

**Video Message by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
To Plenary Session of the Pio Manzù International Conference
On “A 21st Century for Women”
Rimini, Italy
October 23, 2011**

Greetings, Dear Sisters, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, from the Government and people of Liberia, and from me, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

I want to thank the President of the Pio Manzù Centre, His Excellency Mikhail Gorbachev, for the kind invitation to send a message to this Conference, taking place in the seaside resort of Rimini, Italy. But for our elections here at home, this 21st century woman of Africa would be with you in person! I recall with pride and humility when Pio Manzù, and its esteemed members, awarded me the 2006 Gold Medal of the President of the Italian Republic.

Let me, from this distance, congratulate all of you gathered for this important Conference on a topic that focuses on half the world’s population – its women – and on the significance of this new century for our empowerment and advancement. The decision by the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award this year’s Peace Prize to three women, including me, for championing women’s right, illustrates your foresight in selecting the Conference’s theme, for this is, indeed, “A 21st Century for Women.”

I am especially gratified by the many voices – witnessed in the diversity of those gathered – that are championing and advocating for women’s development and participation, and for an end to our marginalization.

Ask a young 21st century woman what she wants, and no matter from where they come, young women want the same things: to contribute to society in a way that is challenging, to make her feel accomplished and good about herself; to be a member of a group that makes her feel unique, necessary, valued and appreciated. We have only to open our eyes to see the level of development that occurs in societies where the political system is free, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is respected, every citizen has access to the same level of services, and barriers that disadvantage certain segments have been torn down.

Not so everywhere, including in my own continent, Africa, whose history is replete with incidences of the marginalization and exclusion of women. In such societies, disadvantaged women face the myriad challenges highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals, including poverty, high illiteracy, gender inequality and sexual violence, high infant and maternal mortality, diseases, the negative impact of climate change, and more.

But I say to you, and through you, to the world, that Africa’s future as a 21st century engine of global economic growth will be directly linked to the status of our women. Africa will rise, and prosper, when its women can take their rightful places as educated and equal partners in society. I echo what my good friend, Graca Machel, said recently, that women will completely change Africa within a decade!

In my own country, Liberian voters made history six years ago by electing me Africa’s first female President. I pledged that my administration would endeavor to give women prominence in all affairs of our country; empower them in all areas of our national life;

support and expand the laws to restore women's dignity and deal drastically with crimes that dehumanized them; encourage families to educate the girl child; and provide programs to enable our women to participate in our nation's economic revitalization.

My presidency opened doors and opportunities that were previously closed to our gender. Today, there is greater representation of women in the executive, legislative and judicial branches, and at the local governmental and municipal levels. Equally noteworthy is that more women have been empowered to speak out, and to exercise their independence by starting their own businesses, farms and other enterprises.

In recognition of our efforts to empower, support and protect women, including the implementation of a National Plan of Action on UN Security Council Resolution 1325, Liberia was named winner of the prestigious 2010 Millennium Development Goal Three Award.

But greater female representation, in significant enough numbers, is a must. For example, our National Legislature had less than 15 percent female representation during its just-ended 52nd session. We expect a higher percentage from this month's elections, even though the number of women vying for political office did not grow as quickly as anticipated, or at the levels women have demanded. In Africa, women's full political participation can and must happen, not only in Rwanda, South Africa or Mozambique, but everywhere on the continent.

The low political participation by women is not limited to Africa; globally, the average number of women in parliaments is 18-19 percent, with the Nordic countries being among the notable exceptions. Only a handful of countries have achieved a critical mass of 30 percent or higher women representation in their parliaments, mainly as a result of constitutional quotas written into law.

I strongly believe that full political participation will become a reality for women when quotas and set-asides become a thing of the past; when women's access in participatory institutions at all levels is considered a right; and when women no longer feel compelled to wage campaigns and stage protests in order to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

There is power in numbers, Dear Sisters. The greater the numbers of women fighting for empowerment and representation, the greater the chances of the decisions that are important to us being taken and of making them stick. When women are represented in critical numbers in parliaments, as well as at the grassroots level, their perspectives and interests will be taken into account and their concerns given higher priority, and they will make a meaningful impact on democracy.

To sustain the fight, special focus is directed at educating, capacitating and empowering girls and young women who, despite certain gains, continue to lag behind in access to education, resources and opportunities. We are teaching our people to understand and accept the vitality of girls' education, to appreciate that when you educate a girl, you educate a family, a nation.

We are also emphasizing the important role women play in the informal sector – those whose sweat and labor keep our economy moving and our families going even in difficult

times. Literacy and skills training for our market and grass-roots women is a must for women's advancement.

In closing, let me reiterate that the world will be a better place when women everywhere can take their roles as educated and equal partners. I am honored, as a woman and a female President, to serve as a role model for many women around the world. Let the word go forth that if we are to develop and overcome global challenges, we cannot, and will not, achieve them without the participation of 21st century women.

I thank you, and wish for all of you a very successful Conference.