

Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf at Thematic Session 5: “Driving African Development through Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment”
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Thank you, Helen [Clark, UNDP Administrator.] Let me say how pleased I am to join the organizers of this event on something very important to all of us who have been promoting the empowerment of women.

We all know, and I’m quite sure the statements that have been made covered the same ground that I would cover: that gender equality enhances economic performance which, in turn, benefits particularly the poor and the vulnerable. Gender equality is a building block not only for women, but for households, communities, and for development, more broadly. The reverse is true, as research has shown that in sub-Saharan Africa, inequality between men and women in education and employment suppresses annual per capita growth by some 0.8 percent.

We’ve seen a lot of progress in an effort to narrow the gap between African women and men, but the statistics still show glaring disparities that continue to put women at a disadvantage, not only in terms of health and survival, but in education, economic opportunities, and earnings. African girls continue to lag behind boys in school enrolment, and even further behind in school completion rates. Collectively, women from sub-Saharan Africa spend about 40 billion hours a year collecting water.

We also know that gender inequality is hindering the agricultural work of women. In our own continent, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, women make up less than 15 percent of landowners. When women control land, it is often the less fertile land. According to some reports African women receive only 7 percent of agricultural extension services and one percent of agriculture credit. Women farmers are also less likely to have access to modern inputs such as irrigation equipment, seeds, fertilizers and mechanical tools. Yet they are the ones who produce the food, store the food, who market the food, and who feed the families.

The statistics point particularly to rural women – the ones in the informal sector who are really the critical gatekeepers – the one that stands most, if given access, to transforming agriculture, and transforming the way our economic productivity stands. They could be the ones that have the potential to transform rural Africa and its impact in countries generally.

But we also would like to say that the way of looking at women and girls should change, so we don’t look at it as a disadvantage, despite all of the disparities that we talk about. We don’t see them as the vulnerable. Let us turn it around and see women as the greatest opportunity for unleashing the full potential of the continent and multiplying our development results. If we simply remove those constraints that have kept them behind by lack of access to all of the things I mentioned – education, knowledge, inputs, factors of production, we can then see what this will do for economic performance to all of our continents. We should focus on the African women

who are farmers, the 60 percent of employed women who work in agriculture and produce up to 80 percent of the food in sub-Saharan Africa.

In Liberia, we've been trying to work with our women farmers, particularly with rural women, and putting them at the center of our food security program. UN Women, UNDP, FAO and the World Food Programme have all been helpful to us in implementing the food security and nutrition program. As a matter of fact, Japan has supported us in a program in which rice is bought, is grown by rural women, bought by them through funding provided by Japan, given to the World Food Programme, to be able to have lunch for the children at school. This has had an effect on enrolment of the girls in school, and has also raised the level of income and raised the level of status and prestige of the rural women who grow the rice and from whom it is bought.

We just joined the United Nations in a Global Joint Program for Rural Women, and we're trying to come up with other kinds of interventions that will enable them to play a pivotal role, but to be recognized for the contribution which they make to our overall economic potential.

Thank you, very much for your attention.