

Ms. Hannah Godefa
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Dear distinguished guests,

It is an honor to be with you today. I'd like to thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak on a subject so close to my heart. My education is the reason I can stand here before you today, empowered to speak for myself and for the millions of girls out there striving for a good education. I am here today to share my reflections on “how” and “what” it takes to aid girls' access to education: moving beyond girls getting into school, to **keeping** them in school, and making sure they **move** from one grade to the next, that at every step of the way they are actually **learning**. I believe this is the defining challenge of our time. Over the last 25 years, significant progress has been made to get girls into school. Yet we know the girls' education agenda is not complete. 58 million children of primary school age remain out of school; and of these many are girls who will never enroll or enroll late and eventually drop out.

There is overwhelming evidence that girls' education is one of the best investments a country can make. Secondary school can be especially transformative for girls and their societies. Yet only 1 in 10 girls graduate from secondary school in Sub-Saharan Africa and they make up 60 per cent of illiterate youths there. The challenge is no longer clear; in fact it is considerably more complex today than in the past.

Unfortunately, the recent targeted attacks on girls are not isolated events - conflict and disasters are preventing girls worldwide from accessing a good education in safe learning environments. **Getting girls into school is only half the battle;** and while I do not know exactly how we will overcome the other half, here are some starting points on how to think, plan and act differently. It is no longer about just achieving gender parity, It is about:

- **Addressing the overlapping disparities and cumulative effects that poverty and location place on girls:** During a trip to Juba, South Sudan, I visited girls who were going to school and I asked them what it means to be a girl and what they wanted to pursue after secondary school. Many stood up and told me they wanted to be a teacher, lawyer, a pilot- all occupations that provide services back to the community. Due to recent conflict those opportunities may no longer exist and I always wonder what has happened to those girls and their dreams. In the neighboring country of Kenya, the majority of rural Somali adolescent girls have less than 2 years of education. Your chances for education diminish greatly if you are a girl, from a poor family, living in rural or conflict-affected area.

- **Putting an end to violence – in school, around schools, in communities.** Violence against girls **perpetuates gender inequalities** in schools, communities and countries. This has

implications for girls **staying in school and learning**, for their empowerment and economic participation, implications for the health and survival of their future children – overall, we all have a vested interest as this has implicates development.

- **Recognizing and tackling sexual abuse in schools:** In Sierra Leone, 10% of primary school girls and 14% of secondary school girls cited **sexual assault** as a reason to be afraid to commute to school. In Niger, 88% of teachers confirmed the existence of sexual acts between students and teachers at their school. In educating the community to change this unhealthy culture and involving them to protect the girls of their schools and communities this abuse can be targeted to support safe learning environments.
- **Understanding the fears of parents and helping them to protect their daughters:**
In my travels to Ethiopia, I met a mother who decided to keep her three girls at home and send her son to school due to economic and cultural reasons. She would rather have her daughters live and support the family domestically instead of going to school. These traditional barriers for girls prevent them from achieving their full potential. Parents are increasingly pulling their daughters out of school for fear of unwanted pregnancy or to marry them off to ‘protect’ them from sexual abuse. And we all know that **child marriage** is not a solution to this challenge.
- **Boys and Girls must progress equally:** In Nigeria, it will take another 3 generations to get poor girls into primary schools whereas all rich boys have already achieved primary completion. In order to progress, we need to equally support the growth of boys and girls.
- **We must invest in secondary as well as primary schools:** so girls and societies benefit from the power of education that is achieved when girls remain in the secondary school.

We must do all in our power to increase funding to the right places to strengthen systems and target excluded girls: Reaching that girl from a rural community requires allocating money in the right places so that she has equal learning opportunities that are not dependent on being born into wealth or privilege, but rather on effort and merit.

We know what it's about...but what is it going to take so that every girl has an equal opportunity to go to school, to learn, to thrive? What is it going to take for every girl to become her own agent of change in her family, her community and her society?

Education does not stand alone. There is a strong link between educating women and girls and positive outcomes for maternal health, economic empowerment and social mobility. But it is truly much more than that. Education can be transformative, providing girls and women a sense of social freedom and human rights. By altering attitudes and building confidence, the education of women – as well as that of men – leads to more equitable and sustainable development. We are all here today to find a solution, and the discussions here must translate into tangible action. Girls are not brides, they are not a commodity, they have every right and justification as human being. The girls and women we are talking about today are not strangers, they are our mothers, sisters, daughters and friends. It is up to us to help empower them, protect them and encourage the next group of leaders to change the world.

I look forward to our conversation today – but even more so, I look forward to our collective power to achieve zero tolerance for education systems failing women and girls, and create inventive solutions together to transform this.

Thank you