

MARCH 7, 2012, 1:00 AM

Africa's Girl Power

By **DAVID BORNSTEIN**

Update: David Bornstein responded to readers in the comments below.

On Thursday, thousands of organizations around the world will celebrate International Women's Day, acknowledging women's achievements and drawing attention to their continuing struggles. (See some events [here](#).)

Thinking about the day, I was reminded of a woman named Fiona Mavhinga, whom I met at a conference a few years ago and who works for a remarkable organization called [Camfed](#), which supports girls' education in Africa.

Mavhinga grew up in a rural district of Zimbabwe called Wedza, about 80 miles south of Harare, the capital. She spent most of her childhood living with her grandmother because the closest primary school was only three miles away, a walkable distance for a young girl. (The closest school was twice that distance from her parents' home.) When she was 13, her father lost his job and had to cut back his support for her education. To remain in school, Mavhinga had to earn money to pay for fees, clothes, books, pens and paraffin. She sold vegetables with her grandmother before and after school, beginning at 4 a.m. and ending around dinner. "I didn't have any time to do homework during the day," she recalled. "I had to be at the market, then cook dinner, and wash up and do all the other house chores which girls are expected to help with."

At night, she studied by candlelight. She did well and completed high school, but her education would have ended there if not for support from Camfed, which allowed her to attend the University of Zimbabwe, where she graduated in law. When I met her, she told me she was supporting the education of 22 children in Zimbabwe — 14 girls and 8 boys.

I was amazed and humbled. But I later discovered that this devotion to education was not unusual for Camfed alumni — or for the tens of thousands of villagers that Camfed has touched.

Camfed (the Campaign for Female Education) was founded in 1993 by a Welsh social entrepreneur named Ann Cotton, who began by raising money at her kitchen table to send 32 girls from poor families in Zimbabwe to school. Today, the organization works with 3,667 schools in rural parts of Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana and Malawi, and has provided direct support for more than half a million children to attend primary school. Camfed has also provided grants to enable 60,000 girls to complete secondary school, supported 15,000 more

who attend university or receive business training, and provided financing for 8,000 of their enterprises.

In recent years, leaders in the field of international development have come to agree that the most powerful way to bring lasting social benefits to a country is to expand educational and economic opportunities for girls. What has become known as the [Girl Effect](#) is dramatic: A girl who doesn't attend school or marries young, for example, is at far greater risk of dying in childbirth, contracting H.I.V., being beaten by her husband, bearing more children than she would like, and remaining in poverty, along with her family. By contrast, an educated girl is more likely to earn higher wages, delay childbirth, and have fewer, healthier children who are themselves more likely to attend school, prosper, and participate in democratic processes. ([pdf](#))

Camfed's support can alter the course of a child's life. Most of the students it assists come from extremely poor families. Some cannot afford shoes. Many are orphans. All are selected for support by village-based school management committees — not by Camfed, nor by local teachers acting alone (who often have personal biases). The committees must make their decisions public, maintain open books, and allocate Camfed's support based on demonstrated need. (Corruption is widespread in many African countries. Camfed tracks its funds meticulously and maintains a culture of transparency.)

What's most instructive, and innovative, about Camfed, however, is not how it channels assistance to vulnerable students in remote areas, but how it catalyzes broader changes, eliciting leadership from more than 90,000 people in thousands of villages — including parents, teachers, local leaders and, especially, the women in its alumni network, known as Cama.

Cama was started in 1998 by the first 400 women who received Camfed's support through secondary school. They were confronted with the question, what to do next? They saw that an alumni association could not only help members start businesses, explore job opportunities and deal with the social obstacles women faced, but could provide mentors to encourage the next generation of girls. In rural areas, schools don't provide career guidance. How do young girls hear about opportunities? How do they come to envision a better future?

Cama is responding to these challenges. It has grown into a force for social change. The association now boasts 17,600 members — there will be tens of thousands more in coming years — and they all go through a four-month probationary period to demonstrate commitment to girls' empowerment. In Zimbabwe, Cama members are district coordinators, businesswomen, government officials, leaders of nongovernmental organizations, full-time teachers and doctors. "These women understand the transformative power of education because they've experienced it themselves," Ann Cotton explained. "And because they understand what it means to have been poor, they have a strong sense of empathy. The way they relate to children and others in their communities is profoundly respectful. It leads to thousands of small actions that, cumulatively, create something extremely powerful."

Cama members support one another at university, for example, where other students typically

come from wealthier families. (This works like the Posse Foundation that Tina Rosenberg [recently wrote about in Fixes](#).) Mavhinga recalled that the five Cama students at her university shared everything, including one purple, sleeveless dress that belonged to one of them. “We all wore it,” she recalled. “So you could just feel decent and confident when you’re going into class.”

Today, Cama members provide moral support and guidance to vulnerable children, particularly those without parents. They sit on thousands of local school-management committees. They speak to community leaders about ending the traditional practice of enforced marriage. And they engage in philanthropy — lots of it — having provided educational support to 166,000 children — an average of 9 per member.

With only 133 full-time employees, Camfed is improving the educational environment for two million children, whose schools can now offer meals to needy students and extra lessons in science or math, and have access to additional sports and teaching resources.

Camfed has succeeded by eschewing the usual strategy of international development organizations. Rather than focusing on what its staff can do for others, it focuses on what its staff can help others do for their own communities. And the results ripple out in surprising ways.

Consider the Pepukai Mother Support Group, in the Chiredzi District of Zimbabwe. Most of the two dozen mothers and grandmothers in this group never attended school themselves, but they are committed to ensuring that children in their community, especially the girls, do. The mothers bake bread, weave mats, raise goats and chicks, and grow vegetables — and use the profits to pay for school fees, uniforms, food and school supplies to send 11 children, including 7 adolescent girls, to school.

The Pepukai group is one of more than 2,500 parent support groups that have been galvanized and seeded by Camfed with small sums of money (in this case \$100) and large measures of training and encouragement, including exchanges with groups from other regions and countries. In 2011, more than 48,000 children received educational support through local philanthropic initiatives like this. Some communities have created Father Support Groups, which have done things like build girls’ hostels.

What makes this all work is a culture of listening. When a Camfed representative enters a community, villagers expect the person to start issuing directions. But the staff member begins by asking local residents: What do you think the problems are? What could be done? People are caught off guard. They are not used to being asked what they think.

Turning people’s ideas into action takes institutions. Camfed is not about setting up its own institutions — it has only one office in each country — it’s about helping others to do so. For example, it has organized 86 volunteer community development committees, which comprise district educational leaders, head teachers, police officers, health workers, parents and members of Cama. At least half their members must be women. These development committees assist 3,500 School Management Committees, which comprise a school administrator, a female

teacher mentor, groups of parents, a representative of the village chief, and, again, a Cama alumna. Camfed calls the people who sit on these committees “volunteer activists.” They are not paid. They get to make real decisions, deploy real money, and solve real problems. They get the satisfaction and mutual respect that comes from working with others to transform lives.

Camfed’s highest priority is child protection. In Africa, it is common for girls to be pressured by teachers into having sex. (More than a third of Cama members surveyed said that a girl who refused a teacher’s proposition would face punishment.) There are other issues that come up: teachers, parents and students who still believe it is legal to use corporal punishment (it isn’t), orphans facing bereavement, students getting sick, families facing economic crises, which can force children to drop out.

Every Camfed partner school has at least one female teacher mentor who is responsible for attending to these concerns, and if necessary reporting problems or abuses to the committees or Camfed’s national office. More than 1,500 schools have established child protection policies. (In Zambia, the government has adopted the child protection policy advanced by Camfed.)

“Institutions have the responsibility to create every possible layer of protection around children, which includes encouraging them to speak out and providing access to adults whom they can trust,” explains Cotton. Schools can draw upon Camfed’s Safety Net Fund, which remains at their discretion. Last year, Camfed reports that 276,000 children were assisted. The organization reports that in areas where it works, dropouts as a result of pregnancy and other causes have fallen, and adults are more likely to report incidents of abuse to authorities.

“People in rural communities have a lot of potential,” Mavhinga said. “But poverty is standing in their way.” When we think about poverty, however, there is a tendency to think in material terms – and to try to solve it in purely material terms. That leads to the mistake that many organizations make – leaving no space for growth from the communities they serve. There is a way to spend money that induces dependency and a way to do it that enables human development. Camfed illustrates the difference.

“Once you create an environment in which people can see that you really mean it when you say you’re listening and you’re there to support their initiatives,” says Cotton, “then you get something very profoundly inspiring. You see the breadth and depth of human endeavor and initiative – that’s the greatest resource we have, after all.”

Join Fixes on Facebook and follow updates on twitter.com/nytimesfixes.

David Bornstein is the author of “How to Change the World,” which has been published in 20 languages, and “The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,” and is co-author of “Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.” He is the founder of dowser.org, a media site that reports on social innovation.