

**Statement by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**At Launch of the Joint Global Program on Economic Empowerment for Rural Women**  
**Thursday, September 27, 2012**  
*(Delivered extemporaneously and transcribed.)*

I'm just pleased to be here, and would like to say a big thank you to the four institutions that have sponsored this event, and to see so many people participating.

I think the consensus regarding the role of women gets stronger by the day. The 56<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on the Status of Women has just talked about how the status of women has improved. The Millennium Development Goal that focuses on the empowerment of women has shown that women's participation in all spheres of our society has been enhanced. Sustainable development, as discussed in Rio identified women empowerment as one of the major issues that had to be addressed if development will be sustained.

As we begin the dialogue on the post-2015 agenda, again women focus very prominently as to what we do. And when you're dealing with women in Africa, clearly you have to deal with rural women.

The bulk of our women live in rural areas. They feed the nation. They do most of the farming, most of the marketing of food products, the storage, and then they also take care of their families by feeding them.

Women, rural women particularly, face the odds that we all know of: their lack of access to the factors of production; access to land – that's improving in many of our places for women today do get access to land; women have inheritance rights today; access to capital. There are lots of micro loan programs that are in our countries, but the number that can access it is so small because a large number of rural women either do not have institutions in their localities that they can access or the amount of the financing is not large enough to be able to support the large ..... of women.

Access to markets. Even though we say they are the ones that provide most of the marketing, clearly they have access to small domestic marketing. It's a question of how you elevate them to another level whereby they can do cross-border trading or through exports, they can be able to scale up the size of their marketing activities.

Access to technology. Although we have some very, very good examples of how that is improving – we hear about what's happening in Kenya with communications technology,

and how rural women now, through their telephones, can access finance, can have marketing information going across. That in itself, though....

The four institutions that have come together – UN Women, FAO, IFAD, World Food Programme – have talked about how they focus on rural women’s participation and leadership. Our own example in Liberia is that we organize the rural women into association . They’ve had elections, and selected their own leaders. Those leaders have also recently gone and organized them at the community level to make sure that those leaders at that level also determine what kinds of programs that they will have. Much more of that needs to be done.

If we are going to improve the leadership skills, then we must also do something about literacy because among most of the rural women, illiteracy is a big issue for them. We have started some literacy programs for them, .... Other countries, I’m sure, around the world, have started that. Again, we are far behind in Africa and in Liberia, so we have to scale up what we can do.

Their leadership also requires going beyond literacy because many of the rural women are also literate. Many of them are intelligent; some of them are even educated, highly educated. So, how we build upon those attributes thtt they already have and ensure that they can move to a different level.

I also think this program seeks to improve food and nutrition security. For that, rural women need to get help in seeds, in tools. All the things that enable food production are something that we can all help them with. Nutrition... sometimes one finds that the farmer – I know it happens in our country – produce the food but prefer to sell it rather than use it themselves for themselves and their children because getting the income is more important to them. So, again, that requires changing the mindset and assuring them that they need that nutrition first, and helping to provide them information and training.

Increasing their incomes – clearly that’s the end result. Raising their per capita income through the means we talked about or through the enhancing of all of these factors of production to which they have access enables them to raise to that level.

Microcredit is good; it helps... if we’re going to move them to an income level where they can sustain their business and can grow, then one has to find the means to be able to do more.

I see, in the audience, one of my compatriots, who just tells you that some additional program can make a difference. We have some additional program – the Goldman Sachs/10,000 Women, a worldwide program which many of you may have heard about. Liberia is one of the beneficiary countries for that. What it does is to train these women,

particularly those who are in marketing, or a small business entity, to train them to be able to know how to sell their products, how to price their products, how to determine their profits, and have them move up. Somebody, I think, will be speaking, one of our compatriots who started selling palm oil, the one gallon of palm oil that she sold, and she was exposed to this program, and as she announced the other day at another meeting in which we participated, that her container of palm oil had just landed in New Jersey. Kebah [Sumbo] is a rural woman herself who's just been given that additional one. How many have responsive policy environments – one of the objective of this. It means that those of us in decision-making roles must be able to look at some of our laws, some of the laws that constrain women from reaching their full potential. Some of our social habits that tend to exclude women and place them in a category where they cannot take full advantage of what they have. We must all look at that, we must look at the examples of so many in other places where women have been successful, promoting women cooperatives.

I am glad that the World Food Programme is one of the sponsors because you may recall that in Liberia the World Food Programme supported a school lunch program in which they brought in the food to feed the lunch program. The women, with the support of our Minister of Gender decided that we could produce the food to sell to the World Food Programme, thereby saving them having to import it, and successfully today, the school lunch program in Liberia is being provided by these women cooperatives . they produce the rice; they sell it to WFP, and that brings a lot of local savings and also sets a good example for other women to follow.

We need to do more about technology. Too many of our rural women still do back-breaking agriculture. With intermediate technology available in more developed societies than our own, we need that networking and those examples that can be used to be able to enhance them to a place where they can produce more and their productivity can increase.

But today I am very pleased at what's happening as regards rural women. Finally, they have their place in the development architecture. They have found their voice, and that's one of the most important .... Things. Today, when we go into rural areas, and we meet with our women rural leaders who are there, they can stand up and say to us, "We now know what our rights are. We now know what our potential is. We now know what we can do. We can go into a meeting, a town hall meeting that's usually led by men, but we can go there and we can stand up, and we can say what we want. We can tell them that we have a right.

The head of my cheering squad is Kebah because she knows what I'm talking about. And that to me is the greatest thing that can happen. We try to make this organization that we formed, Rural Women's Association; what we're trying to do is to enable them to reach their members and to talk about the things that you can do. We couldn't afford to give them vehicles, but we gave each of them a motorbike, so we have great rural women

motorcyclists who go around and carry their message. I'm just so proud to be a part of what's happening with this transformation regarding rural women. I'm glad that I have a small leadership role in which I, too, can be a part of promoting them and supporting them and enabling them and empowering them, and the results are just so pleasing to me.

I would just like to say to all of you – the four institutions sponsoring this, the bilateral that are sponsoring this – that we've come a long way in ensuring their role in society, but we still can do more, because they are the heartbeat of our society. They are the ones that determine what the future will be. And by giving them a future, we give our nations a future, and we give the world a future as a better place for all mankind.

Thank you.