

A portrait of Angeline Murimirwa, a woman with dark hair styled in braids, wearing a colorful patterned top and a necklace. She is smiling slightly. The background is a blurred indoor setting. A dark red diagonal shape is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Sisters Act

WRITTEN BY
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Through her Sisters Network, Angeline Murimirwa hopes to get more girls in school, one at a time.

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Sisterhood.

That is the resounding legacy Angeline Murimirwa intends to leave behind as the CEO of CAMFED, a non-governmental organization that is a pan-African campaign for female education.

Wherever she goes on the continent, Murimirwa knows she can rely on her vast network of sisters and make local connections by simply asking her friends who live in the area—something invaluable for many women and girls born in poverty in Africa.

“When you meet, it’s like you know each other already,” she says. “There’s so much chemistry. It’s not just our history that joins us—it is our vision for the future, that we can help each other to get through whatever we face. We can do that.”

Murimirwa leads a movement spearheaded by a quarter of a million young African women in order to support more girls from disadvantaged communities to go to school.

Just like her, she wants young girls to be able to meet supportive sisters so they can overcome the challenges of going to school together while also building lifelong connections that help create a sense of belonging, ultimately helping them stay in school and build a career.

Murimirwa grew up in a poverty-stricken family of farmers in Zimbabwe and was the oldest of five children. She used to arrive at primary school barefoot, offering to do chores for her teacher in exchange for a pencil she could use for the day’s lessons. Murimirwa knew that while she barely maintained her grip on education in primary school, her family would not be able to meet the additional costs required at secondary level.

In Zimbabwe at the time, students had more classes in secondary schools, which also meant more books—something Murimirwa’s parents couldn’t afford. However, CAMFED had just started its first program in Murimirwa’s area, and so her community selected her to receive support to go to secondary school.

“I was also growing older, so I was becoming conscious of issues like having decent clothes,” she says. “But CAMFED provided all the materials needed that my family could not provide: the brand-new uniform, the books, the stationery, everything.”

The organization even supported Murimirwa to stay in the school’s

— Murimirwa (front row, far left) with members of the CAMFED Association in Lilongwe, Malawi

PROFILE
Angeline Murimirwa



Murimirwa at TED2023
in Vancouver



boarding house, as her walk to school was deemed too far.

But Murimirwa sank into a depression, feeling guilty that she was learning and enjoying regular meals, all while wondering if her family was able to eat each day. It was a teacher who came from a similar background who inspired her. He reminded her class that dropping out of school to help their families would in fact not help at all—it was through their education that they would be able to secure a different future for their loved ones.

Not all of Murimirwa's peers were as fortunate as she to receive financial support from CAMFED. Most of her classmates did leave school, unable to afford to continue their education, and many got married early and had children, unable to lift themselves out of the cycle of poverty.

"When you see us together in the same room today, our lives are so shockingly different in one way," Murimirwa says sadly. "My kids always say

to me, 'There's no way you're the same age! Because you know what poverty does? It ages you.'"

With the hope of helping her family in the future, Murimirwa worked hard and graduated from high school. She stayed with CAMFED as a volunteer, ultimately securing roles as its first-ever association chairperson, its first national director, and her current position of CEO, which she was appointed to in January 2023.

One of the most notable programs Murimirwa helped launch was the CAMFED Association. What began with 400 women from rural Zimbabwe who also benefited from the organization talking about their future has grown into more than 250,000 members throughout Africa. The association aims to empower women to become leaders in their town, region, or country. Through her network, Murimirwa is hoping to change the fate of an increasing number of young girls in Africa, one at a time.

"It's about the potential that's unleashed into the future, the world that we can create when every child is given an opportunity to explore," she explains. "Every time I see a young woman lawyer fighting for other girls, I look at her and ask, 'If we had not supported her through school, what would have happened to her?' They would have become another



— Fatima Frank, Murimirwa, and Tisiyenji Ngoma at a meeting of CAMFED Association leaders in Lusaka, Zambia

statistic. If you see a medical doctor—or a nurse who stepped in to deliver a baby by the side of the road—I look at her and say, ‘If she had not gone to school, this mother and child would have died because this would not have happened.’”

To describe the challenges of young girls in rural areas such as the one she grew up in, Murimirwa describes how poverty translates to a lack of choice and a lack of agency. Very often in Zimbabwe and other neighboring countries, mothers have to choose between feeding their children and buying books for school. CAMFED can offer support regarding the material things, but the support of an organization like the CAMFED Association helps with what she calls the immaterial challenges these girls can face.

“It’s not just material, it’s also just even aspirations,” she says. “It’s generational. My grandmother didn’t go to high school, neither did my mom. It’s that whole vicious cycle. In all the years I’ve worked with CAMFED, we’ve never had an incident where a parent said, ‘I don’t want my child to go to school.’ Whenever these material needs are met, communities, parents, and families have rallied around the education of their own children.”

For some of the CAMFED girls whose parents often do not have a diploma as they do, having support from other graduates for the simplest thing can make an enormous difference.

“All of a sudden, you have an opportunity to dream and be everything that you can, but you graduate into an abyss,” Murimirwa remarks. “I stayed on

course, I did everything I was supposed to do—I’ve passed high school, but I don’t know what to do now with this paper. What do I do with this degree? Whom do I go to?’ There was that whole feeling of hopelessness.”

However, after meeting with other CAMFED graduates, Murimirwa realized that hopelessness quickly went away as they realized how big of a support system they all had. No action is unnoticed or unappreciated, even if it’s just sharing a piece of clothing with someone for their job interview.

This vision of accessible access to education but also communal support between women, and girls, is what Murimirwa intends to continue at CAMFED.

“I want every child to know how it feels to have your dream come true, to have an opportunity,” she says.

“Exclusion is painful. You have all these brilliant things you want to do, but not to have an opportunity to do it—it’s stifling. That vision is where every child, from every town, regardless of who gave birth to you, where you were born, has the opportunity to do the most magical things with your life while you’re still living.” **LM**