

**Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**At Community of Democracies/Council of Women**  
**World Leaders Panel Discussion**  
**On “Women as a Critical Force in Democratic Governance”**  
**New York, Thursday, September 23, 2010**

Let me thank you, Tarja [President Halonen of Finland] and Dalia [President Grybauskaite of Lithuania] for arranging this meeting. I join others in congratulating Michelle [Bachelet, the new Head of U.N. Women and former President of Chile] for taking on this responsibility in this institution, and joining Margot [Wallstrom, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict], and Helen Clark, the first woman Administrator of UNDP, thereby expanding the critical force of women in the United Nations system.

As we know, governance epitomizes all facets of representation and decision-making, from the community to national levels. Women in democratic governance is when women’s access in participatory institutions at the local, national, regional levels, are able to voice their preferences on issues of national concern.

And the word “critical” is important in these discussions because critical means that you have a critical mass of those voices and actions that are necessary for progress and for democracy.

The lone female voices in governance are just insufficient to make the meaningful changes that are necessary. As a small minority in governance, women are isolated, can be subjected to pressures, their capacities as representatives, policy makers

and decision takers are sometimes constrained by these small numbers. So critical force will need to bring together women's voices and perspectives, to be able to make a meaningful impact on democracy and to sustain the effort for the empowerment of women and the representation of women.

As of 2007, only 19 countries had achieved 30 percent of women's representation in national parliaments. By 2008, women occupied only 18 percent of parliamentary seats, with only 13 women in the highest positions of State out of 192 governments. Women ministers, and to a large extent, although this is changing, tend to be concentrated in social areas rather than legal, economic, political and executive sectors of the government.

We always applaud Rwanda as having the highest number of women parliamentarians in the world, at 55 percent. And in Pakistan and India, for example, constitutional amendments passed in the past decade increased the representation of women in their legislative assemblies and local governments.

In my own country, Liberia, our women organizations have a big pressure on for 30 percent women's representation in throughout our political life, in our Legislature, political parties and other organizations. The bill is facing serious challenges from a male-dominated Legislature, but we will continue that battle; we'll continue to push on it until that objective is achieved. Liberia is guided by the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which calls on nations to review the differential impact of electoral systems on the political representation women in electoral bodies and consider the reforms that are necessary toward enhancing their role.

The number of women in our Cabinet, our National Legislature and the Judiciary continues to increase. Not as fast as we would want it to, but in significant enough numbers, so that progress is indeed measurable and noticeable.

In my administration, I have six female Cabinet Ministers out of 21, but I make sure they hold strategic positions – Justice, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Commerce, Youth and Sports. That compensates for not being able to achieve the numbers. I've always played with the idea that I would get into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by having an all-female Cabinet, but I haven't been able to achieve that as yet. At the local governmental level, our women are visible, with 40 percent representation.

We are pleased that in our effort to enhance the empowerment of women, Liberia has made great progress and was recognized during this session as having made the most progress in that regard.

For us, democracy is becoming a global entitlement with women as a critical force – one that will increasingly be promoted and protected by collective national and international processes. Our success lies in gaining the support of civil society institutions, including the media, religious and women's and all the human rights groups that promote activism and equality in the society.

We, in Liberia, will continue to examine our laws and social institutions to eliminate any form of discrimination against women, to bring our laws in conformity with UN Conventions,

and to ensure that measures are taken to enable women to have equal to all opportunities and rights and freedoms that exist in the society under our laws.

In March 2009, I was privileged to co-host with Tarja [President Halonen] a Colloquium on Women that brought together thousands of women from all over the world to talk about the progress women have made since Beijing; to examine what kind of laws and measures, approaches and strategies have been adopted; and to exchange information on best practices and good examples that will enhance it.

Our National Plan of Action was one of the first to be concluded in Africa, and we've established the Angie Brooks International Center that will carry on the work of that Colloquium, providing the opportunities for women to come in and to be able to do research, to look at the examples of other women; to do the networking and promote the kinds of cross-border examples of exchange around the world, so that each nation can look at its own strategy, its own progress, and be able to adopt and change and revise and renew its own effort based upon the experiences and the successes of others.

I want to thank you all for being here, and thank all the panelists for supporting Liberia in its effort to advance women, and supporting women all over the world.

I thank you.