for a year as a bonded labourer at the house of her new owner in Gularia, a town near her village of Khairapur.

"I had to get up very early and I had to clean the pots, clean the rooms and wash the clothes," recalls Asha, now a bright 15-year-old. "I worked all day and I didn't get enough sleep."

I have come along jolting, unmade roads from Nepalgunj in western Nepal to meet Asha at her sister-in-law's hut, a rather beautiful dwelling of unbaked mustard-yellow bricks, more African in appearance than Asian. In the main living area are two large, exquisitely fashioned mud urns built into the walls for storing rice. In the unfurnished room where the family sleeps, Asha sits on the dirt floor and tells me about her new life. She says she is happy in school and that, on the weekends, she works in a brick factory, earning \$1.30 for an eight-hour shift. That is enough to buy rice and to help her elder sister pay for school.

More than anything, Asha remembers the petty slights she endured during her eight years of servitude, which ended last year when her "master" agreed to release her. "They would give me scraps. I used to feel very hurt by that, receiving the left-overs of guests or the elder family," she says, glancing occasionally at the dusty ground outside the mud hut where she now lives. "Sometimes I'd get rotten food, or half-stomach food, not enough to stop my hunger," she says. "They would hit me or shout at me if I dared complain."

Until she was freed, Asha, an extraordinary young woman with beatific self-composure and a dazzling smile, was a so-called Kamlari girl. The Kamlari system, an extension of a wider caste-based practice of adult bonded labour, is a form of indentured servitude that persists even today on the flat plains of western Nepal, a world away from the beauty of the mountain peaks that draw tourists to this Himalayan republic.

"Bonded labourers work as housemaids or on farms," says Reema Shrestha of [Room to Read \(http://www.roomtoread.org/Page.aspx?pid=183\)](http://www.roomtoread.org/Page.aspx?pid=183), the educational charity that, as part of its work in several poor countries, helps Nepal's former Kamlari girls return to

school. Room to Read, which the Financial Times is supporting in this year's [seasonal appeal \(http://www.ft.com/indepth/seasonal-appeal\)](http://www.ft.com/indepth/seasonal-appeal), provides counselling and extra tuition designed to help the girls slot back into the educational system from which they have been excluded. It then supports them to ensure they don't fall behind or, worse, slip back into the world of indentured labour. Those unfortunate enough to remain Kamlari are virtually assured a life of illiteracy and poverty. "Sometimes they are trafficked across the border into India and into the sex industry," says Shrestha, who runs Room to Read's education programme for girls in Nepal.

The Kamlari system is, theoretically, illegal but every year, during the Maghi revelries, parents continue to strike contracts to place their daughters in servitude for an annual fee of as little as \$30. Most families don't see their child again until the following Maghi festival when contracts are renewed or renegotiated.

Many parents have little choice since the owners of the fields where they live and work as sharecroppers threaten to turf them off the land, and into certain penury, if they do not comply.

"Some send their daughters because it is tradition," says Shrestha. "They don't think of it as a shameful thing." If they are struggling to keep children fed at home, parents fool themselves into believing that a more prosperous master will give their daughters better food and, perhaps, even send them to school. It almost never works out that way.

While Asha was in servitude she went to school sporadically, if at all. Some of her masters kept her locked up. Others made her sleep outside. Occasionally she was enrolled in school but was rarely able to attend. "There wasn't enough time to study because of all the housework," she says. As much as the lack of tutoring, she regrets her lost childhood. "When I went to be a Kamlari, I didn't get any time to play. I had only work. My master's children went to school, but I had no one to play with."

Now she does. Asha is attending classes thanks to a scholarship provided by Room to Read, which also builds schools and libraries. The scholarship pays for Asha's school fees, textbooks, writing materials and her blue school uniform. Room to Read has so far helped some 800 of the estimated 20,000 Kamlari girls still forced to work in this part of Nepal. The charity runs specially created three- to nine-month catch-up courses to get the girls, many of whom have missed years of schooling, up to a minimum level. Asha is now studying in year seven, where most of the girls are 13, two years younger than her. But she is already excelling. With a flashing smile, and the assured style with which she relates both the tragedies and triumphs of her life, she says simply: "I find maths very easy. I am always the first to solve the problem."

John Wood, 45, the founder of Room to Read, was a senior Microsoft director until he quit 10 years ago to start the charity. He says it is “ridiculously inexpensive” to place a girl such as Asha in school, an average of about \$250 a year. When I catch up with him in Nepal, he has just been inspecting schools and libraries that his organisation built in the foothills of the Annapurna mountain range.

Tanned, unshaven and wearing khaki shorts – he forgot the FT was bringing a cameraman – he is clearly exhilarated by the progress he has seen since he established Room to Read.

It was during a break from his relentless work schedule at Microsoft, when he was in charge of business development for greater China, that Wood first went trekking in Nepal. He was struck by the lack of educational opportunities: libraries without books and classrooms without teachers. What began as his fantasy of bringing books by yak to an individual school – he ended up hauling them up the mountain by donkey – took on a life of its own. Before he knew it, he had left Microsoft to begin a professional charity.

He built Room to Read to last. It would only construct schools or libraries if local communities were on board, a commitment it measured by a willingness to “co-invest” in projects, either in cash, labour or building materials. Even the impoverished parents of Kamlari girls, sharecroppers and subsistence farmers all, are encouraged to find money to pay for the hair ribbons worn by girls to school. “If you simply give stuff away, it is not valued. Nobody ever washes a rental car,” he says, quoting Michael Porter of Harvard Business School.

Room to Read’s model has allowed the charity to grow exponentially. In Nepal, for example, it has already brought rudimentary libraries to one in 10 schools, and it is on its way to achieving the same in Laos, another of the impoverished countries it supports. In the past 10 years, says Wood, who puts a running tally of projects at the foot of every e-mail he sends, Room to Read has built more than 750 schools, established 7,000 libraries containing 5m books, and funded nearly 7,000 long-term scholarships for girls.

From its single-country origins – the charity was originally called Books for Nepal – it has expanded to eight other locations, including Cambodia, where schools, teachers and libraries were systematically destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, as well as Vietnam, Laos, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Zambia and South Africa.

I had travelled to western Nepal from Kathmandu on a small prop plane operated by Yeti Airlines. From Nepalgunj, a town clogged with rubbish and lined with fetid open sewers, we lurched along heavily potholed roads, avoiding lumbering buffalo carts and three-wheeled rickshaws crammed with children on their way to school. After a couple of hours, I visited

Man Bahadur Chhetri, whose Friends of Needy Children organisation shares tiny offices with Room to Read in Gulariya.

As well as poverty and a lack of land title, which obliges people to work as vulnerable sharecroppers, Chhetri attributes the Kamlari practice to a culture that undervalues women. Of the bidding process during the Maghi festival, Chhetri says: “Everywhere, we saw landlords and middlemen convincing parents to sell their daughters. It was like an auction for animals.”

Chhetri’s organisation has championed Kamlari girls, gaining the release of around 6,000. To persuade sometimes reluctant parents to take their daughters back, his organisation offers them a goat or a piglet, which they can later sell. The animals are used instead of cash so the fathers can’t spend the money on alcohol, he points out ruefully.

“After we have rescued them, we hand them into the care of Room to Read,” he says. “Most of the girls are happy to go to school. They feel free.”

The Kamlari system is so ingrained that it is not easy for an organisation such as Room to Read to have any influence. Yet, by educating girls, Wood says he hopes to break the cycle, one child at a time. “Our goal is to help parents and communities recognise the long-term pay-off to educating their daughters instead of focusing on the short-term monetary benefits of selling them into bonded labour,” he told me.

At nightfall, I am still talking to Asha as she prepares the food for her sister-in-law, who has been working in the fields, and her nephew and nieces. Now dressed in a pink salwar kurta with red trousers, she is bent over an open wood fire cooking a local type of gourd. The rice is already prepared. Later, she will study – for several hours, she says – by the light of a naked bulb.

It is time to take my leave of this remarkable teenager. On my way out I notice a goat tethered in the corner of the room. It is only later that it occurs to me to check where the goat came from. Sure enough, it had been an inducement to Asha’s family to take her back. Properly reared, it will one day be worth at least \$60. Asha, you’ll recall, was sold for \$40.

[David Pilling \(http://www.ft.com/comment/columnists/davidpilling\)](http://www.ft.com/comment/columnists/davidpilling) is the FT’s Asia editor

To make a donation go to the [Room to Read special page \(http://www.ft.com/indepth/seasonal-appeal\)](http://www.ft.com/indepth/seasonal-appeal)

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others. © The Financial Times Ltd.

Special Report: **Arab World: Banking & Finance**

Lebanese camps for Syrians witness the rise of the connected refugee

They are benefiting from cutting-edge apps

Special Report: **Innovative Lawyers**

Lawyers are finally converts to technology

Firms are reaching a tipping point on digital as fear of the drive for efficiency recedes

Comments have not been enabled for this article.