

**“Women Reinventing Themselves in Burkina Faso”**  
**An Address to the Global Congress of *Féminin Pluriel***  
**by Nane Annan**

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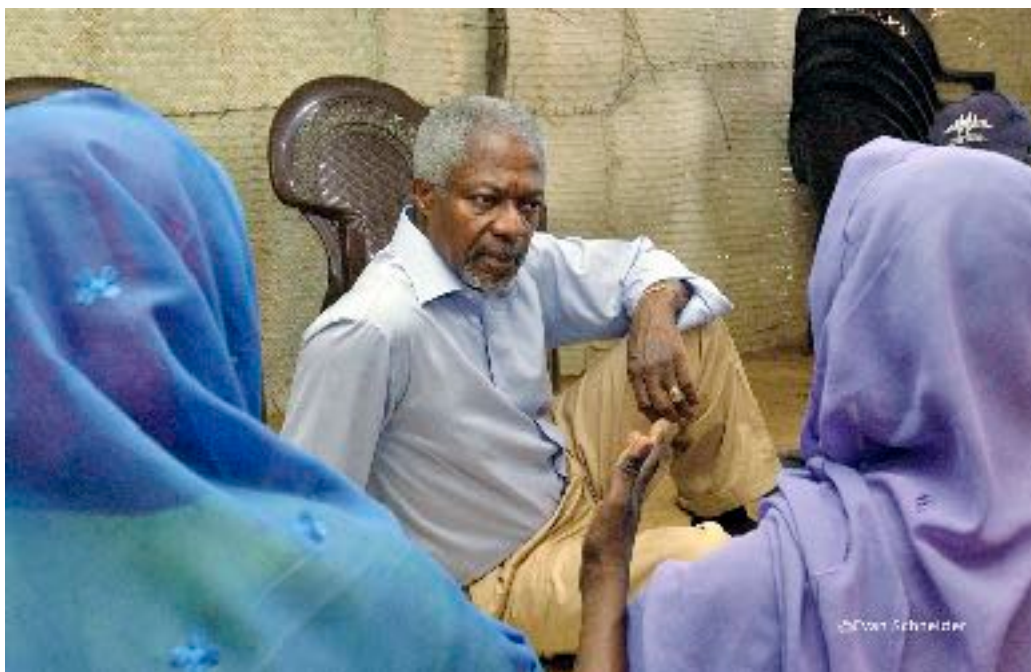
Dear Friends,

It is wonderful to be with you again. Last time I spoke to you about my own reinvention road. This time I want to tell you the incredible story of young women in Burkina Faso who through education, courage and hope are able to pull themselves out of poverty.

I know that today the “*Grève des Femmes*” is taking place in *Switzerland* in support of women—our empowerment and equality, our freedom from poverty and violence.

This was something close to the heart of my husband. He truly believed in the equality of women. He said that there is no development strategy more beneficial to society as a whole—women and men alike—than the one in which women are central players.

He also called violence against women perhaps one of the most shameful violations of human rights.



On our official trips, I often visited women's projects, coming back inspired by how articulate they were and by their courage in wanting to ensure the welfare and education of their children.

But today, in honour of the manifestation with and for women, I want to tell you about how some young women of Burkina Faso are reinventing themselves, and the circumstances they come from as they reach for the goals of higher education.

They are the beneficiaries of a small not-for-profit organization set up by Fred Eckhard, my husband's spokesman at the United Nations for a decade, and his efforts to ensure that young girls in Burkina Faso get access to higher education at universities, nursing schools and in teacher training.



Again, I quote my husband that education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy and sustainable human development.

Fred said that after he retired from the United Nations, he was living in a comfortable home in Brittany with a view of the sea. He thought, "How happy I am! I have everything." But then he felt that that was not enough. He needed to give something back.

He accompanied a neighbour to Burkina Faso where she was doing humanitarian work and met these proud, determined young women living in poverty.

This is when he realised that it was he who was poor. These girls were rich in optimism and hope and the most modest of resources could change their lives for the better. So his life merged with theirs and he became the richer for it.



Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries and one of the most illiterate.



Here you get an idea of the environment: few people can afford cars. Most get around on motorbikes, if they can afford them, otherwise on bicycles or on foot.



Less than 6% of Burkina Faso's young people are enrolled in universities and very few girls get to study beyond secondary school.



Yet to educate a woman is to educate a family. Development experts agree, women are the best investment.

So it was here that Fred created his Burkina Women’s Education Fund, which I will call BWEF from now on. In putting together this



talk, I have been working with two Geneva branch board members, Jo Maxwell Scott and Nicole Hochschild. Nicole is here with me today and was also with Fred on his last trip to Burkina Faso in January—and there she is in the photo.



To date, 62 girls have been helped or are being helped and only one has dropped out—a 98% success rate. They are on various career paths. Predictably, many have chosen nursing or teaching, but there are also those doing medicine, law, accounting, computer science and even hydrology.

What Fred is doing is amazing. He has been going down once a year to interview girls on the list of prospective beneficiaries. He visits their homes and gets to know their families. He talks to their professors and school administrators in order to follow closely their progress. He is a true mentor to them.

Let me introduce four of the girls to help you understand their situation.

First is Sophie, whom we call the miracle girl.



Sophie grew up in a rural village. Her father died when she was young. Her mother, who is half blind, farms to feed her family.



She impressed Fred when she rode her bicycle 35 kilometres to meet with him!

Sophie twice failed her final exam at secondary school and didn't seem to be a promising candidate. From the start, she said that she wanted to be a midwife.



When she passed the third time, BWEF sent her to one of the best nursing schools in Ouagadougou where she performed brilliantly.

She is now working as a midwife in a tiny village south of the capital delivering 30-40 babies a month. With her salary of \$182 a month, she is helping her mother send her younger brothers to school.

Next is Brigitte.



Fred first visited Brigitte’s home in 2013. Her mother, a widow, slept on a mat on a concrete floor with six children, including Brigitte. There was no electricity.





Brigitte had dropped out of school and seemed lost. Her dream was to be a primary school teacher but she saw no way of getting there.

BWEF stepped in and helped her finish secondary school, giving her a bicycle to do the 8 kilometres round trip. With BWEF support, she enrolled in a teacher training program and two years later finished at the top of her class. For Fred it was a clear example of how poverty can mask potential.



She has been teaching in a remote area of the northeast near the troubled border with Mali. Repeated attacks by terrorist groups forced her school to close. She is now back in the capital hoping that security will return.

**HÉLÈNE**  
\* Yameogo \*  
accountant



Hélène was one of BWEF's first two beneficiaries in 2010. Her father died when she was six and her mother was ill. She wanted to be an accountant and BWEF sent her to a school specializing in that.

She was doing well until her mother died. Hélène sank into a depression and stopped going to class. BWEF has a health fund initially financed by the UN Women's Guild here in Geneva. It is headed by doctor Traore, a former WHO official in Ouagadougou. He counselled Hélène and she managed to pull out of her depression and to finish her Master's Degree.



After a series of unpaid internships, H el ene landed a job as the chief accountant for a major university in the capital at a salary of 274 dollars a month. But how could she get to work? It was too far. BWEF gave her a loan to buy a motorbike and she repaid it in just 10 months.



This year she married a consular official and is starting her new life as part of a two-salary family. She thanked Fred, telling him, “You are the Dad I never had.”

**AUGUSTINE**  
★ Yameogo ★  
French major wanting  
to become a teacher



Finally, there is Augustine. She had very good grades in secondary school and wanted to be a French teacher. BWEF enrolled her in a three-year university program.

When Fred visited her in January with another Board member, Anne, they were struck by her family's poverty. They lived in a hovel without electricity or running water. The toilet was a hole in the ground behind the house.



Augustine and her Mom slept together on a concrete floor without even a mat. Her father died in 2012 and she has six unemployed brothers. The family's hope is on her.



As Anne was leaving Burkina Faso, she reached into her pocket and pulled out what was for her small change in the local currency. “This is for Augustine,” she said. In fact, that spare change was the equivalent of about \$45, which bought a double mattress for Augustine and her Mom, a chemically treated mosquito net to protect against malaria and a solar lamp for her to study by.

I have now introduced you to these four girls to give you a glimpse of what the girls are struggling against as they reach for their goals.

And what BWEF offers is a game-changer—providing tuition, a bicycle to get to school, a solar lamp to study by, lunch money, school supplies, soap and sanitary napkins. All the girls' medical costs are reimbursed through the Health Fund.



There is also an in-country network Fred built up over the ten years.



Christiane To  , the woman in red to the right, a management consultant, works as a volunteer, keeping the books, writing checks and counseling the girls.



Dr. Traor   oversees a program of vaccinations for all the girls against four principal diseases and authorizes reimbursement for medical care

A Director of several family planning clinics in Burkina Faso organizes a briefing session for the girls on how to avoid sexually-transmitted diseases

The head of an employment agency counsels the girls on how to write a resumé and conduct an employment interview.

A computer technician with the Rennes School District in France found out about BWEF and offered to give used computers when they are replaced. He cleans and repairs them as necessary. All the girls now have computers.



A start-up businessman in Ouagadougou has offered to tutor the girls in Word, Excel and PowerPoint.

One says it takes a village to bring up a child but it takes one Fred to organize it all.

And one more thing—a little romantic tweak—all 13 girls who have married since receiving help from BWEF have married men whom they've met at university who have jobs. Most started out life in a family with no income at all.





Now Fred is asking those who have found work to give something back. He is asking them for Mille par Mois—a thousand West African francs and month, or less than \$3 a month—to support their younger sisters moving up.

So I hope you are as inspired as I have been seeing young women reinvent themselves, pulling themselves up and out of poverty with the help and push of mentors with limited resources but big hearts.

You will find some more information in your gift bag that you will bring home at the end of the day.

Thank you.



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Burkina Faso**

[www.bwefund.com](http://www.bwefund.com)