Seoul Peace Prize Acceptance Remarks

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A special thank you to the Board of Directors and the Selection Committee of the Seoul Peace Prize Cultural Foundation for this prestigious recognition, for welcoming us to Seoul, and for being such gracious hosts.

I am thrilled to stand before you as a Co-recipient of the Seoul Peace Prize, with my fellow CAMFED graduate and executive leader Fiona Mavhinga by my side.

Today, I'd like to take you back to 1998, a decade after the Olympic Games here in Seoul inspired the creation of this Peace Prize.

It was Thursday, the 2nd of July, and Fiona and I found ourselves in a room in Harare, Zimbabwe, with 400 other young women. We had been supported through secondary school by CAMFED, the Campaign for Female Education, and we had come together to celebrate this huge feat - our graduation.

All of us came from a context where very few girls even started secondary school, let alone completed their education — poverty meant there simply wasn't the money for the school fees, clothes and supplies we needed to stay in the classroom, in spite of our families' fervent efforts to see us through.

Yet here we were, among the first in our villages to have gone this far, because our communities had selected us for a CAMFED scholarship. We were there to celebrate, but also to talk about what was next.

We were daunted by the future. All of us came from the most remote rural districts where even the ministers of education rarely go. In our villages, there were no jobs we could see, no professional female role models we could turn to.

Girls were still dropping out of school in our villages because they couldn't afford the cost, and the consequences were harsh: early marriage, early pregnancy, continued cycles of poverty and inequality.

But everybody in our communities was celebrating us like we were heroines. We had come so far, but a certificate didn't guarantee us a job, money to feed our families, or even clothes to wear. One young woman after another stood up to tell her story. I kept thinking, "Did they steal my script? Because that really sounds like me."

It was the first time that we all met — the first time I saw Fiona, for example — and the first time I realized that my story wasn't unique. I wasn't the only one with a monopoly on poverty and how it affects women. There was a shared experience in that room.

I remember looking at one of the young women, Emma. She was wearing this dress and I thought, "If only I had that dress." It wasn't new, and it was too big for her, but her aunt had given it to her to come to that meeting. I had arrived wearing my school uniform because I had nothing else, so I was feeling envious.

Then another young woman, Tendai, spoke. From the day she left secondary school, a teacher had taken her in because her only surviving grandparent had passed away. Suddenly I felt ashamed of myself.

So I was vacillating between feeling sorry for myself and empathy for others in the room, when all of a sudden there was commotion. A man stormed in. He was big, and very well dressed, but he was shouting, shouting at one of the girls in the group.

"How dare you ignore me? I've been calling you and you are not listening to me. Do you know that you are nothing without me? The clothes that you're wearing - I own you. And so when I say come, you come." I felt outraged. You know, when you've got a knot in your throat, but you feel so powerless to challenge this person? And everybody else was recognizing the injustice of it all.

One of the facilitators stood up and said, "Look here sir, you have no right to do that. If you're going to ask this girl to leave, you've got her friends to deal with." Long story short, everybody in that room found their voice. They were shouting. They were standing up. And every one was like: "No, no, you can't! After all, do you realize that she's a minor?" So some of them tried to appeal to the law.

Someone said, "She's young enough to be your daughter!" Others were saying, "What is it you gave her? Can we raise the funds and repay you?"

For me, sitting in that room where we had had a pity party about how terrible our lives were, then to see young women standing up to this hefty well-dressed and very educated-looking man and saying to him, "You're not going to do this as long as we are all here" — It made me realize our collective power. It made me realize that we might

not have the money or the education to match his, but we were together, and if he was going to do anything he had to go through us!

So on that very day, that's when we started the CAMFED Association. We said, we're going to be there for each other. We're going to support each other through anything. We're going to go back to our communities and use our voices to show that we might not have the money yet, but we've got a lot to offer. Because even though we later realized the man was an actor, playing a role to galvanize us into action, it was a dynamic we recognized, and one we were determined to change.

We had been catapulted into leadership positions. So we were going to use our position of influence to be purposeful role models. And in that meeting, they elected me to become their very first national chairperson of the group. So I had no option, I had to step up my game, as much as I initially felt sorry for myself.

I started volunteering for CAMFED, then joined its leadership, supporting the expansion of our work into other districts and countries. Today, I am the CEO of the very organization that once supported me through school.

CAMFED and the CAMFED Association quickly became inseparable, with graduates deploying their expertise in delivering our programs. Fast forward 28 years, and the individualized social support we early graduates offered to girls in our communities has turned into a structured peer-led mentorship model that is being adopted in national education systems across five countries. Last year alone, 25,000 graduates who trained as 'Learner Guides' supported more than 2.3 million children to thrive across 8,200 schools, changing communities from within.

So for me, when people ask me, "What would you tell any leader wishing to change the world?" I say three things:

Number one: Just start. With purpose.

When we started our peer support network, it didn't have a name, but it had a purpose: We wanted to change all the things that were holding girls and young women back - using what we had and what we knew at that moment. Our families, communities and the next generation of girls needed us, so we were not going to wait a day longer.

So just start with what you have. What you know today is enough. No excuses.

Number two: Partner.

Peace is about building something together, not settling scores. If you use your leadership position to knock others down, you don't care enough about your ultimate purpose. The first thing I learned in my new position of influence was that this is not about me — there are bigger issues at stake. You will need to partner with some people you may not like, because your passion for social justice, for a peaceful, fair and equitable society is stronger than the disagreements you have. It's time to "call people in" to your movement, rather than calling them out.

Which gets me to the third point: Be willing to learn and be able to face criticism.

I don't know everything, and I am always open to learning, to having my views challenged. Keep an open mind; but also know this: Know that you are enough, and you can do it.

400 young women, most of whom did not have a decent dress to call their own, proved this a generation ago. Together, we have created a model for girls' education like no other.

It is a global movement based on the commitment of communities to education, on leaders with lived experience, and on holding ourselves accountable to the girls we serve.



Fiona and I stand here today representing 355,000 leaders in the CAMFED Association - graduates who are all about getting close to our challenges, knowing we hold the key to solving them.

And we stand here for every community champion, teacher, traditional leader, colleague and donor who is joining us on that journey to a better world.

As we say at CAMFED: Pamoja Tunaweza, Together we can!

Thank you.