

**Opening Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Co-Chair
At Launch of Initiative to Empower Women in Agriculture
Sheraton Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Sunday, July 15, 2012**

Fellow Heads of States Champions;
Private Sector Patrons and Partners;
Champions of Women's Empowerment, Dr. Léautier of the ACBF and
Bineta Diop of FAS, and Members of the GIMAC Network;
Special Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

The day is young; our time is short; so let's get on with the task at hand, which is to launch the Initiative to Empower Women in Agriculture (EWAG).

One might well ask, why is such an initiative necessary? Is it not a fact that African women comprise 70 percent of sub-Saharan African agricultural workers and 80 percent of those involved in the food processing chain?

How do these numbers tally with the fact that, in our part of the world, women own less than 1 percent of the land and benefit from only 1 percent of agriculture credit?

The face of agriculture around the globe, and particularly in Africa, is often female. Women toil in the fields that provide nourishment and income for their families. They contribute to commercial agriculture, which includes high value products such as fruits and vegetables, through the marketing of agricultural goods.

Yet, more often than not, women's contributions to the agricultural sector go unrecognized. Few small-scale women farmers are paid for their labor, and societal views of women's roles restrict women's inputs in household decisions. Such beliefs also limit their access to land ownership, farm equipment, and credit – all of which are needed to be economically successful. These barriers

ultimately inhibit women's ability to produce, and can make it difficult for them to escape poverty or provide food for their families.

To sustain the impressive economic growth which our continent has registered, Africa will need to boost agricultural productivity. And in order to do so, and be at the forefront in agricultural production, Africa will need its women – who constitute half of its 1 billion population, with over 853 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa alone. In other words, Africa must place a stronger focus on women at all levels of the agricultural value chain.

If our continent is to progress, there must be parity for its women in their access to land, finance, agricultural inputs and technology. Were that to happen, it is estimated that total agricultural outputs in Africa would increase by up to 20 percent – one-fifth more than current levels.

So, what's stopping us? Could it be that we are our own worst enemies, stymied by societal and other taboos that restrict women's full participation in Africa's development?

In Liberia, I often tell my Ministers that we have no shortage of strategies, policies and plans. Where we fall short is in their implementation. The same can be said for the many initiatives undertaken elsewhere – all with noble intentions.

What will it take to get us to where we no longer need to launch initiatives, such as this one, to strengthen the role of women, be it in politics, in business, in education and, in this instance, in agriculture – to produce the food which we, as human beings, must have to survive?

I am always happy to add my name to, and weight behind, efforts to promote gender equity and to advance and empower women. After all, we do constitute one half of the Africa's – and the world's – population, and we must raise our voices and be heard.

But, I ask, will the day ever come when we no longer have to call attention to the gender inequalities which make such initiatives and their advocacy necessary?

What do we need to do to strike the right balance and get this right? I throw out this burning question to my fellow Heads of State and Government of Africa, 51 of whom are men.

Will the expected results of this initiative to empower African women in the agriculture sector alter or erase the statistics I cited at the outset? Perhaps, to a degree.

But until we can fundamentally alter the mindset and attitudes of a society that marginalizes women, and make the participation of women inclusive in all endeavors, be they political, economic, social and otherwise, there will be many more initiatives aimed at empowering women to push for gender equality.

And because, being a woman and an advocate for women's rights, I will always do all in my power to enable women to play their true role and rise to their fullest potential, in the hope that the day will come – hopefully in my lifetime – when such advocacy will no longer be the norm, but an anomaly. In this regard, I salute the Co-Chair, President Kagame, for the tremendous status of women in his country.

I am now eager to hear from him and other Champions, and our GIMAC sisters, about the best way forward out of this unending circle.

Mr. President...