This is me at age seven.

And this is also me.

(Applause and cheering)

To be standing here in Kakuma refugee camp feels so surreal,

and I'm overcome with so much emotion.

These very grounds are where I was born

and spent the first seven years of my life.

I think many people are surprised to hear

that I had a great upbringing here at Kakuma.

But I was happy,

I was smart, I had friends

and above all, I had hope for a brighter future.

That's not to say that we didn't have our obstacles.

I mean, boy were there struggles.

I would sometimes get sick with malaria

and didn't always know where our next meal would come from.

But the sense of community that is here in Kakuma

and the pride that everyone here possesses

is simply unparalleled.

When I was younger, I remember conflicts breaking out.

That tends to happen when people come from different backgrounds

and don't speak the same language.

Eventually, Swahili --

the main language here --

became our common ground.

I made friends with the kids at the camp

and even started embracing some of their cultures,

celebrating holidays like Christmas even though I was raised Muslim.

The other kids would embrace my culture as well,

sometimes even praying right alongside me.

It was easy, as children, to come together,

blend all of our beliefs

to form our own unique, multicultural environment.

My name is Halima Aden

and I'm a black, Muslim, Somali-American from Kenya.

(Applause)

Some have called me a trailblazer --

I was the first Muslim homecoming queen at my high school,

the first Somali student senator at my college

and the first hijab-wearing woman in many places,

like the Miss Minnesota USA beauty pageant,

the runways of Milan and New York Fashion Weeks

and even on the historic cover of British "Vogue."

As you can see,

I'm not afraid to be the first, to step out on my own,

to take risks and seek change,

because that's what being a minority is about.

It's about using yourself as a vessel to create change

and being a human representation for the power of diversity.

And now I use my platform to spread an important message of acceptance.

But it hasn't always been easy.

When we first arrived to the United States and made St. Louis, Missouri home,

I remember asking my mom, "Is this really America?"

There were things that were sadly familiar,

like hearing gunshots at night

and the streets looking impoverished.

But there were things that were also very different.

Like when I started first grade,

I noticed how the kids played in groups.

In America, we call them "cliques."

Back here, we all played together.

Gender didn't matter,

and race most certainly never mattered.

I remember asking myself,

"Why don't they understand Swahili?

Swahili is the language that brings people together."

To make matters worse,

the school I was enrolled in didn't have an English immersion program.

So everyday I would get up,

go to school, sit in my desk

and never learn a thing.

This is when I started losing hope,

and I wanted nothing more than return to Kakuma,

a refugee camp.

Soon, my mother learned that many Somalis found refuge

in a small town in Minnesota.

So when I was eight, we moved to Minnesota.

My life changed as I met other students who spoke Somali,

attended a school that had an English immersion program

and found teachers that would go above and beyond,

staying there after school hours and lunch breaks,

dedicated to helping me find success in the classroom.

Being a child refugee has taught me that one could be stripped of everything:

food, shelter, clean drinking water,

even friendship,

but the one thing that no one could ever take away from you

is your education.

So I made studying my top priority

and soon started flourishing within the classroom.

As I grew older, I became more aware of others

and how they viewed my race and background.

Specifically, when I started wearing the head scarf known as a hijab.

When I first started wearing it, I was excited.

I remember admiring my mother's, and I wanted to emulate her beauty.

But when I started middle school,

the students teased me about not having hair,

so to prove them wrong,

I started showing them my hair --

something that goes against my beliefs, but something I felt pressured to do.

I wanted so badly to fit in at the time.

When I reflect on the issues of race, religion, identity,

a lot of painful memories come to mind.

It would be easy for me to blame those of another culture

for making me feel the pain I felt,

but when I think deeper,

I also recognize that the most impactful,

positive, life-changing events that have happened to me

are thanks to those people who are different than me.

It was at this moment that I decided to step outside of my comfort zone

and compete in a pageant wearing a hijab and burkini.

I saw it as an opportunity to be a voice for women

who, like myself, had felt underrepresented.

And although I didn't capture the crown,

that experience opened so many doors for me.

I was receiving emails and messages from women all over the world,

telling me that I've inspired them by simply staying true to myself.

The other "firsts" kept coming.

I was invited to New York City by fashion icon Carine Roitfeld

to shoot my very first editorial.

It was around this time that I became the first hijab-wearing model,

and in my first year,

I graced the covers of nine fashion magazines.

It was a whirlwind, to say the least.

But with all the overnight success,

there was one thing that remained constant --

the thought that this could be what brings me back here to Kakuma,

the place that I call home.

And just a few months ago, something incredible happened to me.

I was in New York City, on a photo shoot,

when I met South Sudanese model Adut Akech,

who also happened to be born right here in Kakuma.

That experience in itself is the definition of hope.

I mean, just imagine:

two girls born in the same refugee camp,

reunited for the first time on the cover of British "Vogue."

(Applause and cheering)

I was given the distinct pleasure of partnering up with UNICEF,

knowing firsthand the work that they do for children in need.

And I want you to remember

that although the children here may be refugees,

they are children.

They deserve every opportunity to flourish, to hope, to dream --

to be successful.

My story began right here in Kakuma refugee camp,

a place of hope.

Thank you.

(Applause)