

## Letter from Mrs. Nane Annan

New York, December 2006

Dear friends,

Girls' education has always been close to my heart, especially as I was once a little girl myself. I remember when I visited a refugee camp in Uganda and instead of farewell speeches, a very young girl climbed up onto the podium and read a poem about the girl child. I looked at her as the sun was setting. She was about 10 and had already gone through so much. Yet her voice was clear and she read with great serenity.

I have been thinking of her, wondering: Shouldn't she be able to reap the fruits of education? Shouldn't she be able to go to school instead of carrying water for her family? Shouldn't she be able to learn skills to earn a living if she so wanted? Shouldn't she, as a grown woman, be able to climb onto another platform and speak on the issues of her community, if she so wanted?

I don't have a photo of her but she and that particular moment are etched into my mind. What I have been trying to do during these 10 years is to paint with words or images the remarkable encounters I have had. Very often, I have met young girls – timid, bright, shy, articulate – and I have always appreciated the courage they have shown. I have too often seen the devastating effects of AIDS or violence visited upon girls and women. I fervently wish and hope for them to gain all the strength and independence necessary for them to stand up for themselves and forge their own future.

In Kenya, I visited a school set up in one of Nairobi's largest slums. A young girl, Lily, read her poem to me: "I give you my little heart, desirous of love. How many times I've been crying and shouting. But nobody listens. I'm a silent cry." I think her poem illustrates so poignantly what girls' education is about: to give girls a voice.



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My visit to Abu Sir School in Egypt certainly proves that point. We had fascinating discussions about peace and democracy and, at the end, the girls made a tableau of the need for education. You can see to the right of the photo a plant dying of thirst, but it thrives when it is watered. I think of the words from the Beijing Platform for Action: “The girl-child of today is the woman of tomorrow. The skills, ideas and energy of the girl-child are essential for the full attainment of the goals of equality, development and peace. For the girl-child to develop her full potential, she needs to be nurtured in an enabling environment where her spiritual, intellectual and material needs for survival, protection and development are met and her equal rights safeguarded.”



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In Mongolia, we visited a *yurt*, a traditional tent home, and learned more about the nomadic lifestyle there, with horses very much a part of daily life. We were shown how the mares are milked, but we also got to



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understand how difficult it was for

the demands of modern life to co-exist with life on the steppes. The two young girls were home on a visit from school; in that country, it may be the boys who are out of schools as they need to tend to the horses.

In Peru, I visited a wonderful project, called *2x1* (two times one), which encourages children to keep coming to school. Younger children who were in danger of dropping out were paired with a “cool” older student. On Saturdays, the older students would come in to teach the younger ones to enjoy school through art, storytelling and play-acting. They performed a play,



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and in the photo you can see the sun, the bird, the rabbit and the flower, again underlining the importance of nourishment for plants (and children) to grow.

In Botswana, I went to a school which was part of the Girls' Education Movement (GEM). You see a little GEM in the photo. The girls were very lively, asking all sorts of questions, but they kept their most important question until last: "What will become of us with AIDS around?" Botswana has an infection rate of around 24 per cent. In some countries, girls may be up to six times as likely as boys to become infected.



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In Thailand, I visited a very moving project, called *Paint My Life*, involving children and young people living with HIV/AIDS. The project was a way to help them deal with their feelings through art and drama. There is a very strong album and CD with their paintings and poems, and they also acted out their emotions with a play called *Who am I; Why am I here?*. You see them in the photo wearing their masks to avoid facing the stigma and discrimination that surrounds people living with HIV/AIDS. Can you imagine being a teenager, a time when we need to be loved and go out into the world, feeling that you have to hide behind an emotionless mask? They gave me a beautiful box painted with a sunflower, a symbol of hope.



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I have been very impressed by the involvement of young ones. In Brazil, I visited a skills-training project for young people in the Vila Madalena neighbourhood, one of the deprived areas in São Paulo. The place was hopping with the creativity and imagination of youth. A girl came up to me with a book she had written about herself. It is in Portuguese but I can understand the title: "A Diary from the Street". I can imagine how it must be filled with the anguish of growing up, but also with the hope of having taken her life into her own hands.



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In Benin, we also met young persons who are making a difference. They gave my husband a petition saying that they want Africa to develop and be happy; they want the whole world to live in peace; they want to stop AIDS; they are sorry for children living in the streets; they do not want parents to hit their children; they want parents to listen to their children; and they want all children to go to school.



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One of the shimmering moments was visiting a school in Sarajevo. It was very much fuelled by the school principal's wish to include the Roma children in the neighbourhood. The teachers had even gone knocking from door to door for this to happen. The photo captures the magic of the moment. One girl was much older than the others. She had never been to school but she was determined to catch up.



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In Berlin, we visited a community outreach centre for girls from Islamic countries. It was started by a young girl who, at 13, had felt the need for a place where Muslim girls could come together, talk, support each other and develop. Mothers were also there for special mother-daughter discussions. Two girls demonstrated their songwriting and dancing skills and then we all danced together.

I have also visited many schools in the United States. The very first time was to a class just outside New York, where a girl gave me a gift which seemed like a paper box. I tried to hide my curiosity at what it could be, but of course it was the UN building! Later the children sent me their drawings and stories and on the first page you see me demonstrating how to wear a kente cloth, from West Africa, with all the children looking on in wide-eyed amazement.



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At the Kappa III school, also in New York, another young girl was rapping about my husband.

*“My forever most thought of the United Nations  
Is bringing together all the world’s creations.  
Looking at the world’s most innocent faces  
Each belonging to different places.  
Stopping all wars and creating better choices.  
Listening to all the reasonable voices...  
The Secretary-General as the UN’s boss  
Is trying to make sure that not a soul is lost...”*



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In Johannesburg, I attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development and Jane Goodall invited us to the Mountain of Hope in Soweto for a special event. Just as we were about to leave we were handed a sculpture of a thousand origami cranes folded by young people from all over the world with their hopes for peace and harmony on earth folded into each crane. I have often



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carried these cranes along to my speaking engagements. The latest was the International Day of Peace event at the United Nations this year. To my big surprise, Jessica Rimington, the young student who actually gave the cranes to us in Johannesburg, was at the event.

The last photo is a huge globe that my husband also received in Johannesburg. He often quotes an African proverb:

“The world is not ours to keep; we hold it in trust for future generations.”



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