CONFERENCE SPEECH

FOR

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“GENDER EQUALITY FOR ALL THROUGH EDUCATION”

Thank you so much for that generous introduction… As you have seen in my biography, I am passionate about entrepreneurship, peace building, equality for all, and education – mainly girl child education. I have traveled a great distance to be here and share my message. This has been a journey of awakening, education, awareness, and **action**. (**If there are any people in particular to thank, do that here**) I would like to acknowledge some people for their insights and determination to bring this conference to reality. To \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I want you to know that your response and endeavors have inspired all of us to pursue the vision of a world in which education and progress are available to both boys and girls **EQUALLY**. We are living in an era of progress still counterbalanced with abject ignorance and the dichotomy no longer serves our global community. I heard a quote that has been attributed to Nelson Mandela and whether or not the attribution is accurate, the sentiment is priceless. “I never lose. I either win or I **LEARN**.” The time has come for **all** children to **WIN**… and **LEARN**… **even girls**. (**Say this with emphasis and wait for applause**).

The theme of this year’s conference focuses on gender equality through education. We need to be **VERY** clear about the purpose of this conference as we discover and discuss solutions to the growing problem of unnecessary female ignorance. While it is urgent to make a conscious and vigilant effort to educate young girls so that they are active and valued participants in shaping a more inclusive world, it is also necessary to educate young boys so that they understand, in no uncertain terms, that the world they will inherit as adults **MUST** include equality for all people, especially when it comes to education. If we listen to the quote by filmmaker Michael Apted who said, “Give me the child when he is seven years old and I will show you the man,” we will begin to realize that conditions for equality begin at a very young age. I believe it is more constructive to initiate **positive** lessons of equity, partnership, and mutual success, and that is what I intend to focus on in my work and outreach. As we concentrate on engaging adolescent boys and girls in the process of achieving gender equality, it is clear that an important step towards achieving equal education opportunities for girls has been taken.

Ladies and gentlemen imagine you are in full skydiving rig. You’re wearing a brightly colored jumpsuit. Your helmet is strapped on. Your goggles are in place prepared to shield your eyes from the force of the imminent oncoming wind. Your parachute pack is strapped to your back as you teeter on the edge of the plane. You are at the point of no return as you step that one critical inch into the open sky. You’re free falling and you discover your parachute doesn't work. What memories would flash before you? Now imagine the parachute opened. How differently would you act when you landed? There are no “Do-Over’s” in life. There is no time left. We must take action as though our lives depended on it so when the time comes to look back on life, you… and I… will see the necessity and immeasurable value of making a difference in the world.

You know, sometimes it surprises me that in Malawi, the country I am from, since we fought and gained our independence, what our leaders have been focusing on is to end poverty **DIRECTLY**, spending billions and billions of kwachas every year in that pursuit, yet as of this moment, we are still among the poorest countries in Africa. Illiteracy and subsequently ignorance remain the root causes, issues that are apparently being neglected. Sadly, women, whose population, by the way, exceeds the population of men, have the largest share of illiteracy in Malawi. I believe that **THIS** is the biggest challenge to our country’s development. Gender issues can also be regarded as one of the factors contributing to the education crisis in my country. Cultural norms and the misinterpretation of some religious scriptures put girls at a disadvantage in achieving the most basic level of education. Many girls end up leaving school due to pregnancy and/or early marriage. For example, while general enrollment in the first few years of all school in Malawi is high, UNICEF estimates that only 26% of boys and 16% of girls complete **primary** school. In secondary school, just 15% of boys and 7% of girls will complete all four years. This just shows there is still a long way to go in combating ignorance and achieving gender equality.

Malawi is a multicultural and multi-religious nation. Muslims are the second largest religious community in our country. Malawian Muslim women are no exception to illiteracy and in fact the statistics regarding Muslim females and education are probably even at greater **DIS**proportion. Most Muslim women in Malawi are Yao, a predominant tribe of the eastern part of the country also found in the southern region. Female Muslims are facing numerous challenges that include both physical and psychological abuse due to embedded religious and cultural values. Once married, women are expected to unconditionally obey their husbands. Material support is a privilege delivered by the husbands. It is not a duty. On the other hand, women have domestic responsibilities and are mandated to remain at home. They are then expected to be blindly patient while in many cases being forced to endure physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. It is believed to be standard in many households that most men prefer that their women do not work and that only they can determine their wives’ worth. On top of all of this, many girls go to school just to pass time whilst they await puberty and marriage. Some attend school just to follow their peers. They live with a defeatist attitude unable to break the cycle of subservience and abuse. In some practices, a girl can get married at any age as long as she reaches puberty. This has muffled their voices even further. There are some exceptions. The few educated women either suffer discrimination at work or are not allowed to work by their husbands. They live in a vicious cycle that proves the point that old habits die hard. This is beyond old habits dying hard. This is, in some ways a form of genocide. We have to find a way to respect religious doctrine while incorporating necessary reforms.

Unfortunately, in spite of these challenges, issues affecting Muslim girls and women are rarely discussed. Very few are courageous enough to voice their problems while seeking support as they are afraid of losing their marriages and damaging their reputations. It is normally considered immoral and improper for a woman to report any form of abuse to any arm of authority. They are taught to conceal the abuse and remain silent just to either save their marriages or the image of their religion, which is a mere misconception. Those who have dared to report or actively condemn any mistreatment of women have landed in an ocean of trouble. However, addressing cultural and religious taboos is more complex than these women simply not realizing their rights. Despite the fact that Islam encourages respect for all people… INCLUDING women, and that they should be given equal opportunities, there are others who have taken advantage of women’s illiteracy to manipulate religious scriptures in a conscious effort to perpetuate the conditions that feed the problems…. But **STILL** the conditions persist.

It is because of all of this inequality and negative dogma that Girl Child Education Movement (GCEM) was born – we saw there was a need for a campaign to inform, inspire and motivate the Muslim girl child to attain education, up to higher grades, for meaningful participation and development at individual, household, religious and national levels. That is why at GCEM, besides supporting or advocating for the normal education, we are establishing school clubs which we call G-clubs where adolescent boys and girls will be taught and they will be given the opportunity to learn, discuss and consider issues about gender that will have a lasting impact on their lives and communities.

Through innovative and creative program design that is currently being developed, both boys and girls will realize that they are all equal – and that is the key that will resonate and in turn will establish confidence in girls and help them pursue their dreams… just like the boys, so whilst the girls already get information from their formal education, they will also learn how they can be an active part of gender equity and equality.

It is our belief at GCEM that all this can be achieved if we actually focus on our young girl population and establish methods and motivational tools to ensure that they go to school… that they **want** to go to school, and that they understand that by obtaining an education, it will allow so much more than simple book knowledge. We are building and strengthening the infrastructure of our country by encouraging and supporting our greatest asset- our children. We are **NOTHING** without our human resources and the time has come to end counterproductive conditions that promote a cycle of ignorance. It doesn't cost much go educate girls- in fact it will most likely prove more viable and cost effective to have communities that spend their time building strong and involved citizens as opposed to prolonging unnecessary abuses. Ignorance promotes fear. Abuse can force silence. Muslim teachings are very clear about the definition of humanity. “O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness… On the contrary, live with them on a footing of kindness and **EQUITY**…” (**Do you want to cite this quote as coming from Noble Quran 4:19?)**

So far, with the efforts in place against domestic violence and abuse, it’s evident that most women are aware of their rights and this campaign has been fruitful. (**Give some statistics showing improvement of conditions that stemmed from this campaign**). So imagine if we actually started teaching our youth about it a young age? It would have an even greater impact.

There are laws in place in Malawi but they are not being enforced. Currently, many men in my country, especially from the area I come from, Mangochi, stop girls from going to school – making idle and misleading promises by telling them they will take them abroad where they will have the chance to do some piece work. After a few months, men go back abroad and leave their wives behind (mostly pregnant) telling them that they will come to take them – a promise about 90 percent of them never fulfill. Instead, these men have been known to stay abroad for years and meet other women without the knowledge of the wife left at home. Some never return while others return home but refuse to get their zero status tested. (**Explain what “ zero tested” means in one sentence**). For those of you that may not know, zero testing is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. So on top of having to endure abuse, dejection, and indentured servitude, these young girls also have to deal with the never-ending threat of contracting AIDS. And if young girls speak out about the threats of contracting disease, they are punished with beatings, divorce or worse. These are **grown men** coercing **young girls**. These girls want to believe there is something better for them. They are naïve and so they fall for the empty promises. Because of poverty, some embedded cultural norms and misinterpretation of religious scriptures state that a girl should be married off – that school is not for her, but most of these girls are too young to realize the consequences so they accept offers and dropout of school only to become indentured “slaves” to their husbands and in-laws. Many of these young girls have no idea of what it means to experience happiness let alone even a small moment of self worth. While there are laws on the books prohibiting marriage or relations with minor girls under a certain age which is eighteen, there are countless instances of girls aged twelve, thirteen, fourteen, led into forced marriages and dangerous pregnancies… all of which perpetuate the problem on every imaginable level… infant mortality, young mothers dying in childbirth, and when mother and baby survive, they are subjected to even greater poverty and dejection.

One way in which to reverse the negative spiral facing girls in Malawi is to “spot opportunities and seize them.” That is what I intend to do. I **CANNOT** and **WILL NOT** accept that the situation in Malawi is hopeless or impossible for the young girls of our country. We are talking about our sisters, our cousins, our neighbors and our friends. I know this first hand. How? I am a young Malawi man who has seen the light. There are cracks in the seemingly perpetual veneer of abuse, violence, and exploitation. If we do nothing we are part of the problem. As we move forward with intention to combat this crisis, we become “part of the change we wish to see in the world.”

Through the creation of the Girl Child Education Movement, we advocate for exactly that…. education for those in need in order to engage and involve the boys and girls in our communities to understand what is required to respect all human beings regardless of gender and socioeconomic rank. Every child deserves the opportunity to live a productive, healthy, and informed life. That is the only way we will grow as a community, a nation, and a global “**person**hood.”

It is clear that the winds of change are shifting in our favor. How do I know? We somehow miraculously are here, in Washington DC, discussing this issue that was once confined within the borders of my country. It is a privilege to stand before all of you and to share my observations on the conditions in my country with the intention to chisel through the blocks that stop our society’s necessary transformations, crack open the oppressive shutters that have previously blocked the beams of knowledge, understanding, and action, and make a concerted and pervasive attack on violence, ignorance, lies, and abuse.

This is the first of many critical steps towards achieving the goal of gender education equality. Simply put, many of you have no idea what the young girls of my country have had to endure… in other words, as a friend says, “I don’t know what I don’t know.” But thanks to this conference, we **CANNOT** and **WILL NOT** go back… because now **YOU KNOW**. And as the organization that I have founded works on a grass roots level to educate both boys and girls to strive for ultimate gender education equality, I ask all of you intelligent, powerful, concerned and compassionate people to heed our words and support our cause. Ignorance is **not** bliss. Ignorance fosters a vicious cycle of abuse, pain, poverty, and death and it has to be stopped. We at GCEM work diligently to combat embedded cultural and religious values that hinder our girls from understanding the importance of having an education. We are aware that these cycles cannot change overnight but if we begin to enlighten the girls as well as the boys in our communities, we have a chance of making progress. It will take time, dedication and determination, but as I said, we are **HERE**. Who would have believed that even fifteen or ten hears ago a conference like this would have been possible? Who in my village would have ever dreamt that I would be here speaking about gender equality with all of you? But here we are, and we are all the better for it… and that’s just one small example of what education can do. Remember… “We **do not** lose. We either **win** or we **LEARN**.” It is time for everyone to have an equal chance to learn and to be able to improve their condition in life… for themselves, their families, their communities, and their future. I began this speech a few minutes ago knowing practically no one here and now you know my mission, my message, and me. I am humbled by your attention and consideration and I thank you all for this incredible opportunity!