

Introduction

“This child is going to be a leader.”

This is what a friend of my father said when I was eight years old. As I grew older, my father never let me forget it. “Remember what Uncle John said,” he kept telling me. “You are destined to be a leader.” I didn’t know a leader of what, but I came to believe that in every situation, I had an opportunity to do something, to lead and to make a difference. I was lucky to have a father who believed in his daughters’ potential.

I also understood at a young age that the vast majority of girls were not so lucky. In my village of Malemia in Malawi’s Zomba district, my best friend was Chrissie. Both Chrissie and I were born in that village. I come from a matriarchal tradition, and as the firstborn girl in my family, I was supposed to be brought up by my mother’s mother. Yet my father wanted to bring me up and send me to school in town. A compromise was struck: I would spend the week in Zomba town with my parents, and every Friday from the time I was seven years old, I took the bus to travel the 15 kilometers to Malemia, where I would stay with my grandmother. And every Friday without fail, Chrissie would wait for me by the roadside, and we would walk into the village together. Chrissie taught me all about village life. We picked wild fruits and wild mushrooms, and we fished for crabs. She taught me how to swim in the village river. She also taught me how to

2 From Day One

carry heavy loads and work hard at household chores from a very young age—a valued quality in village girls, and an essential part of our upbringing.

Chrissie was better than I was at everything. She was better at carrying heavy loads, and she was better at school. She was at the top of her class. I was not. Yet I became a civil servant and a businesswoman. I also became an activist for women, youth, and children. I became a member of Parliament, and then a government minister. Later, I became vice president and then president of Malawi. And Chrissie? Chrissie never left Malemia. She had to drop out of school, and I kept going. She stopped talking to me. She married and had a child while still a teenager. To this day she can still be found in the village, cooking over a fire. For a long time, her silent question cast a very dark shadow over our friendship. “Why? Why you, and not me?”

Even as a young girl, I asked myself the same question. Why Chrissie? How many are there like her? And what can I do? I decided there and then that this would be my life’s purpose. This would be my fight. So I grew up and I took this on as a businesswoman, helping other women become financially independent. I took this on in Parliament and then in government. I took this on in State House when I became president. I’m still taking this on through the Joyce Banda Foundation. And I will keep at it until the job is done.

Chrissie’s story is a tragedy. A tragedy of unfulfilled potential. A tragedy for Chrissie herself, but also a tragedy for Malawi and for Africa. In fact, it is a global tragedy: over 130 million girls around the world are not in school through no fault of their own.¹ Girls and women are one of our continent’s most valuable assets. Yet there are still many Chrissies: bright, ambitious village girls full of potential, ready to become the kind of leaders that Africa needs so badly and will not get. All because that potential is not given a chance to thrive.

If we want to change Africa’s narrative, we need women leaders. A lot of women leaders. Why? First, women make up half of all Africans, and it is common sense that they should be sitting at the table and participating in leadership. Having more women in leadership roles has been shown to have a positive effect on policy decisions,² as female leaders focus more on issues that impact women, as well as on corruption.³ A recent survey in five countries—Kenya, Senegal, India, Colombia, and Indonesia—confirmed that over two-thirds of women policymakers thought that gender equality

was getting too little attention in their country, an opinion shared by only one-third of their male counterparts.⁴ The moment Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected as Liberia's president in 2005, she supported the creation of a market women's fund. Throughout my time in office, I worked hard to narrow the gender gap.

There is no shortage of evidence that when women and girls are given the same education, health, and economic opportunities, and an equal voice in society, the whole country benefits. This is why achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls is part of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. A growing body of research has confirmed that closing the gender gap improves economic growth and competitiveness.⁵ A World Bank report found that eliminating gender inequalities in education and access to farming inputs in Kenya, for instance, could boost economic growth by 4.3 percentage points to start with, followed by consistent annual increases of 2–3.5 percentage points.⁶ Rwanda—one of the fastest growing economies in Africa—has a higher proportion of women in Parliament than any other country in the world: 64 percent of MPs in Rwanda's lower house are women, well ahead of the 32 percent in the United Kingdom or 19 percent in the United States.⁷ When President Kagame is asked why he has championed gender equality, his answer is simple: "It is logic and common sense. Women are as talented and as skilled as men. . . . When you sideline them, you lose something big."⁸

Besides fostering economic and social development, I believe women leaders are better able to prevent and resolve conflicts. Most of the conflicts on the continent—or anywhere—are not caused by women. And whenever there is conflict, peace agreements have a better chance to be concluded and to last when women are involved in the negotiations.⁹ When I was president, for instance, I asked the former presidents in Southern Africa to mediate the border dispute between Tanzania and Malawi. At the same time, I had lawyers write an opinion about our border that would allow us to take the matter to court, if necessary. I also joked with President Kikwete of Tanzania that if he was looking for somebody to fight with, it would not be me, and we successfully partnered to avoid conflict. This is not weakness; this is conflict prevention—and common sense. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf demonstrated that she could turn around a country ravaged by civil war. Catherine Samba-Panza successfully eased the sectarian killings that

4 From Day One

devastated the Central African Republic when she was interim president from 2014 to 2016.

Africa has a long tradition of female leaders, particularly before colonization, with examples such as Candace de Meroe in the Kingdom of Kush (Ethiopia) and Queen Mother Yaa Asantewaa in what is now Ghana.¹⁰ Independence and liberation movements also owe much to women such as Rose Chibambo, Joice Mujuru, Winnie Mandela, and Albertina Sisulu. Some regions in countries such as Malawi and Ghana maintain matrilineal or matriarchal traditions like my own. Over the past 20 years, there has been progress in political representation: women accounted for 23 percent of MPs in sub-Saharan Africa in 2017, compared to 10 percent in 1997. This places the region at the global average.¹¹ Yet these numbers still fall short. Only four countries in sub-Saharan Africa have had women heads of state in recent history: Liberia, Malawi, the Central African Republic, and Mauritius. And even in Rwanda, women's stellar representation in politics has not yet translated into more equality at home¹² or significant practical gains for the majority of women in the country, particularly in rural areas.¹³

Most of the many African girls who are born leaders face too many obstacles to realize their potential as change makers. Those who live in villages are often locked in a vicious cycle of poverty, abuse, and harmful traditions. In sub-Saharan Africa, 60 percent of girls live in rural areas; in some countries, including my own, but also Burundi, Uganda, and Niger, the proportion is over 80 percent. If we are going to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we cannot leave them behind.

Programs seeking to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa—from microcredit, entrepreneurship, and education to gender-specific cash transfers and social assistance—have multiplied. Many of these interventions now target girls. Let Girls Learn, the multi-agency initiative launched by President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama in March 2015, focuses on adolescent girls. So did a similar initiative fostered by the Bush administration. In 2016, the World Bank pledged that it would invest \$2.5 billion over five years in education projects that directly benefit girls aged 12–17.¹⁴ UNICEF, the UN agency supporting children, has included adolescent girls in its gender strategy. Initiatives such as the Coalition for Adolescent Girls, launched in 2005, seek to address a “girl gap,” pointing out that developmental assistance has focused on either women or young children.¹⁵

Interventions focused on women and adolescent girls are critical to closing the gender gap and fostering female leaders. These efforts are essential to the future of Africa.

Yet a critical piece is missing: interventions supporting rural girls from 0 to 10 years old. Gender interventions tend to focus on women and adolescent girls, while programs targeting young children are typically not gender specific. This leaves out girls aged 0–10. Unfortunately, discrimination and social norms that penalize girls and women do not start at adolescence. By the time many rural girls are 10, it is often too late to undo the damage that has already been done. As an African woman leader who has grown up on African soil, I have seen firsthand how young rural girls face obstacles in areas that are critical in shaping their future as they grow into adolescents and women.

What are these critical areas? We need to take a good look at nutrition, household work, sexual violence, harmful traditions, and education. Some disadvantage young girls more clearly than others, but they all deserve to be examined closely. Nutrition affects the ability to learn and is also crucial to fighting off diseases. Young rural girls work much harder than boys at household chores and caregiving, which not only leaves little time for education or play but also has lasting consequences on their physical development. Unfortunately, many village girls between 0 and 10 years old suffer sexual violence and the impact of harmful traditions. Child marriage and female genital mutilation have rightfully been receiving attention, but there are many other practices with similarly devastating effects that remain unspoken and ignored. And although much progress has been made in closing the gender gap in primary education, enrollment data fail to tell the whole story. In addition, many of the seeds of the inequality that persists at the secondary level are planted well before girls reach high school.

None of these critical areas can or should be tackled in isolation. Change requires more data and evidence, new laws, and the willingness and ability to enforce them, as well as a shift in mentalities and traditions. Change is also a spiraling loop and relies on more girls and women gaining equal education and economic opportunities, and access to leadership and voice—which is why the efforts deployed to support adolescent girls and women are essential. But if we all come together—men and women, governments and civil society, Africans and non-Africans—these obstacles are not insurmountable.

6 **From Day One**

Although women and girls face an uneven playing field at all ages, the challenges they confront in the first 10 years of their lives are not as well understood or perhaps even as visible. But they are nonetheless devastating and must be tackled as well, for much of the future of young girls is shaped during these critical years.

So let us all do our part. Because every girl deserves a chance from the time she is born.