

## Transcription Episode 6 -Ann Cotton

00:00:02:19 - 00:00:40:21

Reeta

I'm Reeta Roy, and this is Transcending Boundaries. A Podcast that features deep conversations with exceptional leaders. Each episode dives into the lives of women and men who have changed their communities, their countries, and the world for the better. Join me to discover the relationships, experiences and insights that have shaped their remarkable journeys. My guest today is a remarkable trailblazer whose life's work has transformed the lives of millions of girls across Africa.

00:00:40:23 - 00:01:14:02

Reeta

Born in Cardiff, Wales, she began her career as an English teacher in London, working with students from marginalised areas of the city, and she witnessed firsthand the transformative power of education. In 1991, her graduate research in rural Zimbabwe led to a groundbreaking observation that parents wanted to send their children, including their daughters, to school. But it was poverty that was holding them back.

00:01:14:04 - 00:01:55:23

Reeta

At the time, her assessment was unconventional because development literature frequently referred to culture as the barrier. Her insight and her determination to do something about it sparked a movement. That movement is called CAMFED. It's an organisation supporting the education of girls and young women in Africa. CAMFED started with just 32 girls in Zimbabwe, and since that time has grown into a global force for advancing girls education in Africa, reaching millions of learners.

00:01:56:00 - 00:02:31:20

Reeta

Her incredible journey has earned her numerous accolades, including an order of the British Empire for Services to Education in Africa, an honorary doctorate from Cambridge University, and honorary doctorate in education from the Open University, and the prestigious World Innovation Summit for Education Prize. She's a celebrated speaker, a global advocate for social justice and equality. I'm talking about none other than Ann Cotton.

00:02:31:22 - 00:02:57:11

Reeta

Ann welcome and thanks for making time to be here with me and to talk to our audience about your life and the people who've influenced you, especially what you've accomplished. So I'd like to just go back to the past, actually go back to your childhood. You grew up in Wales, beautiful parents who instilled a deep sense of values, of service, of empathy.

00:02:57:13 - 00:02:59:13

Reeta

Would you share a little bit about your childhood?

00:02:59:19 - 00:03:24:17

Ann Cotton

Yes. Well thank you Reeta. This is a marvellous opportunity to share with you and a real privilege. And indeed, it was a privilege to grow in Wales, a land where poetry and song and music, are really valued, greatly. And, I grew up in a household where I actually thought it was quite normal for, your mother to sing Puccini Arias.

00:03:24:19 - 00:03:26:06

Reeta

Oh gosh

00:03:26:08 - 00:03:51:10

Ann Cotton

Because she was in the, multinational opera company, although she'd had a very, very difficult childhood. But there's a very beautiful hymn that I think sums up my mother, and it's called: Turandot. And the lines go canon lamb and sound. They only take a few want Lily DLO, and it means only those with a pure heart can sing.

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Ann Cotton

Can sing in the morning and sing at night. And that really sums up my mother. She did have a pure heart. In spite of losing her mother at seven, in spite of a very unstable father. But she was greatly loved by her extended family, particularly by her aunt. And after whom I'm named. So, yes, my parents grew up in adjoining mining villages in South Wales.

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Ann Cotton

Mining was, was the way to earn money. My father while growing up in poverty, it was a very stable, loving home. And he used to watch the miners, the retired miners climbing the streets, leaning, you know, to catch their breath. Because the lungs were shot through with the coal dust, and he was terrified of becoming a miner.

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Ann Cotton

So he studied. He studied so hard. And when he was nine, he was put in for the 11 plus scholarship, which he passed, but he was too young, so he had to wait a year. But for him, education was the way forward. Education was about security and the way out of poverty. And so that was the mantra, really, of my childhood growing up in Wales.

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Reeta

It's amazing. Wow. Just imagine your mum singing around the house. Your dad, quoting poetry, something you said he loved poetry.

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Ann Cotton

Yes. He was a real all-rounder. I mean, he studied chemistry. He got the mining scholarship to Aberystwyth University to study chemistry. Ironically, it was from the mine owner of the mine where his grandfather, was critically injured, as a result of which his mother left school aged 12.

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Ann Cotton

So he got the scholarship, but he had a great love of Shakespeare and, you know, romantic poets. Yes. He was a real all-rounder. And he used to give us poems to learn. So, right. The first one to learn this poem, get sixpence. He'd put the sixpence on the table. And he'd, you know, we'd be halfway through reading it.

00:06:04:02 - 00:06:14:01

Ann Cotton

He'd say: come on, ready? Are we'd say: No, no, no more time. Of course he knew the poems of by heart took us a while. It must have been a little naive not to realise.

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Reeta

Now you won a scholarship as well to a private girls school. What was that experience like?

00:06:20:03 - 00:06:36:00

Ann Cotton

I did, I did, I was in a school, a local school. There were 51 children in my class, and I think I spent most of my time running errands or teaching other children to read behind the blackboard. And, so my father was my real teacher.

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Reeta

Hmmm

00:06:36:21 - 00:06:58:16

Ann Cotton

When i got home, in the evenings, he would say: the files are upstairs, he had a deep baritone. It's cost, you know, three shillings or whatever it was. And off I would go to work. And that's when, you know, he would be setting homework for me. So when it came to the 11 plus yes, I won a scholarship to a prestigious girls school in Wales.

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Ann Cotton

And, I was the first in my school ever to win one. And I didn't know anybody in the neighbourhood who went there, but, it was, an extraordinary experience.

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Reeta

Tell us more about how extraordinary.

00:07:12:21 - 00:07:31:09

Ann Cotton

Well, I spent the school holidays when the we bought the uniform, which, is very complicated and, had all sorts of lacrosse boots and indoor shoes and outdoor shoes. And I was very, very excited, and my father complained. He said, this is cost me an entire month's salary, Inspite the fact it was a scholarship.

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Ann Cotton

But he was pleased i was going, and, i used to dress up in it. I was so excited. But when I got there, I quickly realised I was a fish out of water because, you know, girls came to school in fancy cars. We didn't have a car. We lived in a terraced house. We had gone to, Barry Island on a on our summer holidays.

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Ann Cotton

And, one of the first things I did, with a piece of homework from Mrs. Roberts, Write what you did in the summer holiday. So I duly wrote about our week in Barry Island where we'd gone by bus stayed in bed and breakfast, and it rained most days. And we went to the laundrette to wash, to dry our clothes and went to see Samson Delilah twice because it was next to the laundrette.

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Ann Cotton

And, and I thought we had a great holiday. I went to the slot machine arcades, and Mrs. Roberts came in and said she was going to read some of the best aloud, and I'd already realised that I'd made a mistake. And at the end of the reading, at the end of the lesson, a girl came up to me and she said, oh, you went to Barry Island Field on holiday?

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Ann Cotton

I've never been there. Well, she wouldn't need to go to Barry Island because they had a car. And so it was so much about me that I had to start hiding. I'd be on a donkey on Barry Island Beach, the girls had ponies. So socially, I was out of my depths, felt very excluded. And I began to withdraw.

00:09:05:00 - 00:09:28:17

Ann Cotton

And I didn't do well academically now in those early years. So it was a very tough experience for me as children, for the teachers, for the most part, I think were made snobbish. And they really valued those girls whose fathers, you know, had status and, were well known in Cardiff. So it was one of the hardest lessons.

00:09:28:17 - 00:09:29:20

Reeta

Yes. Yeah.

00:09:29:22 - 00:09:31:00

Ann Cotton

Yes, yes.

00:09:31:00 - 00:09:57:16

Reeta

And yet it's this experience of being excluded that we will come back to because it's come to characterise some of your greatest work about creating inclusion. And I want to I'll come back to that in a moment. Now, you finished school, went on to university, and you decided to become a teacher, and you found yourself, in a state school, I guess so.

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Reeta

So also rather challenging environment, but of a different sort. But here you are, a green teacher in the classroom. What did you encounter in the classroom, and what did you encounter in the corridors?

00:10:10:04 - 00:10:13:16

Ann Cotton

Yes. Well, I haven't, in fact, gone to university. I went to teacher training college.

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Reeta

You went to teacher training college?

00:10:15:06 - 00:10:31:01

Ann Cotton

I went there because I didn't, you know, I'd lost my confidence. I'd lost my academic confidence. So I applied to teacher training college, and I was happy about that because I wanted to be a teacher. I went for my interview in London, and I got through and then she said, where would you like to teach?

00:10:31:01 - 00:10:51:13

Ann Cotton

Which part of London? So I said Bermondsey. And she looked at me and said, do you know London? I said, well, well, well no, not really, but it's the docks, isn't it? Oh yes. She said, we

won't have any difficulty placing you there. So that was where I went. And it was an amazing, an amazing educational institution.

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Ann Cotton

Teachers who were utterly committed, a headmistress who was tough but very fair. And we cared, you know, the culture was one of real caring for the children and one where we were pushing them hard. And, one of my early experiences, I was asked to invigilate an exam. Well, what could be easier, you know, and, I, I went to the classroom and I couldn't get the class to sit down.

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Ann Cotton

That was my first problem. And,

00:11:23:09 - 00:11:25:07

Reeta

How many people were in the class? How many students?

00:11:25:08 - 00:11:26:07

Ann Cotton

About 25,26

00:11:26:07 - 00:11:28:16

Reeta

And they just all over the place.

00:11:28:16 - 00:11:45:08

Ann Cotton



Girls, Yes. And they were chatting and laughing, and I might as well have been a fly on the wall from the notice they were taking of me. And I was getting more concerned as time went on. But there was a girl in the corner and she was opening and closing, swinging this window and banging it. So I asked her, you know, please, would she sit down?

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Ann Cotton

And, she took no notice. So I started to walk towards her, at which point the class quieted down. They knew what was coming, I think. And I said, please, would you sit down? And she shocked me. I heard a barrage of abuse I'd never heard.

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Reeta

Which we can't repeat here.

00:12:06:02 - 00:12:29:02

Ann Cotton

Fairly new and, and I was shocked and I basically lost control, I think of that. And the exam didn't get taken. It was a school exam, so I thought I'd better go to the headmistress and confess. And she asked me if I wanted to teach the girl one and one, which I found an extraordinary request.

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Reeta

Terrifying.

00:12:30:14 - 00:12:54:03

Ann Cotton

Terrifying actually, yes. I mean, she was knee high to a grasshopper child, but nevertheless. And I learned so much from her. I learned so much, she became my protector in the school.

We worked together. I taught her to read and write. If you get any trouble, madam, she'd say with any girl, I'll sort her out, all right?

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Reeta

Oh my gosh. But you said you taught her to read and write.

00:12:59:07 - 00:13:24:01

Ann Cotton

I taught her to read and write. And she was, she was a Turkish Cypriot girl. They'd come from Cyprus, which was, there was a civil war there. Her brothers and her father had stayed to fight. And of course, she was she was very angry with them. She'd left everything she had known. And she lived in a high rise with her mum who barely left the flat.

00:13:24:03 - 00:13:44:08

Ann Cotton

And she couldn't accept this exam paper. She couldn't read it. So of course she needed to get some, do some kudos from her peers. The only way was to challenge a teacher. But she was feisty and funny and humorous and she had enormous potential. And she was very worried about the fact I wasn't married.

00:13:44:10 - 00:14:05:08

Ann Cotton

So she would, tell me that the Greek, the local greengrocer, you know, was interested and, was I interested in a date? So she and I became very good friends. Yeah, I remember one day on the stairs, she obviously wanted to know who was boss, nevertheless. And, at change of time.

00:14:05:10 - 00:14:35:11

Ann Cotton

And she, shouted out, madam, did you make that dress? And I said, yes. Brightly. She said, I thought so, it's bloody awful. And the whole stairwell erupted. But, she taught me that we have to understand. We have to understand who's in the classroom. We have to understand the children. We have to understand what's going on in their lives outside home and what's gone on in their lives up to that point.

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Ann Cotton

And, and that, for me, is fundamentally what my whole educational philosophy is about. And she taught me so much.

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Reeta

What an extraordinary experience. Absolutely. I hope she's okay. It sounds like she would be just fine. She's in charge wherever she is. She's in charge of things. Now. You took a trip to Zimbabwe to do some research? Yeah. What brought you to Zimbabwe to begin with? And how did you decide that's where you were going to go?

00:15:08:16 - 00:15:38:04

Ann Cotton

Well, I think, you know, I, as I said, I lost my academic confidence in school, and I had sort of rediscovered it a bit, and I wanted to prove myself. So, I embarked on an M.A. in London, and I enjoyed it so much. And I wanted to extend that perhaps even beyond that. And I'd gone to Zimbabwe to do, fieldwork, my supervisor, and had looked at what happened.

00:15:38:04 - 00:16:02:22

Ann Cotton

After the revolutionary struggles to women and of course, Zimbabwe was now ten years into independence. What was happening to the women? Were they still involved in the political struggle, or had they been pushed aside? Which tended to be the experience certainly in Latin America. And I went to look at the issue of the exclusion of girls from Education.

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Ann Cotton

Obviously, education was my great interest. So I prepared or so I thought, in every way I could, reading everything I could about the context and about the issue of girls exclusion from school. And, I went to a village on the western edge of Zimbabwe, Mola. The Nyaminyami district where the Tonga people were living.

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Reeta

My goodness. And you told me once that there was a marvellous man, the chief who received you in Mola. Yes, who was also a very unusual man in terms of being a very strong leader, very committed to his people. And he took you in?

00:16:44:14 - 00:17:09:10

Ann Cotton

He did? Oh, he did, he you know, I was white, clearly. My white skin, the only white person in the community, I came from a country that, was responsible for taking everything from the Tonga people. When the Kariba dam was built, in the colonial period, his own father had been involved in the political struggle.

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Ann Cotton

And yet, you know, he welcomed me, and somehow trusted me, and I had enormous respect for him and the way he thought about the community as a whole. He was really instrumental in giving me the confidence, to move forward. And one of the first things was, a community meeting. He said, we'll have a meeting, which I thought, was to be a fairly small affair in the school.

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Ann Cotton

And it was going to happen two days. Two days hence. And, I woke up that morning, there's a lot of noise outside, and, lots of people walking, on the road, and, I joined the throng.

People had their shoes hung around their necks, you know, to save the leather. They had some of the best clothes on.

00:18:05:23 - 00:18:09:10

Ann Cotton

When I got to the school, I found this was the meeting.

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Reeta

Oh wow, they were all there.

00:18:11:01 - 00:18:23:19

Ann Cotton

They were there. The chief had called the community and we were there to discuss the issue of girls exclusion from education and how girls could be brought into the system.

00:18:24 - 00:18:26

Reeta

And what did you learn? What did you hear?

00:18:26 - 00:18:34

Ann Cotton

It was a profound lesson in democracy, a profound lesson. People stood up to speak. Men, women, old, young.

00:18:34:19 - 00:19:13:03

Ann Cotton

The men sat together. The women sat together. And it was the most extraordinary arena. Cloudless blue sky backdrop of these blue hazed hills, people wearing colourful cloths. People with caps saying, you know, the San Francisco Yacht Club, this, you know, this second hand market in second hand things. And were listened to, you know, everybody was listened to quietly.

00:19:13:05 - 00:19:49:23

Ann Cotton

The children were quiet, well-behaved and we, we basically that day, forged what became the CAMFED model, of community, full community engagement. Committee basis for decision making. And I had never before witnessed such a broad decision making forum. So yes, it was he and of course he asked if I could speak.

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Ann Cotton

Well, I had a, I mean, everything was happening in Tonga, so I had a wonderful young man, a translator, called Tamias Manyepa. Tamias turned to me: you're going to have to speak now. Which, And they listened. People listened, and I thought, what do they think I am? You know, they probably think I'm

00:20:12:12 - 00:20:37:08

Ann Cotton

Wealthy you know, fancy car a big house. And indeed, I was living a privileged life, so I decided to tell them about my grandmother who had left school when she was 12. And, at the end, gosh, it makes me emotional thinking about it. So, you know, people came up to me to shake my hand, and I felt.

00:20:37:10 - 00:21:05:13

Ann Cotton

I was beginning to cross the bridge. I was beginning to cross the bridge to understanding, because I had arrived, thinking I understood and how wrong was I. I was embarrassed, I was embarrassed, I thought, how arrogant was I to think I could study this problem from outside and arrive in this community? With questions and questionnaires.

00:21:05:15 - 00:21:12:13

Ann Cotton

So I accepted with deep humility that I knew nothing.

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Reeta

And yet Ann, that arrogance, not yours because you clearly had the humility to come and listen and to just be and to connect with people. I'm referring to the arrogance within the development community where we assume we know, we think we have the answers. We judge why girls out of school, and certainly at that time, the prevailing view is that their parents, that culture locks girls out of school, and you found something altogether different.

00:21:53:23 - 00:22:21:16

Ann Cotton

You know there was so much money being spent on persuasion that time. There were endless videos, being made to persuade parents to go to school. And I, in speaking of arrogance, I went to see a very senior, education advisor and to put to question this strategy. And I said, do you realise that people don't have electricity, let alone TV sets?

00:22:21:18 - 00:22:35:21

Ann Cotton

And he looked at me and I said, and if they do, they're sending their daughters to school because they can. How? He said, how do we how do we manage your passion? He said to me, anyway.

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Reeta

Your passion.

00:22:37:22 - 00:23:08:17

Ann Cotton

My passion, my passion. But I found, that waste, so wrong, in the context of such need. Because the community told me, you know, as one the chief said, we want our daughters to go to school. The teachers, grandmothers who'd never set foot in a school themselves. Parents with one voice said, we want our daughters to go to school.

00:23:08:19 - 00:23:30:23

Ann Cotton

And when I returned with this message to discuss it. Oh, the community told you, what they wanted you to hear, which was clearly nonsense, but they were just holding fast to this idea. And how could there be an economic line below which, parents didn't care about the education of their daughters made no sense.

00:23:31:00 - 00:24:02:20

Ann Cotton

So what was happening and what was happening, of course, was the fact that boys had a much better chance of paid work. And they had much more freedom to travel. They could go to town in search of work without there being too much fear for their safety. Girls were not considered safe. Quite rightly so. So in a context where, the security was the family, there was no Social Security coming from the state pensions. Here you grew, what you ate.

00:24:02:22 - 00:24:12:17

Ann Cotton

The children were the coming security. So a choice was forced. But when the opportunity was offered, the girls.

00:24:12:19 - 00:24:40:06

Reeta

Went to school. The girls went to school. Now we will enter into a whole other terrain. With your experience in Zimbabwe, you had a powerful experience there, part of which you've shared with us. But you also connected to people and you connected to a particular woman. And something about that experience unlocked something you were carrying deep inside. Can you share that?



00:24:40:09 - 00:25:12:12

Ann Cotton

Yes. I'd come down from the Chiefs place with Tamias, who was the you know, he was my right hand and helped me through everything and translating. And in the distance we could see a woman sitting outside her hut. And it was unusual that she didn't sort of get up to greet us or make any indication of the of our arrival, because that would have been more normal behaviour.

00:25:12:14 - 00:25:32:08

Ann Cotton

And he said to me, her baby has died. Which it was very, very sad. I could I looked at her, he got up to her and I recognised myself.

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Ann Cotton

Because grief, deep grief is not about, expressions, you know, and then the kind of energetic, wailing or, it robs you of the energy to express itself. And I saw that in her. I saw her complete, almost absence of emotion. Because you are, you are drained of, almost drained of feeling.

00:26:04:15 - 00:26:34:21

Ann Cotton

You haven't got the capacity to feel because what's happened is so immense and I said to Tamias, who didn't know my experience. I said, please tell her that I too have lost a baby. And he told her, and at that point, for the first time, she looked up and she said as he translated, I didn't know that white women's babies died.

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Ann Cotton

And it was like stab at the heart. Oh. And somehow things started to coalesce in my mind because my husband and I had wanted to do something in memory of our daughter, of

Catherine. She had died from a medical blunder. Her lungs were immature. They couldn't absorb enough oxygen when she was eight weeks old.

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Ann Cotton

Of course, she had the best treatment when she, well, in those eight weeks. And of course, I knew the connection between education, girls education and maternal health and child survival. And somehow I was beginning now to draw on that, and that meeting started a healing process for me because I had buried a lot of the pain and got on healing. I had three children.

00:27:31:12 - 00:27:58:00

Ann Cotton

I was busy and it became a source of, of courage, actually, and empathy and connection because wherever we are and whatever our circumstances, these human experiences connect us. Well, they unite us, they unite us. My vulnerability and hers were the same. And that was yeah, that was a profound experience at that moment.

00:27:58:00 - 00:28:04:06

Ann Cotton

And it, it gave me, clarity about how to move forward.

00:28:04:08 - 00:28:28:06

Reeta

Clarity, courage, determination. So you came home and not too long after that, you started an organisation called CAMFED. And if I recall correctly, you started by supporting 32 girls in Zimbabwe. Talk about those early days setting up an organisation dedicated to girls education.

00:28:28:08 - 00:29:03:02

Ann Cotton

Yes. Well, then there was an absence of an organisation dedicated to girls education. I was looking for an organisation that would, almost provide an umbrella, but, in the absence of that, I realised I had to move forward myself. Because I also had to convince people that, the girls would go to school because I was still being told, well, they might start, but then they'll be pulled out by their parents when they realise they've lost their labour, etc., etc. This was kind of, you know, conversations I was having.

00:29:03:08 - 00:29:39:10

Ann Cotton

So the only way was to demonstrate it, from a, you know, so from a moral perspective, I perspective, I felt I absolutely needed to act, but also from an intellectual perspective, I needed to have a demonstration, of the reality of the truths that the community told me. The sector was filled with, organisations where there would be, an expat, head, generally white, maybe the deputy as well.

00:29:39:12 - 00:30:06:21

Ann Cotton

The differentials in pay were extreme. They would send their children home to their home country. And then, you know, there would be, people would be recruited locally. And I felt this was a problem. I felt I wasn't interested in setting up an organisation that followed that pattern. So I established, CAMFED in the UK and simultaneously in Zimbabwe, each with a board of trustees.

00:30:06:23 - 00:30:37:22

Ann Cotton

In, Zimbabwe, the chair of the board was the permanent secretary of education, Doctor Isiah Sibanda, who was, a wonderful ally and encouragement at that time. So I, was challenging the norms, if you like. This completely was set up and being told it wouldn't work. That the idea of decision making being held at the community level, I'd see the money go astray.

00:30:37:24 - 00:31:05:22

Ann Cotton

I remember one conversation where I was told, you know, there'd be so much corruption in the community that nothing would happen. And I said, well, it's a it's a strange context when there's so much corruption in this that, that there's so much poverty. Why is there so much poverty if there's so much corruption. And, and he just looked at me and, didn't really have an answer, but, just thought I was I was going to, I was going to fail and he was going to be able to rub his hands and say, I told you so.

00:31:05:24 - 00:31:29:13

Ann Cotton

So right from the outset, right from that first meeting in Mola with the chief, the whole foundation of it was about decisions being taken by the community. I mean, I lived in the UK, I wasn't moving to Zimbabwe. So if it was going to work, it had to work. With this local democratic decision making, and it worked.

00:31:29:13 - 00:31:52:14

Ann Cotton

It has worked. It continues to work. I was told that, committee members wouldn't, contribute, wouldn't participate unless they were paid. And this is 30 years later, no committee member in six countries has ever been paid. And they are committed to the work. They are committed to supporting the most vulnerable children in their midst.

00:31:52:16 - 00:32:19:09

Ann Cotton

They take pride in the success because they've had such a hand in the success of the children. So why does it always seem that money mediates these relationships and money mediates human behaviour? Because there is so much else. And so the, the foundations of CAMFED were laid in those early months and years and have held.

00:32:19:11 - 00:32:45:08

Reeta

I remember when we began working with you and with CAMFED, that one of the most important lessons you said is we're going to have to learn to trust the local communities, the local, you know, grandmother in a particular village because she'll be looking out not just for

her granddaughter, but for all the girls. What struck us as just profoundly powerful was the governance structure.

00:32:45:08 - 00:33:10:11

Reeta

It was all centred around that girl. It was the community. It was the school mother, who was in the classroom. That or the mother, what do you call the teacher mother? The teacher mentor in the classroom who looked out for the girls and just ensured that girls thrived. And if they didn't show up for school, who went back to ask what happened?

00:33:10:11 - 00:33:43:07

Reeta

Yes. And make sure that they were fine and they could come back to school. So that was really very profound in terms of the governance structure. And there's such transparency, absolute transparency in terms of what a girl, who was going to school needed to have her shoes, her books, her uniform, and if something was missing, her mother or grandmother felt quite empowered to make sure that wasn't missing, that she received it.

00:33:43:10 - 00:34:11:16

Reeta

So it's a amazing model. Yes. In terms of structure, transparency and good governance, all around. Yes. And you've had incredible success in Zimbabwe more than demonstrated. You essentially defied conventional wisdom and put a new model in place. There must have been some amazing women and men you encountered in Zimbabwe. Would you tell us about them?

00:34:11:18 - 00:34:17:05

Ann Cotton

Extraordinary, extraordinary people.

00:34:17:07 - 00:34:44:06

Ann Cotton

Judith Kumari was one. The late Judith Kumari extremely woman. She was the headmistress of Mola secondary school. She arrived. She was there for my first visit, but she was there for the next. And she was only 23. Oh, wow. She'd arrived to become a headmistress because Zimbabwe was training as fast as possible. There were only 60 places for every thousand black children in a segregated education system in the colonial period.

00:34:44:07 - 00:35:25:01

Ann Cotton

They had a massive challenge. Fay Chung, the minister of Education, extraordinary woman, really led the massive expansion and so there was Judith, in a very remote area. She taught me so much about, you know, the dignity of people working to really elevate their sense of who of themselves to welcome, you know, people into the school, to welcome the barefoot grandmother who'd never stepped over a school's threshold and make her feel important.

00:35:25:03 - 00:35:47:13

Ann Cotton

You know, be listened to. She went out to families to teach them. If you see a tick in your child's exercise book. Good. That means good. You know, that's good. People didn't understand the symbols of education. And she attended weddings and funerals. She became part of the community. She was loved when she arrived they thought, who have they sent us?

00:35:47:13 - 00:36:09:13

Ann Cotton

They sent us a woman, they've sent us a young woman. And really, she transformed education in in that community. I remember one day being in her office, this little cubby-hole and a child came in with a message. She was speaking to him in Tonga, and she spoke to him harshly. And I asked her afterwards. I said, what's the matter?

00:36:09:13 - 00:36:32:11

Ann Cotton

What did you say? She said: I told him to come smartly dressed. More of this was such a poor place. You know, water was in short supply. And of course my natural inclination was to be sympathetic as it was. Goodness me, you know. She said if children bear the marks of poverty, they will inherit the scars.

00:36:32:13 - 00:36:54:13

Ann Cotton

Oh my goodness. She was a philosopher and a poet. I've always remembered the power of that. So it wasn't about saying, oh, my dear, you know, don't worry. It was about saying, we can do this, we can do this. You know, you have dignity, take pride, take pride in your all. Take pride in your family. Take pride in yourself because you can do it.

00:36:54:18 - 00:37:26:05

Ann Cotton

Now come to school smartly dressed tomorrow. And that, you know, I wasn't meeting people like this at home. And I felt, I was in a context of, you know, the type of humanity that was full of generosity and goodness. People would tell me things not, because they wanted some accolade, but because they wanted to give a message about a child.

00:37:26:07 - 00:37:51:23

Ann Cotton

They would say, well, you know, she lives five miles from here. And I walked up to her home, but they didn't even have blankets. So I got blankets for them. You know, and they would tell me not because, you know, they wanted me to think well of them, but because they wanted me to understand. And that's what counts, you know, how do you behave towards people who are more vulnerable than you?

00:37:52:00 - 00:38:02:02

Ann Cotton

You know, it's easy enough to behave in a particular way to people with more status and authority. But how do you behave to people who are more vulnerable when you're not being watched.

00:38:02:04 - 00:38:03:09

Reeta

When you're not being watched?

00:38:03:13 - 00:38:25:00

Ann Cotton

That is what I saw and that is what I heard, and that that was what the whole thing depended upon. So it attracted those people. It attracted those people who wanted change, who wanted to make a difference. And, it had a kind of a culture of care. With a child, as you say, at the centre.

00:38:25:02 - 00:38:54:20

Ann Cotton

Yes. It was, it was extraordinary for me personally. But it, it was a demonstration model of how, communities can take charge, and work in a way that's, so compassionate and caring. And, you know, when that grandmother comes into the school and feels that she can approach the head teacher and say, my granddaughter hasn't yet received her school skirt, that's change.

00:38:54:22 - 00:39:09:19

Ann Cotton

Yeah. We need to celebrate that. So that is not something say, oh, dear. You know, 10% of the school skirts didn't seem to arrive, so that gets somehow modified on a report to a donor. No, it's grandmothers came into the school to find out.

00:39:09:21 - 00:39:10:16

Reeta

Where are the skirts?

00:39:10:16 - 00:39:11:18

Ann Cotton



Where are the skirts?

00:39:11:20 - 00:39:12:09

Reeta

Where are the skirts.

00:39:12:10 - 00:39:21:22

Ann Cotton

Brilliant. Because the services is for them. Yeah. You know, we are providing a service and we are answerable to them, not the other way around.

00:39:21:22 - 00:39:47:05

Reeta

Yeah. I think the other big myth that's out there, which you also busted completely, was the incredible generosity, the great philanthropy that comes from these very households who have so little. Yes. I remember once you told me about a schoolteacher just reached into a pocket and paid for a child's fees because she didn't want that child to be sent home.

00:39:47:05 - 00:39:50:19

Reeta

Yes, yes. And you must have seen that time and time again.

00:39:50:23 - 00:40:23:16

Ann Cotton

Yes, yes, I saw it time and time again and it reminded me of my childhood. Oh, my, and I wondered, I thought, can this generosity not exist in wealthy communities? Yes. Do we just move beyond empathy and sympathy and compassion, as we move towards greater wealth? Because during the general strike, in 1926, my grandfather was on strike with the miners in South Wales and, they can sing, the Welsh.

00:40:23:16 - 00:40:45:08

Ann Cotton

So the Welsh Mill boys choirs were going around the country, you know, collecting money from people sympathetic in the working classes and bringing the money home. And meanwhile, this army of women, including my grandmother, were making meals for the children during the general strike. They made 217,000 meals.

00:40:45:08 - 00:40:46:20

Reeta

Oh my gosh. Wow.

00:40:46:24 - 00:41:16:02

Ann Cotton

This very poor community. And I just keep finding these parallels. I was in Malawi, and it was a pre-school. And the women, giving their time and, and their resources to provide food for the pre-school children. And I noticed that some of the children were getting extra rations. So I asked the women why are the children getting extra rations?

00:41:16:04 - 00:41:38:24

Ann Cotton

And the woman said to me, because, those are the children who were most hungry. And I said: how do you know? And she said: because they eat the fastest. Oh, and I thought, I've never seen that in a report, you know, in an academic report. And there it was, the knowledge, that's so crucial. Absolutely.

00:41:38:24 - 00:42:07:12

Ann Cotton

Coming from a poor community in Malawi of women who had not been to school but understood children's needs. And I just kept finding these parallels in my own background in Wales and what I was seeing, in Africa. And I remember one day meeting a woman called Dorcas, she was disabled and she was in a wheelchair.

00:42:07:14 - 00:42:30:15

Ann Cotton

And she invited me to her home. And when we got there, she literally climbed down out of her wheelchair and crawled inside and she had a lot of fabric spread out on the floor. And she said: I'm making clothes for the people in the community because I'm supporting, orphan children. And she had adopted 12 orphans.

00:42:30:17 - 00:42:46:14

Ann Cotton

Herself as a single woman, and that she was now providing for their food for their educational expenses all herself. And I've never seen such a profound, you know, act of

00:42:46:14 - 00:42:48:07

Reeta

Devotion and philanthropy.

00:42:48:07 - 00:43:13:00

Ann Cotton

Devotion and love. But it's somehow in our sector, you know, in development you don't find words like love and compassion and empathy in reports. You find a lot of the technical jargon and data. And what are the stories, what are the stories behind what is happening?

00:43:13:02 - 00:43:44:02

Ann Cotton

These are not some sort of sidebar, you know, to give a report, a bit of emotional heft. These are biographies which tell us, tell us in detail of what's happening. And I've always found stories to be a huge source of understanding. And also of acknowledgement, you know, to honour people who were doing, you know, really doing the work on the frontline.

00:43:44:04 - 00:43:55:20

Ann Cotton

Who are often, so marginalised or taken for granted. Yes. I've gone round this a little bit haven't I

00:43:55:22 - 00:44:24:18

Reeta

Beautifully, beautifully. And I'm glad these are all very important things which need to be said. There's, incredible demand for and I say in quotations, data and for analytics. And yet, we have really no insight into what's really happening unless we listen, engage and invite these stories for people to speak about their lives and what's changing or what's not.

00:44:24:20 - 00:44:28:07

Reeta

Otherwise the data, frankly, is just meaningless.

00:44:28:09 - 00:44:29:22

Ann Cotton

Well the data is often flawed, too.

00:44:29:22 - 00:44:30:15

Reeta

And it's flawed.

00:44:30:15 - 00:44:59:16

Ann Cotton

Is not a deep understanding of the gathering, of the gathering process, or even of the language. I think the language of development has a lot to answer for. I think the word beneficiary is hugely problematic and suggests something top down, and a relationship of giving and gratitude. Whereas these are our clients, it's the reason we work.

00:44:59:16 - 00:45:26:24

Ann Cotton

We work for the children or the community. Capacity building is another one I really can't abide. Whose capacity is being built here? And why? There is so much, there is so much that is beyond money. There's so much capital of different kinds, the institutional capital that needs to be honoured and, you know, accessed and used.

00:45:27:01 - 00:45:51:15

Ann Cotton

And brought into work. There's a social capital of the community, the human capital of course. But somehow money is seen as the key, the key driver. So the money and the data seem to drive, held as the most important factors in this, and it's inadequate. It's inadequate.

00:45:51:16 - 00:45:52:17

Reeta

And distortive.

00:45:52:17 - 00:45:53:16

Ann Cotton

And. Yes.

00:45:53:16 - 00:45:55:10

Reeta

And it's distortive.

00:45:55:10 - 00:46:01:11

Ann Cotton

It distorts relationships.

00:46:01:13 - 00:46:31:08

Reeta

It's something, something we need to, I'm trying to find the right word myself. Restate, resettle, rebalance, altogether, and to make sure that humanity, human beings come first in all of this. Now speaking about CAMFED, So by this time you've gone well beyond the demonstration effect. You've actually created a movement, CAMFED operates in five countries.

00:46:31:10 - 00:46:54:16

Reeta

But those girls, once they finish their education, they go on to either further education or they get into the workforce. There's something else. And you've enabled and helped foster, an alumni network, which you call CAMA. And they are formidable. Will you speak about them?

00:46:54:18 - 00:47:25:03

Ann Cotton

Formidable, formidable, extraordinary, extraordinary, extraordinary. It's a movement truly is. You know, I was really losing sleep over this because they, the girls were leaving school, or were about to leave school. What then? This was at a time in the late 90s when HIV and Aids rampaging, decimating communities and adolescent girls, some of the most infected and affected.

00:47:25:05 - 00:48:00:02

Ann Cotton

And of course, they'd gone through secondary school. So the question was, what next? And there was an absence of jobs and opportunities and training, in rural communities. And so they would be tempted to go to town in search of work, which was very, very dangerous. Because, almost the minute they stepped off the buses, there would be offers, offers which would look perhaps like work in hotels or at domestic homes which would be often an opening to abuse.

00:48:00:04 - 00:48:19:04

Ann Cotton

And so I put it to the board that we needed to go beyond, and the board was very reluctant. We said, no no, we're having success. We can't be overly ambitious. This is an area that we don't know anything about. Well, I hadn't known anything about girls education. And so, you know, why not? And I really fought.

00:48:19:04 - 00:48:44:00

Ann Cotton

Fought very hard. And Robert Exhort, who was, you know, a major ally. He said to me years later, I've never been so happy to be proved wrong because, it has become formidable in a force. And I was on a platform in, in Cambridge. I had been invited to speak to students at Trinity College. I was looking out thinking, my goodness, what a privileged group, you know?

00:48:44:00 - 00:49:14:14

Ann Cotton

And even when they leave, they're going to have networks and opportunities that, you know, are available to them. And I thought, we need to mimic the behaviours of the elite and we need to create an alumni, for the girls in Africa. And it was for them really initially. I mean, the idea was to give them a support system on leaving school, but how?

00:49:14:16 - 00:49:38:16

Ann Cotton

The reality was that they were they had such a deep understanding of the reality of exclusion. They had such empathy that already in their lives they were doing what they could. They would meet a child at the bus stop and the child would say, why aren't you at school? And they would explain and they would they would find a way.

00:49:38:18 - 00:50:04:16

Ann Cotton

And so what CAMA became was not my vision. It was absolutely theirs, their own that I don't think it was even their vision. But it was them was they who they were as human beings, what they determined to do in their lives with their education. And so now, of course, the, the older ones are in their early 40s and they, you know, have positions of influence.

00:50:04:16 - 00:50:42:16

Ann Cotton

They, there's a diaspora, they are in Canada. They're in the United States. They've been in Europe, and of course, across Africa. And they are influencers of the systems that they participate in. Angeline Murimirwa, she is the head of CAMFED now, she's one of the first in getting support, charismatic. She understands what it is to be a barefoot child and go to secondary school.

00:50:42:18 - 00:51:08:18

Ann Cotton

Go to a secondary school that, you know, with good electric lights, that she's switching on for the first time. They've lived through that experience. Raniararo Machingaiti, she challenged every expectation of the school she was in of a rural girl. She was one of the first of the 32. By coming top of all the girls in the school.

00:51:08:20 - 00:51:28:01

Ann Cotton

Now, this was a school largely for the middle class of the growing middle class of the cities of Zimbabwe. But there was no local school she could walk to. So if she went to a school which was well resourced and she worked, she worked so hard and she not only became top of the 21 who'd been supported into the school.

00:51:28:03 - 00:51:30:00

Reeta

Of the entire school.

00:51:30:02 - 00:51:57:09

Ann Cotton

The entire complement of girls. And she's a doctor, in Namibia now. She's, working there in a hospital. And she said to me: when I see an old woman and I see a nurse being a bit, you know, disrespectful or dismissive, I say to her, don't speak to that woman that way. She could be my grandmother, they are shocked.



00:51:57:11 - 00:52:00:05

Ann Cotton

Because they don't think that

00:52:00:05 - 00:52:01:05

Reeta

A doctor.

00:52:01:05 - 00:52:35:00

Ann Cotton

A doctor in a white coat came from that background. So they are changing the institutions they are a part of. They are involved in every kind of area. Fiona Mutumberi, who is the, the head of CAMA, she is the first trained lawyer. Remarkable. We have agricultural extension workers. We have, people training others in, agriculture, in managing climate change, through US university, of course.

00:52:35:00 - 00:53:16:02

Ann Cotton

Another, another partner that, works on, sustainable agriculture. They are occupying every facet of, of their national economy, and lives and yet they remain rooted. One of the most profound messages of the early years of CAMA was of the pride, pride in your roots. Never, never turn your back, never feel, that your families haven't got you to where you are.

00:53:16:04 - 00:53:49:03

Ann Cotton

And, you know, I think that is, extraordinary, extraordinarily important for self-confidence, for self-esteem, for identity. So many people hide, hide their backgrounds. You know, when I've spoken about this aspect, I've had people come up to me telling me quietly, I was in a very, a very fancy event in New York, and a woman and I spoke at that, and the woman came up to me and told me like it was a secret she wanted to hide.

00:53:49:05 - 00:54:12:01

Ann Cotton

That her mother was a shop girl in Macy's. And she'd worked so hard for her daughter to have a good education. You know that holds people back when they feel like impostors. Absolutely. The success that they feel, the success has come to them, you know, not by dint of their capability and their hard work.

00:54:12:03 - 00:54:27:15

Ann Cotton

But then they feel like impostors makes them far less powerful. CAMA members have that power. And that is extraordinary to listen to. And they are. Yes, they are over a quarter of a million strong now.

00:54:27:18 - 00:55:05:10

Reeta

I was going to say what's equally extraordinary is just how large this CAMA network is. And so much of what we've talked about, the generosity of people in some cases, have the least to give but have the greatest love and generosity which they express. We've talked about the misplaced assumptions, assumptions which are just dead wrong in the development community about communities they think they know.

00:55:05:12 - 00:55:05:20

Ann Cotton

Yes.

00:55:05:20 - 00:55:06:18

Reeta

But really don't.

00:55:06:19 - 00:55:07:12

Ann Cotton

Yes.

00:55:07:14 - 00:55:28:08

Reeta

And so much of our work is to shift what is outdated in this development sector in order for there to be development. What's your advice to the sector or to foundations like ours, which need to change how this work is being undertaken?

00:55:28:10 - 00:55:57:01

Ann Cotton

It's a very, very big question. One thing I have found challenging is the recruitment of people. Not in Africa but, in the UK, the education systems, of course, are a competitive and they're about, you know, solving problems. So bright young people, they want to change the world. They know the world needs changing, but they think they have to come up with the solutions.

00:55:57:03 - 00:56:29:14

Ann Cotton

So it's about really drawing in people, recruiting people who have those skills, those they're called soft skills. But the fundamentally important skills of listening, listening and learning from people who are the real experts on the frontline, experiencing the day to day problem. So I think we have to look at, you know, how we how we train and how we, how we recruit, in certainly in this sector, I think that's, that's very important.

00:56:29:16 - 00:56:54:06

Ann Cotton

And I think we have to acknowledge the scale of the problem with humility. We have to, take our, you know, we have to be brave about recognising that we don't have the answers. And, you know, I remember in Mola I took my questionnaires, which were only printed on one side to the local school and said, would you like this paper because it's only printed on one side.

00:56:54:06 - 00:57:21:03

Ann Cotton

And the headmaster said, you know, thank you. We haven't got any blank paper. The children would enjoy drawing on blank paper. And I felt free. I started to learn at that moment when I abandoned all my preconceptions, which were born of arrogance, of my arrogance. So we need to, abandon, our presumptions that we know and have the answers and go and listen and learn and trust what people are saying to us.

00:57:21:05 - 00:57:52:13

Reeta

Thank you. Thank you Ann. You're just incredible. And Cotton's life and career exemplify the extraordinary impact that one individual can have in transforming access to education and empowering generations. As a mother and grandmother, Ann's journey is deeply personal. Yet her work has touched millions of lives across continents, from her roots in Wales to her groundbreaking work in rural Zimbabwe.

00:57:52:15 - 00:58:42:17

Reeta

From teaching in deprived areas of London to founding CAMFED. From grassroots mobilisation to influencing global education policies, Ann Cotton has redefined what is possible through vision and empathy by going beyond mistaken assumptions to observing what was real, by connecting to women and families and seeing what they wanted for their daughters. She has inspired a movement that is supporting girls education across Africa, a movement that is transcending boundaries. Ann Cotton is proof that the power of one can create a legacy of change for millions.

00:58:42:19 - 00:59:09:06

Reeta

Thank you for joining us on Transcending Boundaries. I hope this conversation sparked a new idea, or inspired you to reflect on your own leadership journey and the values that guide you. If you enjoyed today's episode, please subscribe, leave us a review and share our show with others. Until next time, keep leading with purpose and with courage.