

# Real life of an American teenager: Crusading for education in Africa

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Zuriel Oduwole, age 15, is an education advocate and filmmaker. Since the age of 9, Oduwole has travelled the world to film documentaries and convince world leaders to invest in girls' education. Photo from: AFP/ Paul Gypteau

Zuriel Oduwole may look like a typical American teen. She has braces on her teeth and sneakers on her feet. But this 15-year-old from Los Angeles, California is on a mission.

Over the past six years, Muriel has met with over 24 presidents and prime ministers. Her mission is to promote education for girls in Africa.

Zuriel is following in the footsteps of another young crusader, Malala Yousafzai. Malala is a Pakistani girl who promotes education for girls. In 2014, when Malala was 17 years old, she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. She is one of the world's most famous supporters of girls' education.

Zuriel was born in the U.S. Her parents are from the African countries of Nigeria and Mauritius. Zuriel works to support girls and young women in Africa, and help them get an education. She talks to African leaders "about making policies so that girls are able to go to school until at least the age of 18." Too often girls are forced to get married at age 12 or 13, she said.

## **Aid For Poorer Countries**

Last weekend, Zuriel was in Paris to encourage wealthy countries to increase their aid to poorer countries.

One measure of a country's economy is the GDP. This number measures the amount of goods and services sold in a country over one year. This is often a big number. For example, in 2016, the United States GDP was over \$18 billion. Zuriel wants countries to contribute just under one percent of their GDP to struggling nations. France's aid is currently half that number.

The teen also addressed thousands of youths in Paris. Zuriel tried to make them understand the effects of poverty on girls all across Africa.

"Now I want you all to imagine your girl cousin ... being married when she is 12 or 13 years old," she said. "But guess what? Most of these problems are because of poverty."

## **An Impressive Resume For One So Young**

Amazingly, Zuriel has never attended school herself. Her parents started home-schooling her when she was 3.

At 9, she got her first break as a campaigner. She requested and got an interview with Jerry Rawlings, the former president of Ghana, for a documentary she was making.

In Ghana, she watched children trying to earn a buck to help their families. The sight struck her. She knew she would never forget it.

"I saw a lot of children, especially girls, out on the streets selling things. I see that a lot whenever I visit other African countries," Zuriel said.

Next year she will begin attending college at the young age of 16. She has her sights set on Harvard or UCLA, where she wants to study economics and psychology.



## Normal Teenage Life, Too

Zuriel is incredibly accomplished for her age — but she insists that she leads the normal life of a teenager.

"I play sports, I play football and basketball, I have friends I hang out with," she said. "I just happen to do all of these projects on the side."

In person, Zuriel can seem shy. But when she takes to the stage to talk about her cause, she is confident and expressive.

In many African countries, boys tend to be first in line when resources are scarce, she says. "And that's not cool."

Zuriel's ambition knows no bounds.

Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is her inspiration. Zuriel said she wants to become president of the United States. But she realizes she has to wait 20 years to meet the age requirement.

## Unstoppable

In the meantime, as she shouts in one of the five films she has made: "I am unstoppable!"

As well as winning awards, Zuriel also hands them out. In 2014, she set up a foundation that recognizes African first ladies who promote girls' education. This year the honor went to the first lady of Senegal.

Senegal is one country where boys and girls attend primary school in equal numbers. The global children's protection group UNICEF notes, however, that as the level of education increases, girls' attendance goes down.