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INTERVIEW WITH BERHANE ADERE ETHIOPIAN LONG DISTANCE RUNNING CHAMPION AND UNICEF GOODWILL AMBASSADOR FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION



What is it like to be a female athlete in Ethiopia?

As women athletes, we are not regarded any less than the men. We are equal to men. There are many advantages to being an athlete including appearing in international venues just like the men.

Do you see yourself as a role model for young Ethiopian girls?

Yes, I do see myself as a role model for Ethiopian girls. I was born and grew up in a rural setting. From there I went to school. I started from that level to get to the point where I am now, competing internationally and representing my country in world events. I believe that is a positive example for girls. The message I want to relate is that with hard work anything can be achieved.

We see you as a role model as well. One of the reasons that we chose you to be our goodwill ambassador is because you were chosen as Ethiopia's top female athlete. How do you see this role as helping to further girls' education?

Parents should educate their girls and advise them to go to school. Girls should listen to the advice of their parents and go to school. In their professions, they must work hard, struggle and develop themselves. It is possible to get to this level. You just have to make the effort.

How was education important for you and how did it contribute to you being such a great athlete?

I was in school when I was selected to participate in this sport. Being educated is very important for doing well in sports. If you don't know anything then it makes no sense to just be running. When you travel you have to read things, so being educated has been a great benefit to me. When vying for a world record, we are told what time we have to make to beat the record. We have to calculate these things. We are told that

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we have to cover a certain distance in a certain amount of time. If I were not educated, I would not be able to calculate my timing. I would just be running unguided. Therefore being educated has an important role in being successful. It does not mean anything to be running without an education.

How can participating in sports in school benefit girls?

We were able to reach this level by first running at our schools. If girls engage in sports during their spare time, they will be able to reach a good place. Sports can provide an alternative from falling into a bad situation, spending their time idly and in unhealthy activities. They can broaden their perspectives and develop good qualities. Participating in sports enhances the opportunities available to girls.

Can participating in sport help raise girls' self-esteem?

Participating in sports contributes a great deal to our capacities as women. As women athletes we spend our time in venues that command great respect. We are engaged in a profession that is highly respected in countries that have achieved a high level of development. We see a lot of things. In Europe, we see women getting ahead of men, using sport to advance themselves. I believe participating in sports prepares you to take on anything.

Why are you helping UNICEF's efforts to promote girls' education?

In Ethiopia, we women are regarded as being inferior, up to now that is. I started from an inferior position, and I have now reached the level where I am. Everyone can learn and work hard and stand before the world on an equal footing with men. I have agreed to work with UNICEF in order to achieve this -- so that we can stand before the world as equal men and women.

I know that you have a young son, and you are sending him to school. Why do you think that it is so important that every child gets an education?

Education is important for every child, because education is something that is above everything else. Being educated means having knowledge. Being educated allows you to eat, drink and clothe yourself. You are able to understand things if you are educated. The country can grow if there is education. I believe that everyone needs to be educated. If our mothers and fathers had been educated, then our country would be in a much better situation. They would have been able to better utilise the resources available to them. Education is very necessary.

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What would you say to parents who are not sending their children to school, especially their daughters, to help convince them to send their children to school?

My advice to parents is for them to encourage their children to go to school, to use the example of people who have come up from nothing and made it in life. They must encourage their children to work hard and do well. Girls are particularly vulnerable and can be easily hurt. If a girl is educated, however, she can protect herself from a lot of things.

In our country we are going through a difficult time with HIV/AIDS. In order to protect themselves, those who are engaged in sport should continue to do that and those who are more academically inclined should focus on that. With an education they will have broader perspectives and will not be drawn to destructive behaviour. I would be very happy if everyone works hard and gets an education.

Berhane Adere will be competing in this summer's Athens Olympics running the 10,000 metres.