Thank you so much for that generous introduction… Well, as you have seen my biography, I am passionate about entrepreneurship, peace building and education – mainly girl child education.

Today I will be talking about education especially on how I feel this year’s theme, which is focusing much on engaging adolescent boys and girls in achieving gender equality, is also an important step towards achieving equal education opportunities for girls.

Ladies and gentlemen imagine jumping out of a skydiving plane and discovered your parachute doesn't work. What memories would flash before you? Now imagine the parachute opened. How differently would you act when you landed?

You know, sometimes it surprises me that in my country where I am coming from, since independence what our leaders have been focusing is to end poverty DIRECTLY, spending billions and billions of kwachas every year. Yet until today, we are still among the poorest countries in Africa.

Illiteracy remains the root cause which is apparently being neglected. Sadly, women, who exceed the population of men, have the largest share of illiteracy in Malawi, which is the biggest challenge to development.

Gender issues can also be regarded as one of the factors contributing to the education crisis in Malawi. 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 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 achieving gender equality.

Being a multicultural and multi-religious nation, Muslims are the second largest religious community in Malawi and Malawian Muslim women are no exceptional to illiteracy and could even be ranking higher.

Most Muslim women in Malawi are Yao, a predominant tribe of the eastern part of the country and fairly also found in the southern region.

Female Muslims are facing numerous challenges which 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 and not a duty. Women have domestic responsibilities and have to remain at home. They have to be fatalistically patient with physical and psychological abuse. Most men prefer that their women do not work and that only they can determine their wives’ worth.

Many girls go to school just to pass time whilst they await puberty and marriage. Some attend school just to follow their peers. In some practices, a girl can get married at any age as long as she reaches puberty. This, has muffled their voices even further. The few educated women either suffer discrimination at work or are not allowed to work by their husbands.

Unfortunately, inspite of these challenges, issues affecting Muslim girls or women are rarely discussed. Very few are courageous enough to voice out their problems as they are afraid of losing their marriage and damaging their reputation. 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 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.

However, despite that Islam encourages that women be respected and that they should be given equal opportunities, there are other people (mostly men) who have been taken advantage of the women’s illiteracy to manipulate religious scriptures so that they continue abusing them.

From this perspective, Muslim women and girls ought to be aware of the correct teachings of their religion and some retrogressive cultural beliefs so that they can be able to fight for their rights.

This is why Girl Child Education Movement (GCEM) was born – we saw there was a need for a campaign to inspire and motivate the Muslim girl child to attain education, up to higher levels, for meaningful participation in development at individual, household, religious and national levels.

That is why as 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 discuss issues about gender.

Through innovative and creative program design we are coming up with, both boys and girls will realize that they are all equal – the thing which will return confidence in girls and help them pursue their dreams like anyone else.

So whilst the girls already get information from the formal education, they also learn how they can be a part of gender equity and equality.

We thought all this can be achieved if we actually target the girls (youth) and ensure that they go to school. It doesn't cost much go educate them.

So far, with the campaign against domestic violence and abuse, it’s evident that most women are aware of their rights and this campaign has been fruitful. So imagine if we actually started teaching our youth about it a young age? It would have a greater impact.

**GBV**

Currently, most men in Malawi especially from the area I come from Mangochi, stops girls from going to school – promising them they will take abroad where they do some piece work. Because of poverty, some embedded cultural norms and misinterpretation of religious scriptures of saying a girls should be married off – school not for her, most of them accept and dropout school.

After few months, men go back abroad leave their wives behind (mostly pregnant) telling them that they will come to take them – the promise about 90 percent of them never fulfills.

Instead, they stay there for years and meet other women without the knowledge of the other woman. Some never return while others return home but refuse to get their zero status tested.

In fact, women who demand the testing are either divorced or beaten up. In fear of this the women just accept their husbands that have been away for years – because some society beliefs of saying a woman should be quite.

In this case, they endanger the lives of the women as they are prone to sexual transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Imagine if we informed and educated our girls about this. About how they can demand their rights and stand their grounds.