

**Remarks by Her Excellency President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
At Official Opening of Oodi College of Applied Arts and Technology
Gaborone, Botswana
May 22, 2012**

Honorable Ministers and Members of the Government Present;
Faculty, Teachers and School Administrators;
Parents and Sponsors;
Students of Oodi College of Applied Arts and Technology;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very happy to be here today, to participate in this special event. I say special because, even though the College has been functioning since February, today is its official opening. I am proud to have been invited to share in it. That makes me feel very special, indeed, and I want to thank all of you for this honor. I wish once again to applaud the leadership and the people of Botswana for the exemplary model which your country represents in peace, stability and development.

So, you've been here for several months now, and have no doubt settled into this excellent learning environment. Consider yourselves the chosen ones – the inaugural class of the College of Applied Arts and Technology.

As the first and only such College in Botswana, you, the first generation of students and teachers, bear a heavy responsibility to establish a solid track record and make this institution attractive to others who will follow in your footsteps. Its reputation will very well depend on how you conduct yourselves, and how you apply what you learn after you leave here. Every time you perform a task, do a job, you will be leaving a piece of your school's reputation behind you. We expect you to conduct yourselves accordingly.

The College's mandate is a noble agenda aimed at creating economic diversification, sustainability and jobs, promoting entrepreneurship leading to poverty alleviation, rural development and supplying trained manpower. This agenda will have a positive impact on Botswana and the sub-region. You, young men and women, should consider yourselves privileged to be given such a golden opportunity to transform your lives, to become productive and contributing members of your communities.

To be out of school and out of work at a young age is a challenge. By being here, you have a new chance to advance, to learn new skills and become competent. Whatever skills you acquire – whether as an electrician, a mechanic or an artist – will allow you to make your contribution to society, and be in a position to take care of yourselves and your families.

There is dignity in labor, no matter what form it takes, so take pride in your endeavors. You worked hard to get here, and must prove to those who selected you that they made the right choice.

One of the major challenges we face in Africa today, is finding trained people to handle our technical needs, to invent and build the tools we need to transform our environment to suit our needs.

In my own country, over 60 percent of our population of 3.8 million is below the age of thirty-five. Many of them missed out on the opportunity to go to school because of our years of civil conflict. Too old for the conventional classroom, we have been working steadily to train them. You can well imagine our need for vocational and technical education!

Our oldest vocational and technical institution, the Booker Washington Institute, was founded in 1929 – when Botswana was still called Bechuanaland. BWI was credited with training Liberia's best craftsmen before the war. Today, the Institute is being rehabilitated, through social responsibility funding from our private sector partners. This will increase the number of students, the variety of disciplines and modernize the training equipment.

Additionally, with a grant from the Government of the People's Republic of China, we are expanding the Monrovia Vocational Training Center (MVTC) to accommodate increased enrolment. We are opening additional technical colleges outside the capital, including one called the Straz-Sinje Technical Vocational Middle College. Our young people will be able to stay in their areas and still get quality education without having to come to the capital. We are also encouraging the many mining companies doing business in Liberia to inform us of their projected growth areas so that we can target our TVET programs to meet their emerging needs. Vocational and technical training is also taking place to meet the needs of our business and agricultural sectors.

As you can see, Ladies and Gentlemen, our government, like yours, is doing all in our power to provide technical and vocational opportunities for our citizens. We pledge to do more as our financial picture improves. We also hope that under an umbrella cooperation framework agreement, our technical institution can network with Oodi College.

Finally, my advice to you, the students of Oodi College, is to look ahead; think of the future when, as technicians and artists, you will invent instruments that will make life easier for all of us. Those of you with entrepreneurial skills will create jobs for others. This is how we will develop Africa. Your government is making a serious investment in all of you; you are expected not only to pay back, but to do more to make Botswana proud.

I cannot conclude without acknowledging the contributions of the parents, sponsors and educators who are doing their part to help you succeed. You have to show them that their efforts are not in vain. Work hard. Never give up. Claim your future!

I thank you.