

## October 2022 Newsletter

### Rotary's Empowering Girls Initiative

Rotary's Empowering Girls initiative is a significant contribution to creating positive change for families, communities and even entire economies around the world. Girls face significant challenges to achieving an education – including child marriage, teen pregnancy, gender violence, and lack of access to health and hygiene. Empowering girls by supporting projects that enhance their health, education, safety, well-being and economic opportunities enables girls to become empowered women with a voice, a choice and the ability to create positive change.

Here are a few examples: In partnership with healthcare, supermarket association and chamber of commerce, Rotary clubs in Trinidad and Tobago are supporting the Crown Her initiative, aimed at creating awareness and education about period poverty and providing feminine hygiene products for every girl and woman in the country.

In South Africa, Rotary and Rotaract members, led by Empowering Girls Ambassador Emily O’Ryan, are creating the first community-based gender violence awareness curriculum for young people.

Thirty-one districts in the central United States all contributed to a global grant to build gender-specific toilet facilities in 30 elementary schools in rural northern India, enabling several thousand girls to stay in school.

There is no shortage of need, and the impact of even simple projects can be significant when the power of Rotary is focused on empowering girls.

**Elizabeth Usovicz**  
*RI Director, 2021-23*

**Rotary's Empowering Girls initiative** is focused on club-level activities through which Rotary clubs can create positive change in the lives of girls. The initiative challenges clubs to:

- Engage in activities of their choice that empower girls.
- Address the needs and inequities that girls throughout the world face on a daily basis.
- In addition to implementing activities, monitor and measure the impact..
- Disseminate and create awareness of Rotary resources and subject matter experts
- Tell the stories of successful activities and their impact to the general public, using a variety of media channels.
- Share stories of success and their impact across their region Post them on Rotary Showcase, as well as on social media channels.

[Empowering Girls Overview](#)

[Empowering Girls Brochure](#)



#### The global gender gap

- In 2021, the Global Gender Gap Index benchmarked 156 countries.
- Iceland is the most gender-equal country in the world.
- The five most improved countries since 2020 in the overall index are: Togo, United Arab Emirates, Lithuania, Timor-Leste, Serbia
- Three new countries have been assessed this year for the first time: Afghanistan (which ranks 156th), Guyana (53rd), Niger (138th)

It will take 121.7 years to close the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa. More than half of the countries in the region (20 of 35) made progress in the past years, though only Namibia and Rwanda have closed at least 80 % of that gap.

In education, 37 countries have reached gender parity; however, it will still take another 14.2 years to close this gap completely.

## The Literacy Mission of Rotary: Why Empower Girls?

If I were to ask you to identify one component that's pivotal to all seven areas of focus emphasized by Rotary International (R.I.) in its commitment to humanitarian causes, it would have to be the power of its female volunteers. Amongst the 1.4 million Rotarians around the world, around 23% of them (277,000) are women. Ever since 1989, when women were first enrolled in Rotary, women have been instrumental in giving a level of kinetic energy and a quantum of strength to the projects of Rotary in the most remote areas of the world. The attributes of kindness, courage, and nurturance have helped define the resilience with which the female volunteers of Rotary, Rotaract, Interact, and Inner Wheel club members have solved the challenges arising from gender disparities.

Even though tremendous progress has been made in the new millennia in women's access to healthcare, education, clean water, and economic empowerment through organizations like R.I, some of the inequities still act as a nexus for women's disempowerment in underserved communities around the world. Without a doubt, education can play a key role in empowering girls and helping to solve the problems faced by them. As per [UNICEF](#) 60 million girls worldwide have no access to basic education. Of the 960 million people who are illiterate worldwide, two-thirds are women. Globally, 1 in 4 girls (age 15-19) are neither employed nor in school, compared with 1 in 10 boys. A recent [World Economic Forum](#) report shows that women continue to face economic impediments, unequal wages, challenging workplace conditions, and a discriminatory denial of participation in meaningful political roles.



I feel hopeful that sure footed progress will take place in the empowerment of women through education in this decade. In a historic decision, for the first time ever, R.I. has elected a dynamic woman and a pioneering leader like Jennifer Jones to be the President for the year 2022-23. In an equally path breaking way, Immediate Past R.I. President Shekhar Mehta embraced the empowerment of girls as his primary agenda, "I encourage clubs to think of innovative ways to empower girls when designing their grant projects. Every step we take to improve education, health care, and economic opportunities for girls makes an important difference in helping them achieve their full potential." [Rotary Magazine](#) As a dad living in India where glaring gender disparities do exist in the most remote and rural areas, President Mehta's passion for the "Leave no Girl Behind" mission is passionately comprehensible to this Rotarian from India who first started her career as an educator with a feminist vision in a Government Girls' college in a small town in India.



Some of the happiest moments of my life ensued from the realization that all my students superseded my expectations when they went on to be educators in India and abroad, earned scholarships to go abroad for research, became financially independent, and played myriad roles as devoted daughters, loving sisters, and nurturing mothers in life. There is one thing common to all of them. They keep passing on the torch of awareness for education and literacy as the tool for empowerment of girls and women. Amen.

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## Guatemala Literacy Project's RISE: Making a Difference for Girls' Education in Guatemala

Carmen is proof that the Guatemala Literacy Project's (GLP) Rise Youth Development Program serves some remarkable young women. Through a combination of academic support, soft skills development, and personal development opportunities, Rise helps these young women develop the skills to overcome all manner of challenges.

Carmen wasn't about to give up on her dream of becoming an elementary school teacher. From the time she was a young child, she always admired her teachers, and wanted to be just like them. However, her parents never had the financial resources to pay her school fees or buy school supplies. But Carmen was determined. She was such a strong student and leader among her classmates that her friends banded together to collect donations to keep her in school. This managed to get her through middle school, but when it came time to enroll in high school, her only option was a scholarship through GLP's Rise Youth Development Program.



For Carmen, 2020 represented a double challenge. In the last year of her high-school teaching degree, she was faced with continuing her own studies virtually, while also having to complete her own teaching practicum without face-to-face interaction with her students. "With respect to my studies, we have gone virtual in all the schools," Carmen wrote to her sponsors. "It is something new for me to live this experience as it was also difficult for me to adapt to that. However, I have tried twice as hard to achieve my goals."

Rise provided much more than just tuition support. Carmen also benefited from a one-on-one relationship with her local facilitator, Any. Even before the pandemic, Any kept track of Carmen's progress in school and touched base with her regularly to ask about any other challenges she may be facing.

Rise also gave Carmen the opportunity to complete a youth development curriculum that gives girls the knowledge and confidence to advocate for their rights throughout their lives, covering topics such as job preparation, life skills, social/emotional learning (self-esteem, goal-setting, etc.), and gender equality.

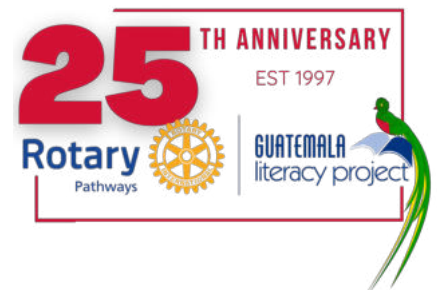
Thanks to the skills she's gained through Rise, Carmen was more than ready to take on the challenges of a global pandemic, even when that meant she had to record videos of herself giving lessons for the students she was teaching in her capstone practicum. Rather than see a global pandemic as an insurmountable challenge to her education, Carmen said, "It is a beautiful experience and it helps me to develop as a future teacher, motivating students through this virtual model that forces us to cope with the times we are living."

Thanks to Rise and the generous supporters and sponsors who make the program possible, Carmen beat the odds and graduated high school with her teaching degree in 2020.

**Guatemala Literacy Project (GLP)**

[www.GuatemalaLiteracy.org](http://www.GuatemalaLiteracy.org)

[info@GuatemalaLiteracy.org](mailto:info@GuatemalaLiteracy.org)





A disheartening 90% of students in rural Guatemala who are living in poverty never graduate from high school. This continues the cycle of illiteracy and limited opportunities.

USAID reports that it takes at least 12 years of education for an indigenous Guatemalan to permanently rise out of poverty. Research shows that scholarships play an important role in expanding access to education - especially for girls - to improve conditions of developing countries.

The key to breaking the cycle of poverty and the future of rural Guatemala is directly linked to providing better education.

**Rise Youth Development Program** has nearly two decades of experience challenging traditional views about girls' education. The goal of the **Thousand Girls Initiative**, is to reach 1,000 girls in rural communities across Guatemala to create a growing middle class among indigenous families and ensure that future generations do not repeat the cycle of poverty.

We believe that all children born into the cycle of poverty deserve the opportunity to rise above their current circumstances. In Guatemala, girls are not traditionally supported in their desire to go to school. Often, when parents have to decide which child to educate on their meager earnings, they prioritize the boy, and the girl is left behind.

In the regions GLP serves, there is nearly 1.5 boys in school for every girl. In Guatemala, 80% of men are literate, compared to 58% of women. The Thousand Girls Initiative includes 250 boys! We find, when girls and boys learn together, they learn from each other.

The education and leadership skills that students gain through Rise will benefit them for the rest of their lives. Statistically, high-school graduates will earn enough for to live out of poverty their entire lives. Women who complete more schooling are more likely to keep their own children in school longer, permanently raising the education level in their community.



*Wondrous – inspiring a feeling of wonder or delight; marvelous.*

*Learning – the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience, study, or by being taught.*

### What does Wondrous Learning mean to you??

The theme of this year's Symposium, **Wondrous Learning is ...!** will attract and re-energize a global community of change makers who are advancing aspects of tech or non-tech infused learning that have left positive indelible moments in learners' educational journeys.



The Symposium is being organized by the mEducation Alliance, a **consortium** of the world's largest development and donor agencies focused on education, particularly in low-resource context. Our annual Symposium typically attracts a dynamic line-up of policymakers, activists, thinkers, and implementers in global education who come together to share their best and brightest tech and non-tech interventions.

Featured sessions include: **Wondrous Learning is Empowered Girls** and a special session in collaboration with Save the Children to feature

**Engaging Others through Volunteers**, emphasizing Rotary's commitment to supporting education and literacy throughout the world.

[Register](#) to attend the [2022 Symposium](#) (Nov 1-4 in Washington DC - some events presented virtually)

## An Educator Who Met Lakshmi: Why Empower Girls?

As a caretaker and breadwinner in my parents' family, I was not immune to the pressure for getting married and maybe even quit my job to "settle down" in matrimony. What gave me the courage to transcend normative pressure in a conventional society was total support from my parents' families and the sense of empowerment that came from within the wellsprings of my role as an educator. In the course of imparting the vision of empowerment and financial independence to my female students, I felt liberated, self-assured, and energized. When I first joined Rotary in India in 1995, I felt fortunate in having opportunities to serve the rural communities in health, literacy, special education, and polio vaccination camps. My best friend Moon Moon shared with me the oppression faced by girls in one of the villages in rural India, where she taught English in a Government school. Behind Moon Moon's beautiful brown eyes glistening with tears, I could see the agony of her disenchantment with the power that patriarchy gave to the men in the household to decide whether the girls in the family could go to school or not. Sadly enough, I also got to witness first hand the gender disparities and inequities that existed in some underprivileged communities in my capacity as a Rotarian.



There was an image that inhabited my mind and my scholarly presentations, then. It was the image of a young girl not yet in her teens that happily walked several kilometers to fetch potable water and firewood for her mother's kitchen. I met Lakshmi on her way back from the well in a village where my club was doing a project. That beaming pearly smile, that tangled matted hair, and that sun-touched brown skin left an indelible impression on my mind, but what never ever left my brain was the quiet strength with which this girl child did her duty diligently to help her mother in the kitchen and her father on the farm. To cite from my memoir, "Dancing Daffodils," published on Amazon:

"The girl child in rural Rajasthan, who gathered firewood for her mother's earthen oven and quit her education so that her brothers could go to school, ignited my compassion. Very early on, she fired my imagination as she morphed into a warrior figure, symbolizing resilience and stoic sacrifice as the subject of my pathos and my admiration"

I did not think of this girl child to be a helpless figure. Rather, in her immense potential, Lakshmi represented a level of tenacity and synergy that she shared with her namesake, the epic figure of Durga, a Hindu Goddess who symbolizes the seamless power of womanhood. While nurturing a fantasy that this girl child could go to school and get educated enough to earn a living rather than being forced into early matrimony, my imagination came to a standstill right there. In rural India, mostly boys were given preference over girls to go to school and college with the view to find jobs that were deemed more meaningful and more productive. The sporadic off-shoots of patriarchy, sexism, and gender discrimination found manifestation in female feticide, malnutrition, stigma attached to menstruation, child marriage, and domestic violence against girls. Per [Rotary International](#), all of these socio-economic aberrations still exist around the world.

**Dr. Anu C. Narula, Ph.D.**

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**Get involved with BELRAG's outreach and impact.** Opportunities to become involved include:

- **Newsletter:** identify great Rotary stories of impactful projects - local or international. An editor is needed to do design and layout
- **Website:** oversee our website so that it is current. No tech expertise is needed (we have a great webmaster to post the information) - help review the site, share new information.
- **Social media:** help develop and support BELRAG social media - share our good work!
- **Technical expertise:** join a topic-focused team to provide technical advice to project developers and share stories of best practice. Collaborate on topics such as early literacy/education, education technology, students with disabilities, adult literacy, mentoring youth, girls education, library support or development, professional development for teachers.

To get involved, contact Carolyn Johnson [cfj2@icloud.com](mailto:cfj2@icloud.com)

## The Initiative of School Supply Donations for Disadvantaged Muslim Girls

As part of the activities of AMIBE (*Association Musulmanes Intellectuelles Battantes Entreprenantes*), we encourage the education of GIRLS in general and Muslim girls in particular by giving them the same opportunities as boys. For religious and cultural reasons, many parents put girls in the background by depriving them of some of their fundamental rights and when poverty is added to it, the choice is quickly made to sacrifice the education of these girls.

### ENCOURAGING GIRLS' EDUCATION

In collaboration with the leaders of the Franco-Arabica primary school located in Akpakpa in Cotonou, we targeted girls whose parents have financial difficulties to prevent them from dropping out from school. For this we asked the Imam of the mosque nearby to help us in this process of identifying parents meeting the required profile.

A collection of school supplies was launched a few weeks earlier and thanks to what we were able to obtain from people of good will we were able to carry out this action on Friday, October 9, 2020 on the terraces of the mosque in the presence of the Imam, a teacher representing the director of the school and some parents.

- We proceeded to distribute the kits to about twenty girls. The kits were made of bags, textbooks, notebooks and various school supplies that could allow the beneficiaries to attend school without interruption and learn.
- We asked the Imam to sensitize his community on the importance of educating girls and especially to make them understand that this is not forbidden in the Muslim religion. With this advocacy, we hope to impact more people for a change of mentality.

**Rabiath Maliki**

*Rotary Club of Cotonou Cocotiers, (Benin), Past President*

*Assistant Governor, D9102*



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### What's Next?

**November** - learn about the wonderful projects selected to receive funding through the BELRAG Literacy Awards and the **BELRAG/Save the Children** Early Learning Community Projects

**December** - **Education Supporting Children with Disabilities**: Rotarians providing access to education for students with disabilities will be featured.

**February and March** - **Science, Technology Engineering & Mathematics (STEM)**: How do Rotarians encourage and support an interest in STEM? We will discuss quality programs from developing basic numeracy skills to encouraging girls' interest in STEM to ensuring teachers are well trained in teaching maths and sciences and using technology to enhance learning. A broad topic that will STEM two newsletters!

**April** - **Early Childhood Education**: an investment in quality early learning - the physical, cognitive, linguistic and socio-emotional development of children from birth to early primary school - is shown to have a profound impact on brain development. In April, BELRAG will share how Rotarians are involved in initiatives that support parents and communities and clubs support quality early learning programs.

If your club or district is involved in projects involving these themes, **share your story with us**. Articles should be 500 - 750 words. Include 2-3 photos - especially those showing Rotary As People of Action (be sure that you have permission for photos to be published!) Submit your article to [carolyn@litrag.org](mailto:carolyn@litrag.org)



## A Call for Action to Promote Literacy: Why Empower Girls?

As an educator who never really retired from the cause of education, I implore each one of you to visualize and plan a local or global project that can play a role in improving girls' quality of life with the power and financial independence that comes from education. "Educated women are more likely to have greater decision-making power...By helping girls access quality education, we ensure economic independence, food insecurity, resilience, environmental sustainability, and a better world for all," affirms Annemarie Mostert, a member of the Rotary Foundation Cadre of Technical Advisers, in the August 2021 issue of the *Rotary Africa-South* magazine. Let's explore the ways in which girls can have access to basic literacy and advanced education, healthcare, hygienic conditions in schools, clean water, toilets, and sanitary products. Rotary clubs and districts can play an inspirational role in empowering women by creating a culture where women can transition into leadership roles. Please consider becoming a member of Basic Education and Literacy Rotary Action Group (BELRAG) to get acquainted with the projects on literacy and education that are being done by R.I.

As one of the District 6910 Advocates for the Empower Girls Now Presidential Initiative, it's my honor and my privilege to share with you the links to three Empower Girls Now projects that are being done in Zone 33/34. All of these amazing initiatives will motivate and inspire you to "imagine" (as R.I. President Jennifer Jones would say!) the ways in which we can envision and "implement" collaborative projects that can "impact" the lives of our women and children in underserved communities around the world.

[Crown Her \(Trinidad and Tobago\)](#) is a Multi-Non-Governmental Organization initiative spearheaded by The Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago and founded by Dr. Nadira Rambocas, with partners including the The Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association, The Greater Tunapuna Chamber of Industry and Commerce, as well as, the Rotary Clubs of Piarco, Sangre Grande, St. Augustine and St. Augustine West.



[The Rotary Action Group Against Slavery](#) is committed to connect, empower and equip Rotarians to engage their communities to eradicate all forms of Modern Slavery/Human Trafficking locally and around the globe.

[The Rotary Club of Meriwether County](#) plays a prominent role within the Wrap Around Care Centers located within local primary, middle and high schools. Rotary members volunteer their services by:

[The Rotary Club of Meriwether County](#) plays a prominent role within the Wrap Around Care Centers located within local primary, middle and high schools. Rotary members volunteer their services by:

- Crafting individual "It's a Girl Thing" bags. (Building a weekly supply of feminine products in a unique bag).
- Creating Personal Care bags for students (Washrag, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and shampoo in a bag).
- Organizing clothes items within storage bins at each school.
- Arranging, coordinating, and distributing the food items within the Food Pantry.
- Arranging, coordinating and distributing school supplies.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to contribute a montage of stories for the BELRAG newsletter on a subject that's very close to my heart. This article is dedicated to all my friends from India who are educators, as well as all my students who are educators now. This call for action will hopefully strengthen the need to use literacy and education as the single most powerful tool that R.I. can use to empower all our girls and women across the most underprivileged and underserved areas of the world.

As Rotarians, community leaders, visionaries, volunteers, warriors, and unsung heroes of the Empower Girls Now Initiative, as we get ready to celebrate the International Educate the Girl Child Day on October 12 this year, let's keep in mind the view of Elizabeth Usovicz, the chair of the R.I. Empowering Girls Taskforce, "Especially for girls, creating opportunities that enhance their education, safety, health, and well-being has the power to transform their futures – and also to transform their families and communities." Amen.

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