Background and Context

The story of Burkina Faso’s women is complex, including both immense progress over the past several decades and remaining societal and economic obstacles to equality and quality of life. A landlocked country in Sub-Saharan Africa, Burkina Faso is particularly economically disadvantaged, consistently ranking towards the bottom of global indexes. Women have historically shouldered a disproportionate burden under these circumstances, taking on the majority of child-care and home-based responsibilities in addition to income-earning activities. Compounding the problem is a lack of literacy among the female adult population as compared to men. Given that literacy can be key to success in small business and other economic ventures, improving this situation is an important factor in the empowerment of Burkinabé women. To address this disparity, UNESCO/The United Nations Development Programme in partnership with the Government of Burkina (then Upper Volta) launched the Project for Equal Access of Women and Girls to Education in 1972. This project aimed to improve female access to education by lightening workloads, thus freeing up enough time for women to attend trainings while still fulfilling their roles within the household. The project has shown marked success – currently, the adult female literacy rate is 22%, as compared to 8% from 1985-94. Furthermore, girls have made strides towards closing the educational gap between the genders. Perhaps as a reflection of their increasing levels of education and resulting voice within their communities, females have also made gains in the political arena – in 2013, they held 15.7% of the seats in national parliament. These encouraging facts point towards a brighter future for Burkinabé women, as domestic and international forces push for the education and representation of women, and thus the betterment of whole communities.

(Data courtesy of UNESCO, BBC, the UNDP, and The Guardian)

Story based on the Women’s Education Project research and work of Brenda Gael McSweeney and Scholastique Kompaoré, assisted by Cassandra Fox

Photos by/©Brenda Gael McSweeney

Photo above, left: First UN International Year of Women (1975), a griot chants in praise of the contributions of the Women’s Education Project.

Map from Nationsonline.org.
And over half the income-generating and household workloads combined. Only unsafe water was available in the 70s, and even for that, women and their daughters trudged for kilometers, for several hours a day.

Scholastique Kompaoré, National Coordinator of the UNESCO Project for Equal Access of Women and Girls to Education, contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage through this traditional Kassena dance.

Another result of the new technologies—a woman proudly and jokingly shows off her smooth hands, as she no longer grinds her grain with a stone.

West African Women’s Empowerment — Burkina Faso over Four Decades

A story in photographs based on action-research by Brenda Gael McSweeney and Scholastique Kompaoré
Another example of modern-day success, this now-renowned painter overcame harsh gender-based adversity. She currently conducts courses to help along young aspiring female artists.

In the early days, this woman leader expressed her views to Mrs. Kompaoré – but only in the privacy of her courtyard.

This female Interim Mogho Naaba (Emperor) of the Mossi Kingdom today maintains many traditional powers and also hosts a solidarity group for women in her village.

The next rare enthronement of a woman as village chief occurred only in this century. The above woman proudly carries this title of Traditional Female Chief, and speaks to visitors about the role of women in her region.

Brenda Gael McSweeney
Brenda managed United Nations development programs in Burkina for seven years. She focused on female education and livelihoods — while living in a traditional courtyard in the capital, Ouagadougou — and conducted research in the villages.

Scholastique Kompaoré
Scholastique was National Coordinator of the Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) pilot Project for Equal Access of Women and Girls to Education. She is a pioneer of advocacy and action for female education and advancement.

Cassandra Fox
Cassandra is a graduate of Boston University, where she works as a Research Assistant with Dr. McSweeney. She has studied and worked in Niger, France and Haiti, focusing on international development, women’s rights, and healthcare education.

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