

Zuriel Oduwole's SPEECH on 4 Dec 2020

There are two kinds of doctors. The first kind you go to when you are not feeling very well. He asks you what are the symptoms you are having, and based on what you say, he prescribes some medication for you, and asks you to come back in a week to see how you are doing.

Now, the other kind, calls you and says based on what he is seeing, you need to slow down, or take certain precautions, so you don't get sick. In other words, he is the preventative kind, instead of the curative kind.

Let me ask, which of these 2 doctors do you want in your corner. The one who treats you once you get sick, or the one who warns you that you are about to get sick. I would guess most people would want the second kind of doctors in their corners – right.

I like to believe I want to be the other kind of doctor, in all I do – when I speak, when I share, and when I advise, like I do with some of the 31 Presidents and Prime Ministers I have met, or work with. And this is why.

It takes too long, and costs too much to fix a problem, while on the hand, it takes a lot less time, and costs less, to prevent the same problem.

I'll come back to these later.

Anyway, my name is Zuriel Oduwole - an 18-year-old girls education advocate, film maker and global peace envoy. It is Such an honor to speak at this event today. I was actually so looking forward to physically visiting Hong Kong for this project, for the first time in many years. I had spent some time in Hong Kong as a young girl, when my mom's work transferred the family over about 10 years ago. I remember very well going by the markets at night, and seeing large shrimps crawl and fight in the baskets – competing for attention, and then men using bamboo as scaffolding around buildings – sights very rare here in the United States.

As I was getting ready for this program, something dawned on me. And that is, why are we in the first place, having this conversation. You see, whenever the subject of gender comes up, the focus is never boys, or young men, or men. It is always girls, older girls, or women.

Why is that true. Why are we not talking about the education of boys, or young men, or men in general.

I shared this reality with the world 2 years ago when I spoke at the UN General Assembly week in 2018. It was from my experience when I met the Gender Minister of Ghana a few months earlier - and that is the honorable Otiko Djaba. She had shared with me that in her country Ghana, 52% of the population were women.... but that the other 48%were born by women.

So, I need to ask here – how did power shift so suddenly, to men. How did the roles and importance of women in society, get so diminished? I think this is a very good place to start this conversation.

Just for one moment, imagine if women for the last 10 years and also for the next 10 years all over the world, no longer had children. What would happen to the world, its future, its ability to continuously develop, and its ability to care for the aging population.

Here is a fundamentally critical behavioral question. Why are those, who are the source of life – treated so poorly, by those whom they gave life to. I want us all to think about that for a moment. Seriously - please do, and I would love someone out there, to kindly share with us, with a great answer to this serious existential question - at least, that's how I see it.

The reason I am sharing this, is because I just do not want to attend a conference, where if we get lucky, a paper is produced at the end of it, and if things actually get moving, some - action may get taken.

I want us to think deeply – and make a conscious decision, to make true and long-lasting change, because the truth is, I don't want to attend another conference again, where we speak, share, and a year later, we are back to the same point. Please, please...I need all your cooperation and determination to make this change a reality.

I'm just an 18-year-old girl, who just wants to see immediate change in the lives of girls across Asia and other parts of the world. This is one area where I can say, I am very impatient - to see seeing real change.

Now, most of you are professionals, with many years and decades of experience. As I said, I am only 18 and have many more years of learning to do. So, I would talk a little only about two of the 10 areas this conference seeks to focus on, and share my experiences in stories, from what I have seen or being involved in over the last 9 years of my projects.

The areas I have had some experience in are CULTURE & EDUCATION, and GENDER & EDUCATION. My experiences as a **film maker**, and as a **girls education advocate** have been in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and also in Asia – when I visited Tokyo Japan, to show my second film in 2015.

From my experiences in these parts, the issues and challenges faced are all so similar, especially in the area of Gender, which is closely tied to Education, and in itself, a victim of cultural influences.

So, Let's start with **Gender**, within the context

I have noticed that when the issue of gender comes up, it is never men who bring it up, or who are championing it, rather, it is always – mostly, and usually women. I somehow don't think it always has to be that way because I really believe that one or two people, can start to change the narrative and perception on any issue, or topic – globally.

Let me share this short story, to show a simple approach to a major 'cultural' issue in the world today. In 2014, Procter & Gamble - the global household and personal care product company launched a campaign back in the US called #LikeAGirl. The whole idea was to try and change the concept of 'doing something like a girl' from a negative connotation to a positive

one. I'm sure you all know when people tell a boy 'you run like a girl, it's a negative connotation'.

They debuted and showed the campaign during the Superbowl finals game that year – and Superbowl as you all know, is a mostly men's and adrenaline-rush sports day. To the surprise of many, men actually received it very, very well, and many admitted they had used the phrase before – you know, #LikeAGirl, and it was always in a derogatory context.

A year later, they launched another campaign, and it was called “Unstoppable Like A Girl”.

To preserve the authenticity after being told the earlier campaign was produced by women, the producers chose a girl – a preteen girl, an armature film maker, to produce the campaign documentary.

In other words, a multi-billion-dollar company run almost entirely by men in their 50s and 60s, agreed to the hire of a 12-year-old girl, to direct a major national campaign and international campaign.

That girl, was me, and this is what that 12-year-old girl, created, because truly, one or two people, can truly begin, to change a narrative.

Now let's look at **Education**.

Many of you might remember that 20 years ago, when the word education was mentioned, it was not primary or secondary education – it was the tertiary education, because in many cultures across Asia, Africa and Latin America, education at that level determined ones potential success in life – as they go on to become engineers, lawyers, doctors, architects, software engineers, computer programmers, and yes – teachers too.

What they overlook too often is that to get tertiary or university education, they have to go past primary, and then secondary school education as well.

The Difference Between Education and Schooling

I always try to separate education and schooling, because without doing that, messages and missions get lost, when both converge, and here is what I mean.

In some countries in Asia, girls going to school is considered a taboo for many reasons. But, girls learning to sow, or to cook, or to raise farm animals is more readily acceptable. What they sometimes do not realize is that some of the girls who are denied school for many reasons, end up getting educated none the less because of what they have to do by staying home.

To me, it then becomes the responsibility of women in leadership portions to begin to find ways of turning that education that the girl have learned, into skills that adds serious value to their accidental vocational learning.

For example, a young woman who has been denied schooling all her young life and has been forced to stay at home, keeping geese or chickens on the farm for almost 10 years, knows something about animal feed. She knows about the eggs they lay, their well-being and health, and who potentially buys them.

What if we add simple book keeping to the mix, or basic pricing management. She then begins to develop into a business manager and an entrepreneur, without formal schooling. In other words, she is making delicious lemonades, from the horrible lemon's life has thrown at her. How does that sound to some of you? Good.....Great.

Now let's go back to Education and schooling, but this time, the cultural aspect.

In many Asian and African countries that I studied or visited, I learned that when the resources are limited, the boys get it first, and they go to school, while the girls stay at home, and do chores. It means the boys grow up within the formal schooling system, while girls do not. It usually also means that the doors of possibilities into high end areas such as STEM, Engineering and Biotechnology begin to close to girls, even before they start, because the society we live in would not accept a self-taught medical professional or a self-taught engineer or a self-taught Pilot - ESPECIALLY, if they were girls.

Thinking about it, there are other problems that make it difficult for girls to get an education across Asia, and similarly in Africa. This time, even if the girls manage to get into schools, they face society taboos, that affects their education. One major problem is that tens of thousands across these regions miss days from school every month, and this is why.

I read about Reports by the Brookings Institute about girls in Nepal, and other reports about girls in Cambodia and India - all pointing to the fact that girls fall behind their schoolwork compared to boys, because they simply do not have basic Femi care products for their monthly cycles. In other words, they are forced to stay at home during this period.

How can that be. Remember that statistics I shared about 52% vs 48% - these girls are the future leaders and future mothers of future leaders, but we are not doing all we can to help. This is why I believe we have to UNLEASH our collective efforts, to tackle these many challenges, one day at a time, and we - I mean each one of us, can truly make a difference.

This video is an example of what I mean, a project I developed in South Africa in February 2020 in partnership with a major personal and femicare company in that country called Lil-Lets, to deliver free products to school-girls in three poor townships and neighborhoods, including Soweto.

As you would see, one person... can truly, make... a real... and measurable difference.

The Unleash Factor

A few month ago, for the first time, I actually went to look at the definition of the word UNLEASH. There were about three, but this one, I liked the most.... to CAUSE A STRONG FORCE TO BE RELEASED, OR UNRESTRAINED.

So, now I have a question for you all. Do you know how many girls are between the ages of 11 and 25 in Asia today? Can you imagine if every girl is allowed to go to a formal school, from early learning right through to University. Can you imagine the potential of their creativity, ... their talents... and their problem-solving skills, being added to the GDP of each Asian country - from Thailand to Mongolia to Vietnam to China and Indonesia?

I'm talking about Research, Marketing, Science, Fashion, Healthcare, their impact would be huge.... right.

Remember earlier, I talked about the difference between school and education. Well, my hope and prayer is that every girl across the globe, gets the opportunity to go to school, and unleash their full potentials upon their economies.

For this reason, in March of 2018, I met with President Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique in Maputo, to talk about the issue of girl marriage in Mozambique, and the need for girls to go to school, till at least the age of 18, so they have better opportunities as they get older.

Remember the 2 types of doctors I talked about earlier?

Well, it took a lot of follow up talking and the incredible work of many dedicated people. I am pleased to share that in July 2019 - sixteen months after I met President Filipe Nyusi, Mozambique formally outlawed Girl marriage. That is great news for the thousands of young girls, in that country.

But then, sometimes, things happen, and the girls either drop out of school for many reasons, and society says they are too old to go back to school. That is when the message becomes education, instead of school. Please take a look at this video of a program I developed when I was 13 with a group of mostly out of school and unemployed young women from Namibia, and the new skills they learned – basic film making. This same initiative, can work across Asia too.

So, to you all I say this - let us UNLEASH the potentials in ourselves, and find every opportunity to educate young girls and women across Asia, so their future is that much brighter.

As I have tried to show and share, we all can do it. We truly can.

Thank you very much, for listening.