

LEARNING FOR LIFE

How a British charity is transforming children's lives on the Sub-continent

(You, 2001)

Felicity Hill, the director of Learning for Life, tells the story of an 11-year-old boy she met while working in a school in Pakistan. 'He was obviously very upset, and said that he'd had to drop out of school because his father had died: he was now the sole earner for the family, and he had five brothers and sisters to support. I thought he was just going to ask me for money, but he didn't: he said, "I want to make sure my brothers and sisters go to school, but I'm not sure that I can afford to pay for their fees and their uniforms and their books. Can you help me?"'

It is hard to imagine many British children taking this attitude: we grow up viewing education as at best a right and at worst an imposition. But in the poorest regions of south Asia, going to school is a privilege which can transform a family's fortunes, and even the younger members are aware of the fact. Sophia Swire, the co-founder of Learning for Life, remembers her astonishment when she started teaching in the Chitral region of the Hindu Kush: 'My experience of schoolchildren was that they would wish to do the least possible work and be as naughty as possible. But these children were like hungry young birds – they would beg me for homework. They were so needy, and also they understood that it would give them the independence to go forward.'

It is this independence that Learning for Life aims to foster in pupils and schools alike. It exists to help those who would otherwise have no kind of education – because they live in remote areas, or because they

have the misfortune to be female, or (most pressingly, given the present turmoil in the region) because they are refugees. In the eight years since it was founded, it has provided schooling for over 30,000 children in Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Tibet – despite the fact that it has only one full-time administrator, based in a freezing belfry in Notting Hill.

Learning for Life was created by Sophia Swire and Charlotte Bannister-Parker – two unusually determined young women, then in their twenties, who arrived by quite separate routes at the same idea. Both come from impeccably Establishment backgrounds, and a hundred years ago would probably have been glamorous memsahibs causing a stir in the hill stations of the Raj. Charlotte is the daughter of Sir Roger Bannister, the legendary athlete; Sophia's father is a former director of Sotheby's, while her brother Hugo is a Tory MP.

Sophia's first experience of teaching in the Third World was the unexpected result of a visit to Pakistan. She had been working as a stockbroker for Kleinwort Benson, but soon became bored, and in 1988 decided to take three weeks off and head for the North West Frontier. Reaching Chitral, she immediately felt that this was her spiritual home.

'The night I arrived,' she remembers, 'I was approached by the local deputy commissioner, who asked me to consider helping set up a school. I said, "Why me?" and he said, "There are no women here who have been educated beyond the age of 12. You've been to university – you have at least ten years' more education than they do".'

Sophia accepted the challenge. She went back to London, asked Montessori experts to help her devise a curriculum, recruited three other teachers – 'all typical Eighties Yuppies who had had enough' – and returned to Chitral laden with equipment and schoolbooks ('We had to Pentel out all the pictures of bottoms and kissing').

During her time at the school, Sophia began to formulate some of the ideas that were to become central to Learning for Life. She realised that any curriculum must be adapted to reflect local conditions (Afghani children, for example, are taught how to recognise landmines); that many diseases that the children suffered from could be avoided if they were taught basic hygiene; and that the way forward was to inspire her pupils to return as teachers.

She also saw how limited the prospects were for local girls. In Pakistan, 35 per cent of children have no schooling, and the great majority of those who do are boys (partly because their employment prospects are so much better). To show what a change in expectations can achieve, she points to two of her former pupils – sisters who had lost their family while fleeing from Afghanistan:

‘The younger was very pretty, with the attention span of a gnat; the older was much more serious, and passionate about learning. The younger went on to have an arranged marriage at 14, and immediately had three children; the older one has gone from being an illiterate 11-year-old, bursting into tears because she couldn’t read a Maths book, to become an undergraduate in Peshawar and an aspiring businesswoman.’

After a year, Sophia decided that she had done all she could at the school; but she continued to raise funds for it, and had just decided that she must put her work on a more formal footing when she was introduced to Charlotte Bannister-Parker.

Charlotte had followed a more orthodox path into the world of aid and development, studying politics and anthropology at Durham and then working for a number of charities, one of them in India. ‘I was recruited because my Indian counterpart – middle-class, educated – could not travel around the country on her own. That opened the whole issue of discrimination to me – it made me realise that no development is of any

value unless it affects the whole family. There's a Chinese dictum: if you educate a woman, you educate a family; if you educate a man, you educate an individual.'

Charlotte went on to make a study of women's life in rural Nepal. Many in the area where she was based were being lured into prostitution, and it was clear to her that this would continue unless they could be provided with education and alternative employment. Back in London, she told her friend Nicholas Mellor – one of the founders of the medical charity MERLIN – that she wanted to start a charity herself to help them. He told her that she must meet Sophia Swire.

The two of them hit it off immediately, and nine years later are so brimming with rapport and repartee that they could be a team from *Have I Got News For You?* 'We are the perfect partnership,' says Sophia. 'If I'm the horses, Charlotte is the coachman: I was the one who was always rushing off to do things immediately, and she was the more temperate one, who reined me in and said, "Let's do it in a systematic fashion".'

One thing they both possessed was formidable organisational skill. Charlotte had set up her own television production company to finance her work in Nepal, making documentaries all over the world ('flying David Bellamy into the Peruvian rainforest, making things for Jonathon Porritt'); Sophia had recently started the cashmere company which was to spearhead the pashmina craze in this country. Their first fund-raising event was the London premiere of *The Little Buddha*, which they arranged in just six weeks, and which brought in £35,000 for the new charity. With Sophia's flat as its first office, Learning for Life was in business.

They were well aware that their activities might meet with hostility from those keen to preserve the status quo: Charlotte had received death threats in Nepal, and Sophia had been pelted with vegetables by

fundamentalists in Pakistan. They therefore decided that the charity would steer clear of political or religious affiliations, and only operate where it was welcome.

Charlotte was also convinced that some aid agencies did more harm than good, by arriving with preconceived ideas and moving on before problems had been properly resolved (a criticism which has been widely echoed in recent weeks). Learning for Life would respond to what local people wanted, and try to make each project self-sustaining – as Sophia puts it, ‘Our aim is to make ourselves redundant as soon as possible’.

When a new school is started, the villagers are asked to provide a committee of three men and three women to run it, and someone to be trained as a teacher. Learning for Life then sets up a fund, a percentage of which must be matched by the village; the interest from this covers the teacher’s wages and any other costs. Some 250 schools in Pakistan and India have been created in this way.

There are, of course, government schools in these areas; but as Felicity Hill explains, ‘Even if there’s a school in the neighbouring village, that may be a three-hour walk away. A seven-year-old isn’t going to be able to do that journey; and as the girls get older, there’s also the issue of their safety.’ It is hard, too, to find government teachers who are willing to work in remote locations, which is why Learning for Life recruits local women and puts them through its own teacher-training scheme.

Although much of the charity’s efforts are directed towards girls, it believes that it would be short-sighted not to include boys. ‘It’s important for them to be educated together,’ says Felicity Hill, ‘because what we don’t want to do is create a further segregated society. We’re not going to change the status quo – they’ve got to do it themselves.’

One of the places where the charity found girls most at risk was Karnataka in southern India. Many of the local children suffer from

polio, a disease which blights a girl's marriage prospects and – in an area with a high rate of female infanticide – can be a death sentence. Learning for Life supports a school for a hundred children, but here again the emphasis is on inclusion, and the handicapped and the able-bodied are taken in equal numbers. 'The attitude is that they can do anything,' says Felicity Hill. 'They may have one leg, or a withered arm, but they'll all be out there playing cricket. They've got children scaling walls and doing things I wouldn't even consider myself.'

Because Learning for Life always employs local people rather than expatriates, it is able to operate in situations which other organisations might consider too dangerous. So, in the present crisis, it continues to run six schools for Afghani refugees in Peshawar, catering for almost 3,500 pupils.

'The schools started off in tents,' says Felicity Hill, 'but they're now able to rent buildings with our support – and when I say buildings, I mean a mud structure, not concrete, and they cram the children in there. But they're fantastic: they have a very high standard of education. And it's so important, because these people hope to return to their homeland one day and reconstruct the country.'

In the aftermath of the horrors in New York, there has been much agonising about the West's responsibilities to the deprived nations of the world. 'Education,' argues Charlotte Bannister-Parker, 'is the only way to eradicate the poverty which leads to such hatred.' Suddenly, Learning for Life's work looks more important than ever.

For more information visit www.learningforlifeuk.org