

Pestalozzi International

To nurture and develop

Girl Power! Pestalozzi International inspired by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi

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On this International Women's Day, we at Pestalozzi International are proud to celebrate our alumnae as leaders and changemakers in their countries and beyond. And we pride ourselves that our Future Leaders Programme, which enables our alumnae to be such leaders and changemakers, has grown out of the ideas and actions of our namesake and inspiration, the educational philosopher and social reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was far ahead of his times - in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century he played a pioneering role in Switzerland, reforming girls' education, recognising that women play a key role as educators of the family and community, and advocating for women's rights.

Pestalozzi International, working in countries which still tend to prioritise boys' education, supports the education of two girls for every one boy and ensures that the girls in our care get not only equal access to relevant educational opportunities but also equal treatment once access is secured. Over 2,000 African and Asian girls from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds have been supported through our programmes. These offer a critical, inquiry-based education, emotional and social support, a practical and relevant skills base and the motivation to help others, nurturing the students to become changemakers and leaders.

In Switzerland in the late eighteenth century only wealthy, urban dwelling boys received a decent education. Rural education usually involved boys learning the bible by rote, crammed into a cramped room, supervised by entirely unqualified individuals.

Onto this scene came Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, opening the Neuhof Industrial School in 1774 where the urban poor - girls as well as boys - were taught reading, writing and arithmetic as well as the practical and vocational skills, for example spinning and weaving, that would ensure they could earn a living.

This was followed by the orphanage at Stans that Pestalozzi propositioned the government to open in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars. Here he ensured that all the 80 children in his care, regardless of gender, should learn not only the three R's and practical vocational skills but also self-reliance and moral values. The children, through the example set by Pestalozzi who lived with them and cared for them day and night, learnt to be considerate and loving towards others.

Pestalozzi's efforts for the reform of girls' education culminated in the opening of the Yverdon Institute for Girls in 1806, a counterpart to his renowned Yverdon Institute for Boys. The aim was for girls' respectability and accomplishment, which is of course constrictive by the standards of today but a milestone in an era in which girls were scarcely educated at all. It also illustrates that Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi is an inspiration and that, rather than do exactly as he did we, like him, respond to the needs and opportunities of the times we live in.

There are plentiful examples of the achievements of our girl students, illustrating how Pestalozzi International's Future Leaders' Programme not only provides them with opportunities but also with the skills and the strength, resilience and confidence to excel and to become leaders.

Sanjita, a Nepalese Pestalozzi International student is doing brilliantly in hockey, **demonstrating leadership** skills by becoming a Coach, mentoring her juniors and guiding them in their athletic development.

Sanjita has recently been chosen to represent her province in the National Hockey Tournament. This is an unusual achievement for girls in her context and the support she is given by Pestalozzi Nepal to achieve this illustrates the value we place on girls' achievements over and above the academic.

It is also worth noting that Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was responsible for introducing physical education to the school curriculum, believing, well ahead of his times, that children need movement because it is natural to them and that physical activity not only makes children stronger, happier and healthier but also helps to develop qualities like perseverance, courage and a united spirit.

Blessings, a senior Pestalozzi International student in Zambia, illustrates the power of peer learning, recognised by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi as particularly beneficial to students who are likely to learn best from their peers who share the same experiences as themselves.

Blessings' passion for service has grown into action: leading conversations on mental health, promoting sustainable habits, designing climate-conscious projects, and standing up for girls and young people who haven't yet found their voice. **[Read more about this exemplary student leader here.](#)**

While it is widely understood today that investing in girls' secondary level education 'transforms communities, countries and the entire world' (**UNICEF**), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's recognition of the vital role women play in the transformation of society was at his time trailblazing. In his novel Leonard and Gertrude (1781–87), Pestalozzi subtly challenged traditional views that confined women to passive domestic roles. In the novel, the mother is portrayed as a moral and social leader, her wisdom and strength uplifting not just her children but the entire village.

At Pestalozzi International we work hard to overcome the barriers that still exist to girls reaping the same benefits as boys once they graduate from secondary school, the barriers that have in the past often prevented girls from achieving anything more than secondary level education.

The majority of those we support are able to access education well beyond the secondary level and/or to gain skilled employment. Some examples follow:

We are proud to have alumni across our programmes who have returned on completion of their further education to take up employment with Pestalozzi International. Who better than alumni of our own programmes to work with our current students? **[One example is Shelja.](#)**

Shelja recognises in her work preparing senior students for life beyond Pestalozzi how values shape education; that what sets Pestalozzi International apart is its focus on the Heart.

As Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi emphasised, to succeed education must be led by the Heart; harmony of the powers of the head, heart and hands can come about only through an education in love, by love and for love.

Inspired by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Pestalozzi International's focus on holistic education, which includes academic prowess as well skills in empathy and ethical leadership, has helped other alumnae to contribute to progress in fields such as science and health:

Nelisa's path from Zambia has led her to work in London in research spanning metabolic disease, biotechnology and food science. While Lobsang has progressed from the North of India to a postdoctoral research position in Scotland contributing to advances in cancer research. **[You can read more about these two alumnae here.](#)**

Having gained from the knowledge, the relevant practical skills and the heart-led social motivation of a Pestalozzi International education, many of our alumnae have set up ground breaking social impact initiatives of their own, often of direct benefit to girls and women. Several projects have been or are being part-funded by the Pestalozzi International Fund for social impact alumni initiatives. Four examples follow:

Aiming to combat period poverty and to promote menstrual health hygiene, two of our former Pestalozzi UK Village programme alumni from very different parts of the world initiated the production and distribution of sanitary pads. Zimbabwean Ruramai's Project 1000 Pad, to provide reusable sanitary pads for schoolgirls in Zimbabwe, was initiated in 2018 after she attended a talk about period poverty. She raised £2000, and donated pads through secondary schools. The project also led to schoolgirls learning how to make the reusable sanitary pads with the school concerned officially registering for sewing class accreditation and offering the class as part of their curriculum.

With many of this Zimbabwean school's students unable to access education beyond GCSE level, learning a trade has many benefits for them and relates closely to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's educational approach of providing the school-based practical skills most likely to secure livelihoods and to be of relevance to local community needs.

And in 2024, Nepalese Pratiksha's Sabailai Cup Initiative was launched, providing young girls and teachers with reusable menstrual cups and comprehensive menstrual hygiene education. The initiative distributed a total of 264 menstrual cups and sterilizers. Educational sessions targeted girls aged 13–16 years and emphasized sustainable menstrual hygiene practices. Teachers, who were also active participants, became key allies in providing ongoing support and answering student questions.

Thirdly, Jyoti, a Nepalese graduate of the Pestalozzi UK programme, was recognised by Business 360! as one of '100 People to Watch 2025 under the Young Changemaker Category for her work for the [Samaanta Foundation](https://samaantafoundation.org/).

Jyoti has been at the forefront of leading the Samaanta Foundation <https://samaantafoundation.org/> since its inception in 2012. Since then, Samaanta has grown into the most comprehensive higher education Fellowship programme in Nepal, having provided 140 deserving government school graduates from underserved communities with life-changing opportunities, 55% of them female.

And last but not least, Zambian Thandiwe's learning at Pestalozzi came with a sense of responsibility to community, country and the world beyond, leading to her becoming an award-winning Conservationist, Integrated Landscape and Custodianship Manager with the Nsumbu Tanganyika Conservation Programme, a National Geographic Explorer and a Board Member at the Zambian Carnivore Programme. Her journey illustrates how the opportunity and sense of purpose provided by Pestalozzi International can lead to our alumnae having positive impact that extends as far as ecosystems and the natural world.

[You can read more about Thandiwe's leadership roles in community-based conservation here.](#)

Again, well ahead of his time, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi included the circle of nature both animate and inanimate in his ideas about good citizenship, reciprocity and the importance of interacting kindly and of leading by example in the circles we live in.

Through these examples of alumnae engagement with social initiatives Pestalozzi International's impact reaches beyond the transformation of education to address other issues of social concern. Here too our alumnae are following Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's example. Recognising how unfairly women were treated and how badly social reform for women was needed, he called for and took practical action for change not only through his educational reform for girls but also in areas beyond the field of education. An example of this is found in his 1783 essay 'On Legislation and Infanticide' in which he argued that unmarried mothers should receive social support rather than punishment and called for laws to protect vulnerable women and children. He held the societal stigmatisation of women and the harsh economic conditions then prevalent in Switzerland responsible for their situation and for their desperation, which often led to infanticide.

The power of the written word so recognised by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi is also recognised by Pestalozzi International alumnae. Take Sarah, who grew up in a family of nine in Meheba Refugee Camp in Zambia before joining Pestalozzi Zambia. She now has a **blog** through which she shares the lived realities of refugee communities - not as statistics, but as human stories of strength, complexity and hope.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, through his visionary pedagogy and the practical application of this in his schools, his support for girls' education, his recognition of the unique contribution women can make to the benefit of communities, and his advocacy for social reform paved the way for the gender-inclusive education systems and reforms for women, humankind and the natural world that continue to advance societies today. Pestalozzi International plays a significant part in this, not only through the education we provide but most importantly through our students and alumni, just some of whose stories of leadership and social impact we have shared here.

Help us to continue the legacy by supporting more young girls to become leaders and changemakers like those you have read about here!

[Get involved today.](#)