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Thank you so much for that kind introduction. It is a great pleasure to be here in such distinguished company.

I am deeply honoured to receive this award, which I accept on behalf of the millions of girls and women in Africa and around the world who face enormous obstacles with strength and courage. They face these challenges every day, and they are my inspiration, every day.

2014 was a particularly devastating year for children and their families, and perhaps none more so than girls – especially those trying to realize their right to an education.

The world took notice when Boko Haram kidnapped hundreds of school girls in Nigeria – and indeed, it is an ongoing outrage for those girls, for their families, and for their futures.

But this is only one glaring example of the risks faced by so many girls around the world – and their stories never make the headlines.

For despite the progress the world has made, some misguided groups and individuals still see a girl with a book as more dangerous than a man with a gun. Schools have been attacked. Girls have been assaulted. Families fearing for the safety of their daughters have pulled them out of school or refused to send them at all. Many marry off their daughters, rather than risk sending them to school – not understanding that by doing this, they endanger them even more.

But there is another enemy that is less obvious but in some ways just as dangerous, because it stands between so many girls and the education that is theirs by right – and without which they may never reach their full potential.

Some have called this enemy the tyranny of low expectations – for if you do not value what a girl can do, and become, and achieve, then you don’t see the value in educating her.

Some call it ignorance. Some call it injustice.

As a girl, tormented by boys who didn’t believe girls belonged in school, I called it “batonga” – a word that was my way of saying, I have a right to be here and I will let nothing stand in my way.

But I was one of the lucky ones. My mother and father fought for me to go to school, despite pressure from many in our extended family who argued that only boys should be educated.

They knew what we can now prove with statistics – what we all know in our hearts has always been true: Educated girls can change the world.
An educated girl – especially a girl who has been able to go on to secondary education – not only earns significantly more over her lifetime, she also improves her family’s standard of living and helps reduce poverty in her community.

Educated girls are less likely to marry or have children before they are ready – which, in turn, protects them from domestic violence, from preterm labour or dying in childbirth while they are still children themselves.

And educated girls are more likely to have fewer, healthier children – and to send their own daughters to school. As my parents sent me. And as I have sent my daughter.

The ripple effect that spreads from one generation to the next. A virtuous cycle with the power to change the world.

It is through education – and with that I mean quality learning of skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic not just being counted as present on a school bench - that children, families, communities and countries can be lifted out of poverty.

And quality education is the best tool to help humanity narrow the wealth gap between the ‘haves and the have nots’ that we are increasingly witnessing - not only within countries but across borders.

It is time that we realized that investing in girl’s education – not only primary school but secondary school and beyond -- is the best and one of the most cost effective investments we can make in our communities and the future we share.

It is time that we pushed for laws that prevent any person from taking a girl out of school – and demanded justice for the girls who have been forced into early marriage – whether by an armed men or members of their family.

It is time that we stood together for the absolute right of every girl to pursue her dreams. All of us – and I include the men and the boys!

My father would not marry off his daughters. He said, no, they are not merchandise to be sold. He will always be one of my greatest heroes. But global leaders like Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu are also my heroes. I thank them and so many more like them for standing up for their daughters, their sisters, their wives, and their mothers.

But my greatest inspiration will always be the women in my native country, Benin, and everywhere in Africa.

I was reminded of this again when I was home in Benin over the holidays. I love to go to the market, where I always see the women, so hard working and yet, always smiling. They are like a protective blanket of love and support, and I draw strength from their courage.
Once, one of the women I met in the market took me aside and said: ‘Angelique, I’m so proud of the dignity you give us all the time.’ But it is I who am proud of them. It is the women of Africa who have made me who I am.

And that is why I humbly accept this award and dedicate it to these amazing women and girls. We have a right to be here – and we will let nothing stand in our way.

Thank you so much.