Aneri Pattani, a freshly minted graduate of Northeastern University, is the winner of Nicholas Kristof’s annual win-a-trip contest. She previously wrote about a hospital with few resources and the seven most inspiring people she met in Liberia.

My grandmother dropped out of school at 16. She had great grades and could have easily gone on to college, but there was one problem: she was a teenage girl in 1950s India. That meant she had to get married.

That limitation stuck with her and when my mom and aunt were born, she was determined to ensure their lives were different. Both my mom and aunt went on to earn bachelor's degrees in commerce and science, respectively.

I was reminded of their story while talking to young girls in Liberia, who often said their mothers pushed them to go to school no matter what. It seems that across cultures, mothers who lose out on opportunities for education can be the fiercest champions for their daughters.

Jestina Barleah, a sixth grader in Ganta, credits her mother for keeping her in school. When she got pregnant at 14, Jestina assumed she’d drop out. In Liberia, when a teenage girl gets pregnant, she either drops out because of the shame or is forced out by the school as a warning to other students.

But Jestina goes to a school run by Bridge International Academies, a company contracted by the Liberian government to manage some public schools. Bridge has a policy against expelling teen moms, and it’s been quite successful, Bridge co-founder Shannon May said.

“Most parents, once they see there is another way, they are receptive,” she said. “Especially the mothers.”
If Jestina had the opportunity to continuing going to school, her mom was determined to make that happen. Having dropped out in 10th grade herself, she was not about to let her daughter repeat that mistake.

“I was feeling bad and I didn’t want to come to school,” Jestina, now 16, recalled, “but my mom said I had to keep going.”

While Jestina is in class, her mother watches over the child, carrying him on her back while she sells mineral water on the street and in local markets. That dedication to her child’s education was something I heard echoed by many Liberian moms.

Dorothy Allen only went to school through seventh grade. Now she struggles to provide for her family. She hopes her two daughters are able to do more with their lives. “I’m not going anywhere without education,” she told me. “Let my children go.”

This is certainly a change from parental attitudes in the past, when it was not considered as important to educate girls as boys.

“Traditionally, girls did not have the same choices as boys,” said Minister of Education George Werner. “If parents had to choose between kids they could afford to send to school, they usually picked the boy while the girl stayed at home to do chores.”

National and international campaigns have played their part in influencing this culture change. Several parents quoted to me a famous slogan: When you educate one woman, you educate the whole nation. They told me they recognized the potential of educating girls when they saw a woman become president of their nation.

The slogan, unlike many marketing schemes, isn’t much of an exaggeration. Educating women has immense benefits for society. Girls with an education have fewer children, raise their kids to be healthier, make stronger contributions to the economy, earn more money, spend that money more wisely, empower their countries and more.

This progress is not limited to Liberia. Around the world today, there are essentially as many girls enrolled in primary schools as boys — a fact worth celebrating.

The challenge becomes greater as girls get older, though. Hannah Malee, a fifth-grade teacher at Jestina’s school, said her classes typically have a girl to boy ratio of 4 to 6. In Liberia, many children start school late, often because their families’ lives were disrupted by the civil war or they cannot afford fees for books or uniforms. By the time girls get to fifth grade, many are in their late teens, making them susceptible to early marriage or pregnancy, Malee explained.
It wasn’t hard to find evidence of her claims. I spotted Hellem Tomen walking around the school grounds with a basket on her head and a baby on her back. I soon discovered she was 21 — a year younger than me. Hellem was forced out of school when she got pregnant in seventh grade. Now she sells sweet meal bread in town to provide for her 10-month-old child. “I wish I could go back to school,” she told me.

It hurt to hear those words. I knew I had advantages Hellem would likely never get: a college degree, a chance to pursue whatever career I chose. But thinking back to my grandmother and my mother gave me hope. Maybe Hellem won’t go to school, but she might fight for her daughter to have a different future.