

## A Book's Impact on a Rural Village in Nepal

By Carol Lauritzen

Books can have a powerful influence, but can a compelling book increase school attendance and combat gender discrimination? My recent experience in Nepal suggests this might be the case. I visited schools in the Gorkha District of Nepal with a team representing the Gorkha Foundation, “a nonprofit, grassroots organization whose purpose is to support initiatives that reduce poverty and inequality by making sustainable improvements to the living conditions of the poor and marginalized in the Gorkha region of Nepal”

The Gorkha Foundation is active in rebuilding schools in the Gorkha District, the epicenter of the 2015 earthquake. These new schools are well-constructed to withstand tremors, though the classrooms are simple, consisting of four bare walls and furnished with bench-style desks. Near the end of a visit to one school, I observed a huddle of nine-year-old boys that attracted my attention and came across a similar cluster of boys in another classroom. There were about ten boys in each group and their attention was focused on something hidden in the center of the group. My curiosity got the best of me, and I had to stop to investigate. What was so captivating to these boys that they ignored the foreign visitors in the courtyard? What I found in the middle of each cluster was a teacher reading from a book we had given to her earlier, *Ravika: It Happens at this Age* (unknown author, undated).

This comic-style booklet tells the story of a young girl going through puberty. Puberty and menstruation are rarely mentioned publicly in Nepal, and yet in this small rural school, teachers bravely presented this information to boys. Menstruation is one of the many barriers to girls' education. In Nepal, menstruation is not openly discussed and many people are uncomfortable or embarrassed with any mention. Even though it is illegal in Nepal to deny girls an education because of menstruation, in some areas menstruating women and girls are banished to isolation sheds or rooms. Sanitary pads are not readily available outside urban areas. Women in rural and low-income areas of Nepal don't have access to feminine hygiene products and, even if they did, the used products would cause pollution since there is no method of disposing of them. Local customs, coupled with a lack of sanitary pads and (often) inadequate school bathrooms, cause girls to skip school at that time of the month. It is estimated that girls miss as much as 50 days of school each year due to their periods. The net attendance ratio for girls in secondary schools is 66% —much lower than boys' 74.2% attendance (UNICEF, 2013). Since girls who are missing schools hesitate to openly admit that menstruation is one of the reasons for skipping school, the actual absenteeism due to menstruation is not easy to determine.

Our group had purchased feminine hygiene kits through two sources: Mountain People and a local women's cooperative. A kit typically consists of a carry bag (often made from silk sari fabric) containing two waterproof pad holders, soft washable pads, underpants, and a waterproof purse to carry the pads. At the beginning of our

school visit, we met with the teachers and principal to ask if they would support the distribution of the kits to their adolescent female students. The four female teachers were willing to sit with us as we explained, through our leader's fluent translation, the purpose of our offering. At first the teachers were hesitant, reflecting the overall reticence about the subject of menstruation. They confessed that they had little knowledge of the causes of absenteeism and said that the girls never gave explanations as to why they were gone. However, after more information was shared, the teachers agreed to help us present the kits to the girls with no males present. That meant my friend and I, lacking a shared language with the girls, had to depend on the teachers to give accurate and supportive information. We held up each part of the kit and demonstrated how to use the contents and how to wear the products. These demonstrations brought shy laughter. However, the girls were positive about receiving the kits and gave us many smiles and words of thanks. Then we gave each of the teachers a copy of *Ravika: It Happens at This Age*.

*Ravika: It Happens at This Age* is the only story book available in Nepalese that addresses the topics of sexual development and menstruation. The man who directs Mountain People and who had introduced us to the sanitary kits had provided the books to give to the teachers. We have since learned the book is currently out of print and a new book is in the early stages of preparation. I offered to edit the English version of this book, but it is just in initial stages. I asked both Mountain People and our group leader about the author and publisher and learned no additional information about the book. This is indicative of the issues that arise in Nepal in regard to access to education and information.

The book, it seemed, was the most significant aspect of our offering. At the end of our visit, one of the teachers said that the book gave her the vehicle she needed to talk about menstruation. "Now we have a way to discuss it openly," she said, "and even if the boys don't totally understand, they have been exposed to the topic." On their own initiative, the teachers decided to begin that conversation with the boys the very day they agreed to give the kits to the girls. The book, they thought, could be a wedge used to open the door and engage in a conversation that could have a great impact on the lives of girls in Nepal. The book, we realized, had the potential to overcome old taboos, bring freedom from oppressive practices, instill pride in being a girl, and, in this particular case, help girls attend school.

Neither the short-term nor long-term effects of *Ravika: It Happens at This Age* are known for these boys in this village, just as the impact of providing the kits to the girls is unknown. We provided assistance with the hope and belief that it will make a difference and the teachers' actions in sharing the book supported these hopes and beliefs. Government regulations may lead to some change of women being accepted during their menstrual cycles. But, it is the use of powerful stories that can change hearts and minds. Recent research has shown that the sharing of stories can change our thoughts. Empathetic story response can lead people to behave differently in their lives (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, 2011; Stephens, Silber & Hasson, 2010). These research studies support the WOW community as proponents of using global

literature to build intercultural understanding or, as in this case, to engender understanding within a specific culture. My work in Nepal reinforced for me the potential of a book to transform students and adults.

### References

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