

**In Southeast Asian countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, girls and women don't pursue higher education in great numbers—but faculty and students from outside the region are changing that and improving their educational opportunities.**

**I**MAGINE BEING SO DETERMINED to get an education that you're willing to live in a crawl space under a building so you can attend university.

While it might seem unfathomable, Alan Lightman, an adjunct professor of humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, recalls visiting Cambodia in the mid-2000s, and meeting a young woman who had gone to law school just a decade before. She and the other female students had nowhere to live during their studies, so they bunked down on wooden planks in the crawl space of a university building. "That's how much they wanted an education," he says.

Lightman was so moved by the tale that he began raising money to build dorms for female university students, opening up a whole new world of possibilities for girls who live nowhere near the capital, Phnom Penh, where all of the country's universities are located. Yet the vast majority of the population lives in the countryside.

For Menghun Kaing, who is spending this school year studying at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, after graduating this year with a degree in computer science from the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the availability of the dorms made all the difference. Without them, "I wouldn't know what to do after high school," she says.

The dorm-building project took root after Lightman created the Harpswell Foundation following a visit to Cambodia in 2003. Women in the small village of Tramung Chrum begged him to build a primary school for their children. "They believed in the power of education," so the foundation built them a school, which opened in 2005.



Ngoc Lan Thi Dang, a doctoral student at Michigan State University who hails from Vietnam, shown here at an ancient citadel in Vietnam during a summer study tour with a group of 15 MSU doctoral students.

# Finding A Home IN Higher Education

BY SUSAN LADIKA



Ngoc Lan Thi Dang at the Vietnamese display table during Michigan State University's Global Festival.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fifth article in an occasional series on improving education for girls and women in developing regions. The first was "Women's Work," which focused on the Middle East and published in the September/October 2009 issue; the second was "An Unprivileged Child," which focused on Africa and published in the January/February 2010 issue; the third was "Women in Latin America—Opportunity Through Education," which published in the March/April 2011 issue; and the fourth was "Empowerment!" which focused on South Central Asia and was published in the July/August 2011 issue.



JULIO GIULIETTI

**Vietnamese master's of science nursing candidates teach their students in the emergency ward at Dalat Hospital.**

The following year the foundation built its first dorm in Phnom Penh to house college-age women. A second dorm opened in 2009. Together they house more than 80 young women, giving them a safe, secure place to live. While young men can stay at Buddhist pagodas while they attend university, young women have no comparable alternative.

Demand for such housing is huge. "There are millions of poor girls who need help," Lightman says.

Because there is no way the foundation can help them all, it selects the cream of the crop, visiting about 50 high schools around the country to speak with their top prospects. While many girls have exceptional grades, Lightman relies on one crucial question when deciding who the foundation will assist: "What would you like to do with your life?"

The vast majority of the girls say they would like to get a good job and help their families, and although that is laudable, it's not enough to get them in the door at a Harpswell dorm.

Instead Lightman focuses on those who have a broader perspective, and want to do things such as raising the level of education in Cambodia or fighting sex trafficking or poverty. The girls who are chosen to stay in the dorms "have a vision of helping the whole. That is very rare," he says.

Under the Khmer Rouge, more than 1 million Cambodians were killed in the second half of the 1970s, and others died of malnutrition or disease. Many of those who were killed were well-educated Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge "destroyed all sense of community and civic mindedness, leaving a kind of every-man-for-himself mentality," Lightman says.

The goal of the Harpswell Foundation is "helping the country, not helping the individual student. We try to find agents of change" who can then assist others in their country, creating a multiplier effect, he says.



**Alan Lightman, founder of the Harpswell Foundation, has lunch with students.**

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALAN LIGHTMAN

## Spearheading Change Throughout the Region

Cambodia is just one of the countries in Southeast Asia where U.S. universities and professors are trying to inspire change. According to United Nations' statistics, in 2008 only 5 percent of women and 9 percent of men were enrolled in tertiary education in Cambodia. In Vietnam, where statistics are sorely outdated, 8 percent of women and 11 percent of men were enrolled in higher education in 2001. In contrast, Thailand far outshines the rest, with 51 percent of women and 39 percent of men enrolled in 2010.

In the various countries the main issues could be improving the quality of teaching and the level of education; helping girls from disadvantaged groups and from rural areas; or encouraging women and girls to continue their studies. One project that is striving to improve the status of women and their education in Vietnam is being undertaken by Loyola University Chicago, which is currently working to improve the teaching level and skills of six Vietnamese nurses. Ultimately the school would like to equip 50 to 60 nurse educators with masters degrees. "By better training the faculty we will help raise the whole nursing profile in Vietnam," says Patrick Boyle, Loyola's associate provost and assistant to the president for global affairs and initiatives.

The university and Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training began working together on various projects in 2007, and in 2010 the dean of Loyola's nursing school and several faculty members visited the country to learn about its health care needs.

After discussions with Vietnamese officials, it was decided that because Loyola is so successful at training students, the best thing the university could do was work to help professionalize the country's nursing teaching staff, Boyle says.

Nursing is a profession that is not highly regarded in Vietnam, and pay is poor. Those working in the field typically have associates or bachelors degrees. Those Vietnamese nurses who complete the three-year program with Loyola will receive a master's degree. The goal is to "help the profession really come into its own," he says.

At the same time, Loyola wants to avoid creating a situation where the nurses will migrate to other countries. Instead the aim is to have them use their

**Nellie Moore, a leadership resident from Northeastern University in Boston, and a first-year student in Nellie's advanced English class at Harpswell posing in front of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP).**



skills to help develop the nursing profession in their homeland, he says.

The program began this year with six nurses, five of whom are female, spending the summer in Chicago, where they took intensive English courses each morning and nursing courses in the afternoon.

The group has since returned to Vietnam, where they take online courses, and faculty from Loyola plan to visit the country for two to three weeks at a time. Because most of the nurses work full time and have families and children, “it would be impossible for them to come to Chicago for three years,” Boyle says. Another cohort of students is expected to start the program next year.

Through the program, Loyola aims to “elevate the level of learning” in Vietnam, says Judith Jennrich, director of the acute care program at Loyola’s Niehoff School of Nursing. “There’s not really any opportunity for advanced education in the country.”

At the end of three years, the group will return to Chicago for the summer, and then each student will need to be able to pass a comprehensive nurs-

ing exam. With that background, they should be able to get into a PhD program for even more advanced education, Jennrich says.

The Loyola project reflects one of the major problems in Vietnam—the need for more professional, better trained faculty members. “There are many young, inexperienced lecturers,” says John Dirkx, an associate professor in the higher, adult, and lifelong education program at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

MSU has worked with Can Tho University in Can Tho city, Vietnam, for years on various projects, and Dirkx has given about 10 to 12 faculty development workshops in the country over the past five years. The majority of those faculty members who take part are young women.

In Vietnam, many community colleges are quickly being transformed into universities to try to meet the demand for higher education, yet many of the faculty members only have a bachelor’s degree. To obtain an advanced degree, students typically need to study abroad.

In many cases, young women are hired to teach at universities right after they graduate, he says. They

**Vietnamese higher education lecturers participate in a workshop, facilitated by Professor John Dirkx, on inquiry-based teaching at Can Tho University.**



JOHN DIRKX

**In Vietnam, girls may have to drop out of school by sixth grade to work and help pay for their brothers' education. Boys are viewed as being more of a financial asset to their families, so their education is emphasized.**

are considered subject matter experts, but have no real-world experience. Even basics in the United States, like drawing up syllabi and lessons plans, are new concepts for many educators.

Dirkx goals are to improve the instructional capacity of university educators in the Mekong Delta region and help them shift to a learner-centered paradigm, rather than having the students rely on memorization in order to pass exams. For the project to get off the ground, outside funding is needed because the universities in Vietnam are strapped for cash.

To improve the quality of the country's higher education system, "they need something comprehensive. A workshop here and there isn't working," Dirkx says.

In the interim, he has proposed to the Vietnamese government that a complete needs assessment be conducted to determine what educators do and don't know.

## Higher Education Not Often Encouraged

One major obstacle in Vietnam is that women aren't encouraged to pursue advanced education, says Ngoc Lan Thi Dang, who expects to graduate with a PhD from MSU's Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education (HALE) program in June.

While these days more than half the students attending university in Vietnam are women, she says, they typically end their educations after they complete their bachelor's degree. Their families usually want them to marry as soon as possible, and they believe it's hard for a woman to find a husband if she is well-educated.

Dang was deputy director in the department of international relations at Can Tho University when she headed to the United States in 2007 to work on her PhD. But she says she spent years trying to get permission to study abroad. She had to convince her bosses at the male-dominated university that it would benefit both the university and the community if she continued her studies.

When she returns to Vietnam, Dang plans to use the connections she has made through studying in the United States to help connect women from her homeland with women in the West. She also wants to work to improve the status of women and girls in the country.

Like many countries in the developing world, the situation is much harder for girls and women from rural areas, where the priority is typically on educating boys, she says. In Vietnam, girls may have to drop out of school by sixth grade to work and help pay for their brothers' education. Boys are viewed as being more of a financial asset to their families, so their education is emphasized.

Ann Brooks, an adult education professor at Texas State University San Marcos, is working to combat such behavior in Cambodia by helping to develop a book about the possibilities that are open to girls from rural areas.

The girls often drop out in middle school because their families want them to work. It's a particular problem in poor families, where all family members need to contribute economically to make ends meet.



Sometimes the girls are involved in the sex trade. Other times they go to work at garment factories, or sell goods door to door or at local markets.

But other opportunities do exist, and Brooks and is working with faculty and staff at the Royal University in Phnom Penh. They've collected the life histories of young women who made their way from the countryside to university, which will be used in the book.

In most cases, those who have made it to university have had a relative or teacher who has helped them to succeed, or they've received a scholarship to pay for their studies. "Someone in their life championed them in a way that gave them a step up," Brooks says.

**Pen Vathana, a student working on her MA in gender and development in Thailand, collaborated with Professor Ann Brooks on a research project to help Cambodian girls pursue education.**

**The students head to a village in the northeast of Thailand for cultural immersion, where they stay with local families in homes with no electricity and no running water, and learn to do things like plant rice and catch fish with their hands.**

But it also took hard work by the girls to be successful. “There’s a tremendous amount of stick-to-itiveness on these girls’ parts,” Brooks says.

After they’ve completed their university studies, many of the girls have found work with small companies or nongovernmental organizations, while others have gone on to graduate school. As girls have gone away to university, graduated, found a job, and then returned with some money in their pockets, their friends and relatives in the countryside have taken notice.

The project aims to share their stories by distributing the books in rural areas, or by having the girls’ stories read on the radio, which is how many Cambodians get their news.

Even though job opportunities are still limited, Brooks says, “it’s better they know they have educational choices than get funneled into exploitive situations.”

Kaing, the Bard student, has taken on a similar role, educating girls in her home village, and both boys and girls in other parts of the country, about the opportunities provided if they attend college.

She visits her home two or three times a year, and when she’s there the girls in particular ask her about college and life in the big city, and she talks to them about setting goals and striving to get ahead.

The girls often are at a loss as to what they can do after high school because they have no money for college. “Sometimes they feel like they have nowhere to go,” says Kaing, who feels like she can help inspire them to pursue their dreams.

She also works with the Fulbright and Undergraduate State Alumni Association of Cambodia, traveling to various provinces and talking to them about university. “I feel like I’m doing something for my society.”

### **U.S. Students Get Involved**

While much of the focus is on helping girls and women in this part of the world, in other cases, the emphasis is on educating U.S. students on the situation of women and girls in other countries and encouraging them to provide a helping hand.

For the past three years, Westminster College in Salt Lake City has taken its students on a trip to Thailand for May term. Most of those who make the trip are majoring in nursing, public health, or education, says Peter Ingle, director of the college’s Learning Coalition, which facilitates educational development for faculty and staff.

They spend their time in Thailand traveling with Thai nursing students from Suan Dusit University in the capital, Bangkok, after Thai educators thought it would be good for their students, who live in the city, to spend time in rural areas of the country. It also increases the Thai nursing students’ exposure to American culture, and many of the Westminster and Thai students become fast friends, keeping in touch via Facebook and Skype.

The trip is designed to teach students about the health, education, and developmental needs of those in rural areas of Thailand. After a brief stop in Bangkok, the students head to a village in the northeast of the country for cultural immersion, where they stay with local families in homes with no electricity and no running water, and learn to do things like plant rice and catch fish with their hands.

The students also are involved in service-learning projects at the local school, such as bringing supplies for teachers and

**A first-year Harpswell student leading a break-out group during a leadership seminar in the Hall of Great Women on the top level of the Teuk Thla dormitory.**





painting school buildings. By being immersed in village life in such a remote location, “it helps students get a better understanding of Thai culture,” Ingle says, and “once you’re there, then it all becomes real.”

Siri Wieringa, a senior majoring in social science and then planning to get her master’s in secondary education, experienced her own culture shock, adjusting to the rhythms of remote village life. “It was a contrast in cultures,” she says, and a major adjustment was the “very slow pace of life.”

While the village school caters to both boys and girls, as in many cultures the majority of teachers are female. “Like every school system, they’re underfunded and overworked,” Ingle says. Following Westminster’s first trip three years ago, two teachers from the village came to Utah for six weeks, where they met local teachers, learned about American educational practices, and then returned home to conduct professional development workshops in the region.

After their village stay, the students head to Mae Sot, near the Burmese border, where they spend a

day at the Mae Toe Clinic, which is commonly called Dr. Cynthia’s Clinic for its founder, Cynthia Maung, MD. It’s been providing free health care for refugees and migrant workers who have come from Burma to Thailand for more than two decades, and it now treats about 150,000 people each year.

Another stop involves spending a week in the mountains working with the Karen minority, where the Thai government operates a boarding school for more than 200 first- through sixth-graders. The majority of students are girls, Ingle says, and the Karen tend to send boys to work in the fields or factories, where they can earn more money than the girls.

The nursing and public health students do physical exams of the youngsters and the rest of the group works at the school, doing things like building a library and renovating the school kitchen.

During her trip this spring, Wieringa’s group planted a garden for the youngsters to help improve their diet, which is sorely lacking in vegetables and fruit, played games with the children, and helped teach them English.

**A schoolgirl is reading along with others during a school material donation event in Kampong Spue province, Cambodia.**





A schoolgirl rides a bike back home after her morning class in Kandal province, Cambodia.

By improving the education for the girls in the mountains, and providing them with Thai- and English-language training, the opportunities for employment expand, Ingle says, such as working with NGOs that aid refugees along the border.

When she graduates, Wieringa wants to teach social studies, and she believes that by sharing her experiences in Thailand with her students, “it will give more meaning to learning.”

Ingle says the travels also help the students when they’re home in Salt Lake City, which has one of the world’s largest Karen populations outside of Burma and Thailand.

By spending nearly a month exposed to countless new experiences, “it encourages the notion of global citizenship,” he says.

### **The Notion of Global Citizen**

That same ideal [of global citizenship] influenced Nellie Moore, who now is an administrative assistant in New York with Friends Without a Border, which supports a children’s hospital in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

The human services and international affairs graduate from Northeastern University in Boston did a six-month co-op in 2010, spending six months as a leadership resident at one of the Harpswell Foundation dorms in Phnom Penh.

Moore says she chose to take part in that program because of the “real problem in educational equality” in Cambodia. “I fell in love with Cambodia along the way.”

Living in the dorm allowed her to build a sense of family in Cambodia, and she spent her time leading discussions designed to help the students hone their critical thinking skills in a country that relies heavily on rote memorization in the educational system. The students who live in the dorms get free room and board and receive English-language and computer training.

Moore also helped line up speakers for a conference featuring female leaders in Cambodia. Through their talks at the conference, the women “served as role models and created a sense of empowerment for the girls,” Lightman says.

Along with providing the young women from Cambodia a safe place to live while attending university in Phnom Penh, a handful are now coming to the United States to study for a year.

Lightman seeks out universities that will offer the girls scholarships and donors who will help fund room and board and other essentials, like their flights to and from the United States, laptops, and clothing. “These students have no money at all,” he says.

**Caring for Cambodia works with about 10 government-run schools in Siem Reap, where the NGO does everything from provide preschool education, to train teachers, to provide food to students.**

Among those now studying in the United States are Kaing and Limheang Heng, who arrived at Bard in August. Kaing had already been to the United States once before, to attend an intensive English program at the University of Delaware sponsored by the U.S. State Department. It's quite an accomplishment for a young woman who grew up in a one-room hut with no electricity and no running water with her parents and four siblings.

If she and Heng had not been selected by the Harpswell Foundation, their futures likely would have meant "arranged marriages and working in the rice fields," Lightman says.

Instead Kaing is a university graduate, and she credits her mother with supporting her in her studies. Her mother, who was the oldest of eight children, had to quit school to take care of her brothers and sisters when their mother died. "She regretted giving up her studies," Kaing says. "She didn't want the same for me."

Now Kaing is focusing on creative writing and political science classes at Bard and plans to work at the *Phnom Penh Post*, an English-language newspaper, when she returns home.

Heng, who graduated from the Royal University of Law and Economics with a law degree, wants to teach at the university when she returns home.

She believes her experiences in the U.S. classroom will help her immensely. Instead of just lectures, she's now been exposed to a professor who uses songs in the classroom, team teaching, and roundtable discussions.

## **Making Classrooms Better**

Improving classroom experiences in Cambodia is a major goal of Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which in 2010 teamed up with the NGO Caring for Cambodia, run by Lehigh alum Bill Amelio and his wife, Jamie.

Caring for Cambodia works with about 10 government-run

schools in Siem Reap, where the NGO does everything from provide preschool education, to train teachers, to provide food to students. "Food sometimes becomes the main obstacle to come to school," says Iveta Silova, associate professor and program director in the comparative and international education program at Lehigh.

Now Caring for Cambodia wants a more targeted approach to improving education and has partnered with Lehigh's comparative and international education program, which will work on teacher training, curriculum development, and community outreach.

Part of the goal is to determine what teacher development practices have worked best and document them so they can serve as a model for the government and other NGOs, Silova says. The three-year partnership also will involve conducting needs and capacity assessments.

Lehigh student Harry Morra, who is working on his master's degree in comparative international education, was responsible for organizing two trips by Lehigh students and faculty to Cambodia last year, and is involved in the school assessments.



**In the class, Limheang Heng (left) with classmates, at the Royal University of Law and Economics, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.**

**U.S. Ambassador Carol A. Rodley getting to know several Harpswell students in the Hall of Great Women on the top level of the Teuk Thla dormitory**



**Education is needed to help break the cycle of poverty, and by better educating women it helps lower the child mortality rate and the birth rate.**

He says the schools that are assisted by Caring for Cambodia instill much more of a sense of equality between boys and girls than other schools in the area, where boys' education is most valued and girls may attend only for half a day, or drop out to work. And sometimes something as simple as building a girls' bathroom can encourage them to attend school.

One of the goals of the Caring for Cambodia schools is to set up a career corner so students can learn more about the job opportunities available for them if they receive a good education, Morra says.

At the Caring for Cambodia schools, "the kids are engaged. You see so much more energy," he says.

There are also plans to evaluate teacher training in Caring for Cambodia schools compared to that at schools where the NGO is not involved, he says, and for Lehigh students to meet with representatives of international organizations like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to get a bigger picture view of education in the country.

The Caring for Cambodia schools tend to have more female teachers than comparable schools, and they often have 50 students in their classrooms. Le-

high wants to work with them on developing their classroom management skills, and encouraging more group work, rather than having teachers just rely on lecturing because the classes are so big, Silova says.

Parents also are more involved at the Caring for Cambodia schools, she says, and mothers

will attend preschool, along with their children, where they can see the benefits of education and have "greater motivation to keep girls in school," Silova says.

Lehigh has also recently hired Sothy Eng, a professor of practice of comparative and international education and a Cambodia native, to help with their work. At Lehigh he's teaching classes on Cambodian education and culture to help Lehigh students when they head abroad.

And in Cambodia, one of the main challenges is helping mothers to understand that girls are worth the educational investment, Eng says. Mothers tend to think there are fewer job opportunities for young women, they'll just marry and move away and not help support their families, and they worry about their daughters' safety, particularly if they have to travel long distances to school.

But education is needed to help break the cycle of poverty, he says, and by better educating women it helps lower the child mortality rate and the birth rate. Many parents have low levels of education because the Khmer Rouge often killed those who were well-educated.

For parents and students, "they don't know how big the world is and what opportunities are out there," Eng says. NGOs and universities can have a major role in "inspiring them to see something outside their villages." **IE**

**SUSAN LADIKA** has been a journalist for more than 20 years, working in both the United States and Europe. She is now based in Tampa, Florida. Her last article for *IE* was "Building a Literate World" in the September/October 2011 issue.

Two second-year Harpswell students in a tuk-tuk with Eva Pilipp, an Austrian Leadership Resident, on their way to a film screening at Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center in Phnom Penh.

