

“African Women and Political Participation”
Lecture by
H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
On the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary
Of the African Women’s Development Fund (AWDF)
Accra, Ghana, Friday, November 12, 2010

Madam Chair, Madam Executive Director;
Your Excellency, Madam Vice President of the Republic of Malawi;
The Board of Directors, Officers and Members of the AWDF;
Ministers, Officials of Government;
Members of Parliament;
Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
Donors, Grant Beneficiaries;
Distinguished Guests;
My African Sisters;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

Heartfelt congratulations to you, AWDF Sisters, on reaching your tenth year! You have succeeded in your goals; you have weathered the global economic crisis; you have demonstrated resilience and determination to succeed in your noble cause to promote leadership and empowerment for African women.

When Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi invited me, almost a year ago, to be a part of the AWDF’s 10th Anniversary Celebration, she knew that by asking me so far in advance I could not say no, although I was not sure what my schedule would be a whole year away. I agreed, and we duly blocked the dates ensuring that whatever events came before or after November 12th and 13th had to give way to my AWDF commitment.

This was a typical Bisi foresight – the same foresight that led her, and colleagues Joanna Foster and Hilda Tadria, to establish the AWDF 10 years ago. Today we can boast of an organization that has funded numerous initiatives to promote African women’s leadership and empowerment here in Ghana,

the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, Swaziland, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and many, many more since its founding.

Liberia particularly applauds the AWDF for the role they have played in promoting the welfare of women in our country. The establishment and support of the Sirleaf Market Women Fund has brought together some 12 partners with funding close to \$2 million for the construction and renovation of 13 markets throughout the country. This does not include, perhaps the first of its kind, the \$500,000 donated by the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority for the construction of the Omega Market, which is expected to assist more than 7,000 market women. Bisi, Hilda, Thelma (a former Board Chair), and Joanna, you played a large role in all of this, a big thank you.

AWDF also played an essential role, as “Theme Lead,” in the preparatory phase of the March 2009 International Women’s Colloquium in Monrovia which brought together some 1,100 women from 54 countries to join some 900 local women in a parallel session. The AWDF was responsible for driving the process for empowering women to be more effective leaders by linking with their peers around the world.

The legacy of that 2009 Colloquium was the establishment of the Angie Brooks International Centre (ABIC) at the University of Liberia campus near Monrovia, which will serve as the implementation mechanism for the Colloquium’s program of work. It will also extend its reach to the Madam Suah Koko Center at Cuttington University in rural Liberia. The Center, still in its infancy, has benefited much from AWDF funding and expertise. On behalf of the scores of women who will come to the ABIC to engage in training, research, analysis, partnership, networking and advocacy, and profit from the experiences of others, we express profound thanks to the AWDF.

Certainly, with this backdrop of how Liberia has benefited, I can do no less than to be here today to declare what a singular honor it is for me to deliver a lecture commemorating AWDF’s 10th anniversary. Any organization with a vision to better and transform the lives of people – most especially African women – is deserving of staunch and unswerving support. I am also proud to be a part of the launching of the Hawa Yakubu Memorial Fund. She was very good to us during the campaign. To the family of Hawa Yakubu, let me say how grateful I am for the role she played in my success.

To the host city, Accra, let me confess that I always welcome the occasion to visit Ghana – a country that sets the standard as a role model of success for Africa in so many ways, and which has been, and remains, a refuge for so many Liberians. Thank you, Ghana, for your gracious hospitality and warmth, and for the wonderful reception we always receive whenever we are in this country.

AFRICAN WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Dear Sisters;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

The topic of today's Seminar, "African Women and Political Participation," is one on which I can speak with some authority – as an African, as a woman, and as a politician.

Every woman here knows, or has experienced, the difficulty in bringing women into the fold of political participation across our continent – from the grassroots up to the highest office in the land.

You are here this evening because you believe that women's full political participation can and must happen, not only in Rwanda, South Africa or Mozambique, but in all corners of this vast continent that is our home. In overcoming the multiple challenges which we as African women confront, it is vital that there be trailblazers such as the AWDF which are striving determinedly for all our women to be empowered.

We are seeing progress in African women's participation in politics, no doubt, although not at the levels we demand. The job of full equality and total empowerment is incomplete. Let us remember that in the fight to empower women, we can accept no frontiers, only breakthroughs.

Governance cuts across all spheres of representation and decision-making, from the community to national levels. Full political participation will become a reality for us, as women, when quotas and set-asides become a relic of the past; when our access in participatory institutions at all levels is considered a right; and when we no longer feel compelled to wage campaigns and stage protests in order to have a say in the decisions that affect our lives – be it at the peace table or in the political and economic arenas.

There is power in numbers. The lone female voices one encounters in political circles, including in Africa, are insufficient to effect the changes that are so important to women. As a tiny minority in governance, women could be subjected to pressures, and their capacities as representatives, policy makers and decision takers are constrained by their numbers. We still need those numbers in critical mass to make those decisions and make them stick. In such low numbers, and with insufficient clout, women ministers tend to be relegated to, and concentrated in, social areas rather than legal, economic, political and technical functions of government.

It goes without saying that 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. Greater political participation will also allow women to make a meaningful impact on democracy, and to sustain the effort for the empowerment and representation of women.

A GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Dear Friends: The low political participation by women is not limited to Africa; it is global, with the Nordic countries being among the notable exceptions.

Today, out of 192 United Nations Member States, there are only 18 women, either elected or appointed, in the highest positions of government. That figure inched up by one with the election, just last week, of Dilma Rousseff as the first female Head of State of Brazil. When she takes office in January 2011, she will preside over the largest country in Latin America, with a population of over 192 million, 45 percent of which are people of African descent. We welcome her to our tiny circle.

Globally, women's representation in parliaments stands at 18.2 percent – the highest it has ever been, but still not high enough. Today only 22 countries have achieved a critical mass of 30 percent or higher women representation in their national parliaments, mainly as a result of constitutional quotas written into law and requiring that a certain percentage of political positions be occupied by women.

Of that number, six are African countries: Burundi, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. These countries succeeded because they recognized the importance of equity between women and men in decision-making and they instituted changes in their electoral and parliamentary processes.

The world applauds Rwanda as having the highest number of women parliamentarians, at 56.3 percent, followed by Sweden, at 47 percent. Rwanda succeeded by implementing a gender quota system. With a population of 70 percent female following the 1994 genocide, women had to assume traditional male roles. Able, finally, to participate in the drafting of a new constitution and new legislative structures, they pushed for greater equality in politics through such initiatives as a constitutional quota and election law quotas to ensure women's place at the political table. Rwanda serves as a case study, an example for other countries seeking a more equal representation of women in politics.

Let us also recognize South Africa, which leapt from 17th to 3rd place, behind Rwanda and Sweden, in the global ranking. That country has experienced an 11 percent increase in women's political

representation, from 34 percent to 45 percent. Prior to democratic elections held there in 1994, there were only 2.7 percent of women in the South African Parliament; the figure increased to 27 percent following the elections and has been growing ever since. We applaud the enlightened male leaders who played key roles in this success.

My country, Liberia, is a strong advocate of the seminal UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which seeks greater representation of women at all decision-making levels in politics and in crisis management activities. We are only at 12 percent – the highest it has ever been in Liberia – yet far below an acceptable percentage of women in our National Legislature or in other leadership areas.

Women's groups are pressuring for 30 percent political representation. The Gender Equity in Politics Act 2010, sponsored by the Women Legislative Caucus, is now before the Legislature. It calls for no less than 30 percent representation of women in national elected offices and political parties. As you may well imagine, the proposed legislation is facing serious challenges from a male-dominated Legislature, whose members argue that competition, rather than gender, should be the criterion for representation. Since there is no mutual exclusivity here, you can be assured that our women are neither defeated nor are they backing down, and we will continue to push until this necessary objective is achieved.

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

You may have heard, or read, that a week ago I created a bit of turbulence when I placed my entire Cabinet on administrative leave, including the six female Ministers who held strategic positions at the Justice, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Commerce, Gender and Development, and Youth and Sports Ministries. Let me put on record that our women Ministers have been effective and transparent in leadership, and I have no doubt that the majority – all of them dynamic, hard-working, imbued with integrity, and wholly committed to our development agenda – and you can be sure they will continue their invaluable service to our country.

At the local governmental level, our women are visible, with 40 percent representation. Women serve as superintendents in 6 of our 15 counties; as mayors of cities, including our capital, Monrovia; as heads of public corporations, including the National Port Authority, the gateway to our nation's economy. Junior Ministers across sectors account for more than 30 percent of women in our government.

In recognition of our efforts to empower, support, and protect women in our society, including the implementation of Liberia's National Plan of Action on Resolution 1325 – one of the first to be concluded in Africa – Liberia was named the winner of this year's prestigious Millennium Development Goal Three Award. We owe that to all of you who have been a part of our success. We were recognized for outstanding leadership, commitment and progress toward the achievement of MDG-3 through the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment across the country.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: THE 1990s AND BEYOND

The gains in women's political participation in Africa did not happen overnight; they have been earned over decades by Sisters who dared to challenge the status quo. Prior to the 1990s, it was unthinkable – in my country, for sure – that a woman could run for the presidency in Africa. In 1997, I challenged that stereotype and ran for President of Liberia. I lost, bested by a well-financed military machine. I ran again, in 2003, for Chairman of the Interim Government right here in Accra during the peace talks. Although I received the highest vote from the participating civilian groups, the warring factions with regional backing placed the leadership in others hands, in retrospect, a blessing in disguise. Undeterred, I ran for President again in 2005, and this time the outcome was in my favor.

I am proud to be the first democratically elected female President in Africa. It is my fervent hope, and prayer, that what I accomplished will not be a one-off; that a woman running for President in Africa will become the norm, not the exception, for many more women across our continent.

I continue to be encouraged by the women with whom I interact across Africa. They see in my presidency a validation of something they have always believed, that "It is possible. We can make it happen." You in this room have to work to make it happen. It is my great privilege to be a source of inspiration to you, the women of Africa, with aspirations to occupy the highest political positions in the land.

Other African women have dared to run for the highest office in their countries since my first attempt. Charity Ngilu and Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai ran in Kenya's 1998 presidential election, and Ngilu ran again in 2002; Tanzania, Sierra Leone and more recently Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire have seen women compete. Dr. Sarah Jibril of Nigeria, for the fifth time, has thrown her hat into the race for the upcoming 2011 presidential elections. Despite their unsuccessful bids, these women, undaunted, set important precedents and several have assumed other important leadership roles. We have one right here with us today, the Vice President of Malawi. Africa needs more daring women to step forward.

Prior to the 1990s, the only female African Heads of State got there by virtue of being royalty – Zauditu, Empress of Ethiopia, who ruled between 1917 and 1930; and two who served for brief periods as Queen-regents of Swaziland in the 1980s. Africa's first female Prime Minister was Elizabeth Domitien of the Central African Republic, who served in the 1970s.

In the 1990s, African women claimed national leadership visibility in noticeable numbers. Liberia's Ruth Perry served on the six-member collective presidency, chairing the Council of State between 1996 and 1997. Uganda's Wandera Specioza Kazibwe became the first female Vice President in 1994. From 1993 to 1994, women served as Prime Ministers of Burundi and of Rwanda, while Senegal claimed a female Vice President in 2001. Gambia continues to have a very active female Vice President and in like mode is our dear Sister from Malawi who is here with us today. Countries in East and Southern Africa have also had women as Speakers and Deputy Speakers of Parliament.

Africa, which had the lowest female participation in politics in the 1960s, is today seeing the fastest rates of growth of women in politics. A comparative analysis with other parts of the world would conclude that some African countries are doing relatively well, although none come close to proportionately representing women – Rwanda, again, being the exception. Women have made important strides in terms of political participation and their rise to top-level economic and political management portfolios, but there is still a huge gender gap worldwide, and a long way to go before women can be treated as full equals and partners to their male counterparts.

At the same time, we are seeing the growth of groups that campaign for women's political leadership, press for legislative and constitutional changes, and conduct civic education. This divergence commenced in the 1990s when women began to form their own political parties because existing ones in the multiparty context did not adequately address women's concerns. Women founded the National Party in Zambia in 1991, the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats in 1999, Kopanang Basotho in Lesotho, as well as women-led parties in Kenya, the Central African Republic, and in Angola.

Let me recall some of the factors that account for African women's new visibility in the political arena as independent actors:

- The move towards multi-party politics which lessened the need for mass organizations linked to and directed by a single ruling party;
- Increased educational opportunities for girls and women which created a larger pool of capable women who were positioned to vie for political power;
- An increasing number of women experienced in creating and sustaining associations and social and economic networks;

- The availability of donor funds, channeled through international and local NGOs like the AWDF, religious groups, and foundations, which spurred the growth of national-level organizations that support women's participation in civic education, constitutional and legislative reform, leadership training and programs for women parliamentarians; and
- Stronger commitment to women's increased representation by a country's leadership, especially ones with female Heads of State.

The emergence of these independent associations means that for the first time many women's movements could select their own leaders and set their own agendas.

CHALLENGES IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

Despite the advances I have cited, women have yet to see enormous payoffs in being elected into office and receiving political appointments. An important reason is that women often lack the resources, political experience, education and political connections to run for office. Popular perceptions are that a woman's place is in the home, and in the kitchen, rather than in politics and corporate boardrooms. Cultural attitudes which constrain women's involvement in politics persist among men and women. These are oftentimes reflected in voting patterns, media coverage of female politicians, as well as attempts to suppress women's assertion of their political rights and views.

Such attitudes are not helped by the fact that women themselves are many times reluctant to run for office, stemming from cultural prohibitions on women being seen and speaking in public in front of men or challenging them. Where these prohibitions are strong, men do not listen to women who take the podium or are active in politics.

Campaigning and being a leader often involves travel and time away from home, all of which put women politicians at risk and at a disadvantage due to gender bias. Would-be female politicians may find themselves and their families under attack or the subject of malicious gossip. Some husbands forbid their wives from engaging in politics, fearing that they will interact with other men, or worrying that their spouse's political preoccupations will divert her attention from the home.

How, then, can we address and overcome the hurdles placed in women's path towards political participation and representation? It is one thing to legislate that women be represented at all decision-making levels; it is quite another to change the attitudes and mind-set of those who would obstruct that access. With men making up the other half of the world's 6.8 billion people, it is imperative that we reach out to them if we are to succeed in our overall goals and objectives. We have to work harder.

Together with efforts to persuade men of the need to allow women political space and access, grassroots action is also essential in order to groom future women political leaders. That will require advocates to: develop rosters of viable female candidates to participate fully in the political arena; encourage women to register to vote and educate them about the electoral processes; teach female aspirants how to run effective campaigns; and enhance their leadership capacity. Female aspirants will also require training in how to seek elective offices, to articulate the issues, and how to acquire funding in order to run successful campaigns. Unless we can train and prepare women to compete for political office at all levels, their representation and participation in political bodies will remain low until such time that legislation setting gender quotas are enacted into law.

AFRICA'S FUTURE: ITS WOMEN

Africa faces many challenges, all of them highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals – poverty, high illiteracy, sexual violence, high infant and maternal mortality rates, HIV/AIDS, the effects of climate change, and a litany of other woes. In such a landscape, let us not make the mistake of not harnessing the potential of one-half of Africa's population – its women.

Africa's history is replete with incidences of the marginalization and exclusion of women. That history likewise shows the incredible potential of women to persevere, to lead, to resolve conflict, and to move a country from chaos onto the path of social and economic development.

I can recall in Liberia's own experience that it was the women, notably the Mano River Women Peace Network (MARWOPNET), the Liberia Women Initiative, among others, who labored and advocated for peace. I pledged, upon assuming office, that my Administration would endeavor to give Liberian women prominence in all affairs of our country; to empower them in all areas of our national life; to support and expand the laws to restore women's dignity and deal drastically with crimes that dehumanized them; to encourage families to educate the girl child; and to provide programs to enable our women to participate in our nation's economic revitalization.

To ensure that in the Liberia of tomorrow, women will have full equality with men, special focus is being directed at educating, capacitating and empowering girls and young women who, despite certain gains, continue to lag behind the men in access to education, resources and opportunities. The glaring reality, in Liberia and elsewhere, is that, from the beginning of their lives, female children get less attention, less education, less of everything. Girls' education and, in some places, girls' lives, are treated as less valuable, thereby establishing a pattern that constrains women their entire lives, affecting their ability to make decisions at all levels of their societies.

We are therefore training our people to understand the vitality of girls' education, to appreciate that when you educate a girl, you educate a family, a nation. At the same time, we are emphasizing the important role that can be played by women in the informal sector – those whose sweat and blood keep our economy vibrant in difficult times. Literacy and skills training for our market and grass-roots women are a must for women's advancement.

I think it is prophetic that, less than a week after a speech in the United States about "Africa and Its Place in the World," I am here discussing a related topic. I told the audience in Richmond, Virginia, that despite significant gains, much remains to be done about the place of women in African society, and that Africa's future as an engine of global economic growth will be directly linked to the status of women on the continent. For in the long run, Ladies and Gentlemen, this continent will rise when women take roles as educated and equal partners in society. There is no doubt in my mind that women are the future of Africa, and its leaders must invest in women's development if they want their country, and our continent, to advance in the 21st century and beyond.

At my Inaugural, in January 2006, I addressed the women of Africa, Sisters all. I said, then, that I am one of you; that I know what you go through daily, confronting tremendous odds, for I have been there. I feel your enormous support in all that I am endeavoring to achieve, and I am keenly sensitive of your expectations from me. I promised not to disappoint you, not to let you down. I trust that I am keeping that promise.

I feel honored, to stand here, not only as a woman leader and representative of the people of Liberia, but also of women throughout Africa and the world, in our just and determined struggle to play a more prominent role in society.

I see myself as representing the aspirations and expectations of women everywhere. My success is your success, as it opens the door even wider to many other women who will step up. As women, there is a commonality in what we go through. For no matter where we come from, there is still a measure of discrimination to overcome because of our gender. It is imperative that we work together, and pull together, and be supportive of each other, in order to strengthen and uplift women everywhere.

Finally, let me again congratulate the African Women's Development Fund for reaching this milestone. I urge the many donors to continue their financial and in-kind support, and call upon the beneficiaries of these grants to ensure that they are well spent.

I thank you.