

Excellencies First Ladies, Dear Sisters

Madame Aminata Keita,

Madame Roman Tesfaye

Madame Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO,

Honourable Minister,

**Chair of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children
Affairs,**

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning/Good Afternoon.

Allow me to start by thanking UNESCO for the opportunity to once again, speak on the importance of girls' education. It is an issue that is close to my heart – as I am sure yours – as a mother, a woman and a human being.

Countering violent extremism through girls' education is important, because a healthy, stable and vibrant society, is one that embraces the belief that everyone deserves an equal shot, at a better life.

I humbly believe that in order to bring an end to violent extremism, and the radicalisation of young people, we must take an honest look at the expectations we have for our societies. And we must do this with the right mindset, focused on context-appropriate solutions and how to achieve the right goals for and with our citizens, as quickly as possible.

In this regards, a few questions come to mind:

Why are witnessing this attitude of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and the inability to embrace coexistence?

Why are some nations still struggling with protecting basic human rights, while this struggle has long been overcome in other parts of this world?

Why is there a lack of political will to build and sustain strong systems, to ensure that governments implement policies centred on the wellbeing of their people?

Why are we still witnessing in some societies, the exclusion of a segment of the population who have the potential to become true agents of positive change?

In other words, leadership matters in mobilising and enforcing inclusive policies that empower all citizens, irrespective of gender, race, religion and other barriers to full participation in society.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

We have seen various forms of violent extremism destroy societies and countries; and in many cases, affect in the worst ways possible, the most vulnerable – women and children. That is because like all evils, extremism targets the many, but obviously preys on the most defenceless from a physical, psychological or social standpoint.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

You may already know a little about Rwanda's history. Our past was characterised by discrimination and division, and a political system that fuelled hatred among citizens.

Decades of racist ideology taught at all levels of Rwandan society, entrenched hatred and ultimately led to the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994.

- Over 1 million Tutsi men, women, and children were slaughtered;
- Thousands of families were completely wiped out;
- Hundreds of thousands of women were systematically raped, and infected with HIV/AIDS, as part of a deliberate campaign;

- 50,000 widows and 75,000 orphans were left destitute;
- 2 million people, were forced by the extremist genocidal government to flee to a neighbouring country, and held in refugee camps as human shields,

I have highlighted just a few of the consequences of the genocide not to horrify you anew, but rather to give you an idea of the almost impossible task of reconstruction, that Rwandans have had to undertake in the last 23 years.

Over the years, we have learned a lot from others around the world, but the strength and inspiration for building a new Rwanda, came from our history and culture.

In Rwanda, long before colonial times, education was an essential part of traditional upbringing, like it was in other parts of the world. Education was delivered within families and communities, and prepared boys and girls for their future roles in society.

Young men and women learned all aspects of the Rwandan culture, values and traditions. This nurtured a sense of confidence, identity and unity, as well as a strong commitment to serving their community.

However, colonial administrations established an educational system that strengthened their own power, while undermining

traditional education and values. This included entrenching divisionism that pitted ethnic groups against one another. Ethnic quotas in schools and the workplace deliberately limited access of the Tutsi minority to opportunities.

Excellencies,

After the genocide, the new Government focused on unity and reconciliation to rebuild the heart and fabric of our society. Part of this work was empowering girls and women.

Rwanda's President Paul Kagame put it this way: *“How does a society hope to transform, if it shoots itself in the foot by squandering more than half of its capital investment? The truth of the matter is that societies that recognize the real and untapped socioeconomic, cultural, and political power of women thrive. Those that refuse to value and leverage women's talent, energies, and unique skills remain developmental misfits.”*

In other words, if women – who constitute over half of the world's working age population—do not fully utilize their potential to generate wealth, the global economy will suffer. This was pointed out in a report published by McKinsey in 2015, which found that US\$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2015, simply by advancing gender equality.

Rwanda wanted to both restore the human rights of all its people, and enable every citizen to fully participate in their own, and their nation's development. This is why legal and institutional frameworks were put in place to advance gender equality.

The **2003 Constitution** established a minimum threshold of 30% for the number of women in senior levels of public office. The **Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion**, which coordinates gender-balance efforts at the national level, and the National Women Council which engages women from the grassroots to the national level, became prominent national institutions.

In addition, the Gender Monitoring Office was set up to monitor the respect and compliance of gender-related commitments.

Rwanda's history taught us that education is a powerful tool. So, for the past years, we have worked tirelessly to put the power of education to the right use.

We continue to focus on three main pillars. First one is to ensure access to schools for all children, including boys and girls, those with mental and physical disabilities, or material constraints. Second, to improve the quality and relevance of school-curriculum in order to empower students with knowledge and critical thinking. And last but not least, to cultivate community ownership in the education of children.

By allowing as many of our children as possible to benefit from an educational system that challenges them to think and question, and by having communities understand and support the positive outcomes of education, we believe we are laying the right foundation for a better future.

In this spirit, at the level of my foundation, we conduct an annual and national campaign to reward the Best Performing Girls and every year we award 510 girls for their academic performance. We also have *Role Models*, who are women in leadership positions who engage with the girls and show them how possible it is when they put in their heart.

Distinguished Guests,

As a result of conducive policy and political mobilisation, women today make up 64 per cent of members of Parliament; 40% of Cabinet; 38% of judges in Higher Courts, and 42% in Lower Courts. The gender budget policy in public institutions, has cemented the consideration of gender equality through sustained financing.

Significant progress has also been achieved on issues of equal pay, inheritance rights, paid maternity leave, representation in public and private executive committees, businesses ownership and so forth.

We were pleased that last year's *Gender Gap Report* of the World Economic Forum, acknowledged many of these efforts and cited Rwanda and four Nordic states, out of 144 countries, as having reached 80% of global gender equality objectives.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude my remarks, I wish to add my voice to yours in reiterating that violent extremism has stolen much from communities, and too often in that process, hurt our girls and women in unspeakable ways.

As a famous philosopher once said, *nature abhors a vacuum*. If we do nothing, violent extremism will always find favourable grounds to breed, and continue to destroy people and communities.

I truly believe that we can prevent violent extremism through concerted efforts between governments and the civil society, to raise the standards of living of our communities. There can be no greater path to this objective than promoting accessible, quality, and inclusive education, with special attention to the needs of our girls and women, who have not always enjoyed a level playing field.

Together, let us embrace the power in us to reach our end goal of establishing well-formed societies, with systems that rely on policies based on proven approaches.

Together, let us build a world in which we can all rise, and enjoy the kind of dignified lives no one should ever be denied.

I thank you for your kind attention.