Teyise’s Speech
Anniversary of the Convention on the Right of the Child
United Nations General Assembly
New York
November 20, 2014

Your Majesty Queen Silvia...President Kutesa ...Excellencies...
Ladies and gentlemen...

It’s an honor to be here with you all to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And it’s, indeed, humbling to be the voice of not only the children of Swaziland...of Africa... and of the world. But, also, to be the voice of girls everywhere! Thank you for inviting me.

Perhaps you are wondering how a girl from Mahamba, a small village in Swaziland, gets to grace such an important event as this.

Two words: my mother. I wish everyone could have a mother like mine.
My mother’s a single parent. Since I was three, she’s been both mother and father to my brother and me – that’s a tough job. But she was determined that we’d have a better life than her...because she gave birth at an early age and sacrificed a lot of fun things. Instead, she built her career so that she could provide us with a comfortable life.

At home, she taught us the importance of self-respect... hard work... equal opportunity... and studying at school. She encouraged me to be courageous...to speak up for what’s right and what’s wrong.

Seeing my mother struggle to give us everything we need is what motivates me to work hard every day. Today, I’m strong, ambitious and confident because of how my mother raised me. And I will achieve my dream of becoming a leader in society and making life better for children, especially girls.

Not all children have received this upbringing. Not all girls realize their rights. Not all children even know what their rights are. That’s why I wish everybody had a mother like mine.
So, every week, on the radio, I host a youth empowerment program that discusses issues that affect all children and young people everywhere. Issues like: living with HIV...child marriage... and violence between teachers and pupils. I try to teach my listeners that they have the right not to be hit in their school... not to be sexually assaulted...and not to work when they should be studying.

Today, I heard many of you leaders talk about progress for children in these past 25 years. I am one of these children. I had my vaccinations...I go to school and my school has toilets (but no soap!)...I have clean water to drink... there’s a clinic close by...and I can speak out about issues that affect me -- and be heard -- even at the UN General Assembly! That’s my story but it’s not the story of all children.

Every day, children’s rights in countries all over the world are violated...at home... in school...and in their social circles --especially children who live in war-torn societies.

For example, the right to education. In many countries, it’s still considered more important to send sons to school. And a waste of time and family resources to send girls to school Absurd, don’t you think? Educated girls are more likely to delay their first sexual encounter... delay marriage...and earn a higher salary later in life.
[pause]

Or, the right of children with disabilities to go to school. There’s a girl I know in the village of Ngwenya, near where I live, who is deaf and blind. But the local school has no facilities for her so she cannot enroll. That’s the story for many children with disabilities around the world. We need facilities in public schools everywhere so that all children can learn together and play together -- as we will live together later in life. Only then will we see every child’s talents unleashed.

[pause]

Or, think about the right to protection from violence. Every day, we hear in the media about child violence or sexual violence. But in too many countries, people blame it on “culture” and “social practices,” so, often, laws are not passed to protect children. Too often, this violence affects girls.

Donors invest a lot to empower girls against this violence. And that’s important. But it’s only one side of the problem. Boys still grow up violent because they’re not taught how to respect women. Please, we need programs to teach boys how to behave...how to respect us girls.
Excellencies...my message to you today is: you have done well for some children -- but you must do better for all children. Millions are still crying for help even 25 years after the CRC.

As you look to the next 25 years...and plan our post-2015 world...you have, in your hands, the opportunity to enable children to realize their dreams in a peaceful and prosperous world. The foundation of that world is safe, healthy, educated children. And empowered girls -- registered at birth...enrolled in school...inspired by mentors...and thriving in leadership roles.

I hope that you will start this new era for children and youth by listening to us – not listening to older people’s versions of what they think we want. Decisions that affect children and young people must start with discussions with children and young people!

So, in that vein, please listen carefully because I’m going to teach you some SiSwati – the language of my country. I want you to remember it when you talk with your governments about laws, policies and programs for children and young people. Especially when someone says to you, “Ahhhh, but we cannot afford that!”

Then you can reply (and tell them that Teyise taught you):
Bantfwana bangumliba loya embili.

It means: “Children are the future”. It’s my way of asking you, in the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child ...and on behalf of all children in Swaziland, Africa and the world... to *please* protect us and invest in us today, tomorrow and always.

Thank you very much.