

**Address by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

On the occasion of International Women's Day 2006
UNESCO House
8 March 2006

I am most grateful for your kind invitation to participate in this program today. And I am pleased to bring you warm greetings from my people, most especially the women of Liberia, with whom you have decided to share the honor at this March 8 commemorative occasion marking International Women's Day.

It is indeed a pleasure and gives me a sense of pride to observe this day in the renowned city of Paris that has for centuries paid numerous tributes and honored many outstanding women who have left their imprint on the course of human events.

It is particularly gratifying for me to share some time, albeit brief, with so many notable intellectuals gathered in this room under the distinguished Chairmanship of the Director-General of UNESCO Mr. Koichiro Matsuura.

In this connection, I must pay deserving tribute to UNESCO, an organization whose name and stature resonates intellectual depth, practical knowledge, and the embodiment of the educational, cultural and scientific heritage of all of the world's people.

I feel honored not only as a woman leader and representative of the people of Liberia, but also of women throughout Africa and the world, in their just and determined struggle to play a more prominent role in making decisions that affect their lives.

Mr. Chairman:

Permit me to observe that since the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, the People's Republic of China in 1995, the world has continued to witness considerable levels of progress as far as the role of women in decision making process and in particular the high level of women's political participation.

Since my election as President of Liberia less than three months ago, we are witnessing a most welcome development of the ascendancy of women through the democratic process across three continents – Europe, South America and Africa.

Across the Globe a number of great women have led the struggle for gender equity and equality and now their voices are being echoed higher and beyond the Great Wall of China since the historic Beijing Summit.

Yet, the challenge has always been – and will continue to be – how to identify a rallying point on the key issues associated with the struggle for gender equality and how to systematically enhance women's access to and participation in decision-making processes.

As we reflect on the Global theme of Women's participation in Decision-making, we can only hope that those elements of our achievements before and since our ascendancy to the pinnacle of state power in Liberia and any other attending success, will travel around every hamlet or village where women power thrives and toils to keep our various societies together.

Yes, indeed, Distinguished Representatives from diverse backgrounds and States, peoples from Civil Society organizations and Non-Governmental Organizations, it is important to draw our attention ever so often to the fact that in spite of the gains made so far, the place of women in our societies has still not reached an appreciable level as we had anticipated more than a decade ago.

Only a few days ago, it was reported in some of the major media outlets that the participation of women at the decision making level in politics represents only 16% and specific mention was made of the great strides made by the heroic women of Rwanda leading the world with near 49 % representation in parliament.

These gains notwithstanding, women, in many parts of the world, have remained virtually excluded from the mainstream of decision making, while at the same time their tireless efforts to gain access to resources and opportunities continue to be undermined by the reluctance of their societies to show a demonstrated commitment towards the goal of equality.

Several factors continue to buttress and solidify this reluctance. However, we remain eternally optimistic that the wind of change that has hit the west coast of Africa will swivel and blow at those archaic and backward structures of confinements. Structures that restrain the full and resourceful potential of womanhood.

It is unfortunate that the global principle which speaks of "the empowerment of women and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration in all areas of life..." remains a mirage in the minds of many. Obviously, this is the challenge that we must be prepared to face if our development goals are to be achieved in a timely manner.

But it would certainly be unrealistic to ignore the fact that some positive efforts have been made in many parts of the world, especially in terms of political participation in some developing countries, as women are occupying and rising to top-level economic and political management portfolios, defying the status quo and at times even presenting clear and formidable leadership skills. The gender gap remains a huge one, continentally and globally.

Let me stress, however, that the world needs to be reminded again and again that where women have succeeded, in achieving some level of progress in terms of political participation, that success has almost always been overwhelmed by enormous challenges or issues that need to be tackled more vigorously. This involves redeploying energies and resources towards pursuing not only equity but also a form of participation in which women in decision-making can endeavor to bring quality in order to generate the desired change.

Indeed, since 1995, the struggle to enhance women's access to decision-making bodies has intensified remarkably. The Beijing Summit alerted the world to the stark reality that without creating the enabling environment that promotes gender equality and gender justice, the majority of the world's rapidly growing population will continue to remain in abject poverty, while at the same time their vulnerability to killer diseases such as HIV/AIDS, TB, malaria and other infectious diseases will no doubt increase.

After decades of campaign against social inequalities, the world must now wake up to the clarion call of women for a level playing field in which both men and women can fully utilize their vast potentials to engender social, economic, political and cultural advancement. In this respect, the key issues associated with women's participation in leadership will have to be addressed more aggressively as we move further into the 21st Century.

Distinguished Participants:

It is crucial for us to underscore once more that qualitative participation in leadership is the objective of promoting gender justice. Therefore for us in Africa's Oldest Republic, the journey has begun in earnest.

We have committed ourselves to unleashing an all-out campaign against all forms of social injustices in our Nation. The main goal of this campaign is to create an environment that promotes fair play, engenders socio-economic growth and advancement and facilitates justice and equality for all, irrespective of tribal, gender and political differences.

Women in decision-making must at all times seek a clear objective. Such objective will of course require that women leaders should be committed to providing qualitative leadership, which, in most instances, has always been lacking. In other words, women who make it to top leadership positions in their countries, as in our case in Liberia, must understand that any reluctance and/or refusal to deal decisively with certain social ills, for example, the menace of corruption, will undermine their capacity to lead.

For any environment that has been dominated by bad governance practices over many decades, the only best leadership alternative is a strong determination and will to break completely with the past.

Now the time has come for women leaders to realize that the goal of their long years of toil and struggle for equality has never been to perpetuate societal ills, but to defeat or eradicate them so that social, economic, political and cultural advancement can be attained.

As we strive for equitable distribution and access to resources and decision making at all levels, we need to again be reminded that ours must always be to seek to overturn the structural and attitudinal barriers that need to be addressed through positive measures. Such measures should encompass a visible policy of mainstreaming the gender perspective in all policies and programs so that before decisions are made or taken, an analysis is made of their effect on men and women, girls and boys.

Today the world could have become more gender-balanced if leaders had taken practical steps towards actualizing the Twelve Critical Areas outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action. As a reminder to us all since Beijing '95 the critical areas of concern addressed by the Platform for Action are:

1. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
2. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training
3. Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services
4. Violence against women
5. The effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women, including those living under foreign occupation
6. Inequality in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities and in access to resources
7. Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision making at all levels
8. Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women
9. Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women
10. Stereotyping of women and inequality in women's access to and participation of all communication systems especially in the media
11. Gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in the safeguarding of the environment
12. Persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

There is a need for governments and peoples across the globe to make concerted efforts to address these critical issues in conjunction with the eight Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. Their full realization will lead to the attainment of development for all peoples in a more peaceful and secured environment. Moreover, the

attainment of the basic minimum of these Global milestones in a decade would be an important step toward gender equality, achieving equity and justice in the world.

Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

If we are to correct the ills in many developing societies, women with the moral rectitude should aspire to positions of power and decision making in their communities. Proven tested, tried and committed leadership at the local government levels can lead to the lead to their assumption of even greater decision making responsibilities.

To be sure, we are still challenged to eradicate poverty, HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, human rights violation such as violence against women, human trafficking, harmful traditional practices against women, limited access to resources and opportunities, corruption, lawlessness and other social ills. While these challenges remain formidable they are not insurmountable.

I believe that addressing them in a timely and well-focused manner will confirm women's leadership potential and help elevate societies from the culture of bad governance that is prevalent in most developing countries. Leaders who are committed and have the courage of their conviction, particularly women leaders, will tackle and address the critical issues affecting women and children or one half of humanity.

Finally let me re-emphasize here that women's success in decision making positions will largely depend on their character, competency, the courage of their conviction and a commitment to team work. In the case of the national government, a team comprising the private sector, civil society and an open, accountable and transparent governance structure including our international partners will set the threshold for a more wholesome functional participation of all the stakeholders.

Women in decision making positions will and can succeed if they set as well as maintain the standards of excellence which they ascribe to personally. They must also demonstrate clear commitment and respect for international norms and treaties which have evolved over the years and brought the concept and practice of equity and equality to the fore. In this regard women are under more societal pressure, scrutiny as well as obligation to protect and promote the human rights of women and girl children as an integral part of the universal human rights.

We know our people are looking to us for success and we cannot and must not fail. We embrace the goodwill at the international level as a sign that indeed the wind of change is beginning to blow across the continent and inspire women to assume decision making positions in order to pursue the noble objectives they set for not only themselves but for their people.

Women leaders will be expected to demonstrate at all times a willingness to break with the past, a commitment to serve and a determination to never relent in pursuing truth, justice, good governance and the rule of law.

Women have demonstrated considerable leadership at the family level, in the community and informal organizations, in high levels of international organizations, and are now boldly stepping up the highest mantle of state authority in public life and we are convinced that with good guidance, commitment, dedication to change, with a vision that carries forward equality and social equity, women, through their leadership role, will help to make the world a safer, peaceful, more progressive place for themselves and their children.

We know that in Liberia, we take on the responsibility of setting the pace, of being able to take the winds of change and turn it into a reality for the advancement of women. For sensitivity towards the needs of society, for being able to respond to those needs and to bring effective leadership, to bring prosperity, to bring integrity, to bring character, to bring to all of our people those wishes which they have dreamed of in all those years will become possible by promoting women to the highest level of state power. We promise to this group that our commitment will remain ever alive and that Liberia will become, once again, a beacon, one that sets the pace, for women's leadership that can make a difference in the quality of the lives of people, not only in Liberia and Africa, but we dare say, across the world.

I thank you.