

**Angélique Kidjo** has been a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador since 25 July 2002. Throughout her long, illustrious career as a musician, singer and performer, she has championed human rights, environmental protection, reconciliation and development. She is a special friend to UNICEF and girls' education. Born in Ouidah, a coastal town in Benin, Ms. Kidjo is married to Jean Hébraïl. They have a 12-year-old daughter, Naïma-Laura. Below is an excerpt of an August 2005 interview.

**Question:** As a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador you have participated in advocacy campaigns for girls' education, such as teaching at the record-setting 'Girls' Education: The Largest Lesson' and performing at the Africa Unite Symposium in Ethiopia, and you have traveled throughout Africa in support of educating girls? Why have you focused on girls' education?

**Angélique Kidjo:** *First of all, my own example. Because my parents believed in education for boys and girls. I remember when I was going to school part of the family of my father would comment, "Why are you sending your girls to school? They should get married, work early and be useful to the society. You are wasting time and money sending them to white people's school when they don't need to go to school."*

*And my Dad used to say, "Every person should be educated simply because it's good to be informed and it's good to know what you're doing, where you're going, how you can impact your society and how you can improve your lives."*

*So that was one of the most important things that drove me to stay in school. Because I started being famous when I was six years old. I was making money even though the money was not in my hand because I was too little to handle the money. My Dad would say, "I don't want to have any artist in my house that can't speak about the arts and cannot have any general idea of what's going on in the world. You have to be able to discuss subjects. If you can't read news and if you can't listen to it on the TV or radio, your life is not fulfilled. You don't know what's going on. And you can't play any role."*

*Girls' education is also something that is scaring the little boys. The men in the country say, "You are talking about women empowerment, what about us?"*

*I said, "What about you? What have you done all of those years to empower your women?"*

*They didn't answer.*

*I said, "Do you realize how important it is to have a wife home that can read the notice in the medicine? It saves your child's life. If she can't read, she has to wait for you to come back from work while her child is having fever. Those couple of hours may be deadly for your child. You men don't even think about it. Someone can come home and say anything to your wife and she can give something away because she doesn't know how to read. Somebody brings a piece of paper that says 'your husband says I have to come and take the table.' She's going to give it away. You come back and you're mad. How do you want her to know? An educated woman is a power for a man. It is powerful for society."*

*Then the guys looked at me and said, “We never thought about that.”*

*I said, “You see that’s the way it goes. Don’t be frightened, we’re not taking your virility away from you. You will always be the man – always. And we want it to be like that.”*

**Q:** When you met the 350 children from New York City schools at the UN’s ‘Largest Lesson,’ what was particularly noteworthy about your interaction with them?

**AK:** *The thing that stood out was the questions of the children of New York about human rights. When a child asks you, “What does ‘human rights’ mean, really?”, it means that the kid is asking himself the questions about a lot of things. I was not expecting to have those kinds of questions. I was not expecting to have a child asking me, “Why don’t the kids in Africa go to school? Why can we go to school and not them?”*

*So there you go. You give them the opportunity to tell you what is in their brains and you learn a lot about a lot. If you want our kids to be better politicians later on, we have to take the time – after school – to speak to them and to lend them books that they can read, not TV. Because TV is not giving them exactly what the world looks like. It gives them diluted information and brain-washing information. So we have to lure our kids to read interesting books and we have to be adult, parents, ready to answer the questions.*

*The thing that was really important for me as a child growing up was that my parents stated that in the house there were never, ever going to be any taboo subjects. That I could feel free to ask any questions. And they were fine for me as a child to understand.*

**Q:** How would your life have been if you weren’t educated?

**AK:** *If I weren’t educated, I would still be in Benin, I would have been married early and had tons of kids. Education changed that destiny for me by knowing my rights to choose to marry the person I love. To also choose what I want to do. To also see the world as mine. Where I can go anywhere and do whatever I want as a human being. With an education, I can impact my own life and other people’s lives. If I was not educated, I wouldn’t have that perspective of the future. I wouldn’t have that ambition of going to meet the whole world through my music.*

*Without education I would be – I wouldn’t be a waste – but I would be somebody’s wife and I would fight definitely for my kids go to school, as my parents did.*

*The situation of my parents is unique in Africa, I would have to say. Because both of them were single kids [they did not have siblings], which is very rare, and both of them had been to school.*

*So being to school and working gave my father another opportunity because he studied in Dakar and he studied in France when he was young. So he saw, by going out of the*

*country, what education can bring to his children. Many other people from the same generation as my father, not all of them chose to send their kids to school.*

*So it all depend on how we can convince the parent that education is absolutely the salvation of the whole family, especially in the rural area in Africa where girls are married so early. If the parent can just imagine the future, how that girl can come back and help the village develop, they would send all of them to school.*

*But most of the time the men have the last say. Also because of poverty, they can't afford to send the kids to school. So we have to somehow make school free. And we can. Instead of spending the money on weapons, we can spend it in education.*

*For Africa, we need our historian to write our own history because historical amnesia is terrible. If the kids don't know anything about the genocide in Rwanda, about slavery, about colonization, about geography, the history of the world, when they get out of Benin, Togo, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, wherever, they are going to come with preconceived ideas.*

*We have to educate our educators. Teachers have to be educated in full because the world has changed from the time I was in school.*

*We have to have a system of education in Africa that will please everybody. That will please the parent. Also we have to ensure parents in Africa that when the daughter goes to school, they won't be raped by the teacher. We have to be really frank with this, to have the parents feel absolutely certain that no harm will be done to their kids. And today, we haven't been there yet.*

**Q:** What was school like when you were in Benin?

**AK:** *Great. It was great. I remember when I started kindergarten I loved to stay home so much and be in my Mom's lap, eating all day; so when my parents dropped me off to school I would go back home – "Whaa." Then my father would say, "You've got to go back." He brought me back until I started making friends.*

*I have to say that for you to love to go to school, it takes one teacher – one, only one person. Until I reached 4th grade, I did not like it at all. Because I was really tiny – I was the littlest, tiniest, skinny girl in school – and I could hardly see anything on the blackboard. And they always put me in the back of the class, and I'd be crying because I have to struggle. So when I reached 4th grade, my teacher put me right in the front desk where she could see me, and she said to me, "If you have any questions, you ask. If you don't understand, ask me. You can stop being scared, OK?"*

*So I catch up with all the things I didn't have before. This teacher, she spent time with me, explaining things to me. I would rather sit with her than go to break and eat because I was not hungry. I was hungry to learn.*

*So it take that teacher for me to suddenly go, “Whhhhhow. There are wonders in books. I can read; I can do my math.” I wanted to go to school – even Saturdays and Sundays. I would say to my Dad, “Why are we staying home for two days?”*

*My Dad would say, “You have to rest your brain.”*

*And I would say, “My brain doesn’t want to be rested. I want to go back to school.”*

*It took that teacher for me to just love going to school. And after that the base was there and that was it.*

**Q:** Did you have any friends who dropped out of school?

**AK:** *Oh, I had a lot of friends that have been pulled out of school after a while because their parents needed them. And I remember me going back home and yelling at my parents, “Why can’t you help them stay in school?”*

*My Dad and Mom would say, “We can’t help everybody. They must have a reason to take them out of school.”*

*And I would cry days and days. Especially when you were friends and you would do homework together and you could see how their brains, they are sharp. And I sensed it. Even when I was in primary school, I sensed the waste when they disappear.*

*Still today, when you have your period, that’s it, you are gone from school. And that was something that would really outrage me all the time. “Why, why can’t you do something?”*

*My mother and father tried to do things. Sometimes people from the villages, they come and give you their kids and they say, “Don’t send them to school,” but, I swear, when they turn their back my father would send them to school and give them education without the parents’ knowledge. And we all were part of that conspiracy because I saw it. When we saw their parents coming from the train station, when they were coming back, someone would come and tell us and we would pull the kids from school, and remove the uniform and then she’s home. And then when her parents go back, “Whhhhhit, she goes back to school.”*

*Today it’s a lot of problems because the poor people in the rural area will send their kids to cities, hoping that if they send them to a member of their family or people that they know, they are going to send them to school. But instead they turn them into slaves. It’s everywhere in Africa. It is a social problem that none of the politicians are willing to deal with it.*

*So when you’re talking about girls’ schooling, children being sent to school, that is a topic that we have to tackle but it’s gonna be the hardest thing to change. But it has to change. There’s no way that it can stay like that. “Why are you keeping the child home?”*

*Why does the child have to work about 6:00 and work all day long?” And that was a very sensitive topic when I was in Benin. I know because it is my society. It is a really sensitive subject. But we have to find a way to deal with it.*

**Q:** Are you pessimistic or optimistic?

**AK:** *Optimistic. I am really optimistic because knowing the problem, you can see the solutions for it. Not knowing the problem kept you pessimistic.*

*I believe in human beings; I believe in the power of working together. Individually we make change. But together, we don't make change, we make revolution. We make things change faster. Because two brains are better than one brain. We start brainstorming about something that we can do. I cannot do it all by myself. Your brain will complement my brain. So that's why I am optimistic.*

*You are talking about girls' education. If someone told me when I was going to school in Benin that I would be sitting here and I would be working with UNICEF talking about girls' education, I would look at the person and say, “Are you making fun of me or what?”*

*If I am able to work so that tomorrow is going to be better, why can't all people do that? I'm not pro girls' education in UNICEF for the sake of it. It's a passion for me. It's a reality for me. And I believe that we can all make a difference together. That's what Carol Bellamy told me when we were in Tanzania together. She said to me, “Every drop from everybody, one day is going to make an ocean.” And I believe that.*

**Q:** Your song *Mutoto Kwanza* was inspired by a UNICEF-sponsored trip to Tanzania. The title means ‘children first.’ Can you tell us about that trip?

**AK:** *That trip was absolutely interesting. The first village we visited was to visit a programme that UNICEF had brought to Tanzania to help women with goiter. Because the salt that they were consuming had no iodine in it. So UNICEF provided them with a tester that women brought to the market to buy the salt.*

*The ones that had goiter, it was too late for them. They were stuck with it. This was for the next generation. Instead of bringing whole hospital staff to do a lot of huge surgeries, you can prevent lives from being ruined with little things for less than a dollar. And the women were on top of the game. They even succeeded in changing the people who sell the salt. They got them to buy from the good salt from the wholesaler.*

*The second thing that I saw was the orphanage and visiting with some of the orphans. And one of them was really hard for me to deal with. Because the kids were little and big, what can you tell a child who has HIV/AIDS? That has no treatment, and you know that child that you see at that moment may not be there in two or three months? And on top of that, how can you sing —hopefully? I was devastated, I couldn't sing. And they were the*

*ones who gave me the strength. They made me see that there is always hope as far as you have a breath. You can't give up. You can't give up on life.*

*And they are the ones who taught me Mutoto Kwanza. They don't even think about death. So who are we to think about their death for them? So I gathered from that trip more strength and hope than when I was on the trip going there to Tanzania. Those kids gave me that strength of believing that tomorrow is always going to be better. And unfortunately we adults don't listen enough to children. Because the vision is innocent and right to the point. There's no hypocrisy. There's no politically correct. It's right to the point. And I loved it. They pulled me back, they centred me back. We are you. We are the reason why you are here. We have to be your focus. That's it.*

**Q:** In your travels through developing world, what about girls' education strikes you?

**AK:** *Everybody embraces the idea of girls' education because in the developed world a lot of people have been to Africa. And when you travel to Africa the first thing that strikes you is the energy of the women in the market, in the house, doing tons of things. And imagine that with an education. Wow, the economy of the continent would go [she claps her hands and as her right hand goes towards the sky, she whistles] whhhhit, flying up.*

*If you give a girl an education, the society will benefit. Absolutely. Not only the family, but the whole country will benefit from it.*

**Q:** Are you in touch with anyone you went to school with who dropped out?

**AK:** *No. The thing is that when they drop out of school, they leave the school with shame, thinking it's their fault. And that's one thing that you can't really break. They know you have continued going to school and they know that you know they had to drop out. And they don't want to deal with it. I don't think it's their fault. It's hard to tell them it's not your fault. It's really hard for the people that drop out of school.*

**Q:** How is it for you to be a role model, especially for young women?

**AK:** *It is a lot of responsibility, but somebody's got to do it. When I have to go on a trip, I'm prepared before I go. And when I'm on the trip, I'm 100 per cent on the trip. And when I'm speaking to girls or mothers, I'm 100 per cent with them, which means I'm willing to learn, I'm willing to listen, and I'm willing to give them my experience.*

*And that's the only thing I can give because sometimes a mother goes, "Why do you want me to send my child to school?"*

*I say, "I've been to school, am I less a woman than you? No. Trust her. Send her to school. Give her the chance to change her life and to change yours."*

*And then some mother will come to me and say, "I'm willing to send my child to school, because I realize now that if I had been to school, I wouldn't be stuck where I am."*

*And I always tell those women, “Don’t be bitter about anything. Be thankful for the life you have and be thankful for thinking about your child, how you are willing to send her to school.”*

*We can convince the father to send the girl to school. Those mothers did not agree sending their kids to early marriage. But they didn’t have much of a say in it. So speaking to the men, I’m willing to do that too. Show them that a child cannot be married, a child of 12 years old cannot have a baby. “Because down the line, if your child dies, whose fault is that? You parents, because you made the decision for that child. You love your child? Yes. So don’t do that.”*

*It’s not only appealing to the love for the kids, but also the perspective of the future of the whole family that you have to point out to them. Because you have to understand that in that rural area as soon as you start talking about girls’ education, the parents are thinking normally, “OK, my child will go to Europe and start dressing like all those European women with their breasts naked, with this, blah, blah, blah.”*

*It goes with so many preconceived ideas. You also have to tell them, “A child is not a possession. A child is a human being. So your point of view may not be her point of view. But it’s OK. That won’t make you love her less. She should decide who to be.”*

**Q:** Is their resistance to what some see as ‘western education’?

**AK:** *Definitely, in rural areas.*

**Q:** What do you tell your daughter about the importance of education?

**AK:** *I have nothing to say, she’s the one that said to me, “Education is the key to my future.”*

**Q:** How does she know that?

**AK:** *Because of the work I do with UNICEF – probably. But since the beginning, she has love for school. Because she is a curious child. She has always been curious.*

*When we arrived in America she was three years and she did not speak a word of English. So we put her into the Montessori School. In three months she was speaking English better than both of us. [Ms. Kidjo and her husband, Mr. Hébraïl] And that was it. So she would come home and say, “I learned this, I learned this, I learned this.” She would draw and learn. And she loved it. Period. She loved going to school.*

*She wanted to be a teacher. Now she wants to be a writer. Whatever she wants to do is fine with me. But we always tell her, “ We, as parents, give you an education that we can afford. But what you do with it afterwards is your business. Because this world in which we are living is going to be tougher and tougher. So you’ve got to be able to deal with*

*other people. You have to deal with yourself. You're working hard. By working hard, you can change your life and change other people's lives."*

*She knows that perfectly. And she's smarter about it than I could ever be. And also we have traveled with her, we have taken her to las escuelas in Brazil and she started traveling with me to Africa when she was three months old. She always wondered, "Why isn't the kid going to school?"*

*The last time when I was in Benin, the teachers were on strike. So the kids were not going to school. So everywhere I went, there were kids following me, "We want to go to school. I want to be a doctor. I want to be a lawyer. I want to be this, I want to be that. "*

*And my child was like, "Mom, why aren't they going to school?" So I tried to explain to her and she goes, "What can we do? Can we talk to the politician?"*

**Q:** What are the realities today for women and girls in Africa and what do you envision for the future?

**AK:** *Today, the women in Africa have great challenges to face. Not only because of the lack of education. There is something that is really endangering the future of women in Africa, that is HIV/AIDS. Because of the mentality of the man in Africa that believes that wearing a condom makes them less virile. And they go ahead and go around and they bring it back to the girls.*

*HIV/AIDS has changed completely the face of Africa's future. Because the number of deaths that we're going to have is going to be too high and we cannot afford that. So that's where education comes to be handy. Because a girl that is sent to school means that, too, boys go to school. The little girl can take her brothers to school.*

*And a girl that is educated can educate a man – sexually. Knowing her rights to her body. Knowing her rights to tell a man, "If you don't wear a condom, it's without me."*

*So the future of Africa with HIV/AIDS is really a shaky future. But the future of Africa with education is a bright one because they are going to be able to save lives of the women, of babies and of men.*

**Q:** How did you choose to become involved in UNICEF?

**AK:** *UNICEF has been part of my life since I was a child. Because every vaccination campaign, my Mom would drag us to go and get a vaccination. And I hated needles. "Why do you want me get another needle? I was vaccinated three month ago." And she goes, "No, no you go." And she would force us to go. She would absolutely force us to go.*

*And tests. At the end of school and before the school year, every year, we had to do a blood test. And we would yell, "Mom, we are the only ones in the whole town, in the*

*school, doing this.” She said, “I don’t care. I want you guys safe. I want you to get healthy. I don’t care what anyone else does.” She would grab sometimes the kids of the neighbors. That was my Mom.*

*My Mom was very strong. Because for her to fight the family of my father for us to go to school, it demanded guts. And she said to my Dad, “I don’t care what comes my way, my kids are going to school. If you don’t want to pay for it, I don’t care, I will sell water on the street and I will send them to school because I want them to go to school.”*

**Q:** So how did you come to work with UNICEF?

**AK:** *I always wanted to work with UNICEF, because UNICEF deals with women and kids. And for me, that’s the ultimate thing we have to protect in this world. So one day UNICEF approached me to be a goodwill ambassador and I said, “Hey, hello. They have been listening to me. I’m going to do it.” And that’s it.*