

**Speech by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
to the Annual Summit of the Women in Parliament Global Forum
on “Reshaping Society through Female Leadership”
European Parliament
Wednesday, November 27, 2013**

Madam President of the African Union Commission;

Madam Prime Minister;

Honorable Members of Parliaments;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I regret that I could not join you in your opening session, but it’s a pleasure to be here today to participate in the Women in Parliament Annual Summit. I reflect back on the past 120 years, since the women of New Zealand first received suffrage. The struggle that started many decades and continents ago is far from fulfilling its promise, but we have made great strides and there’s no turning back.

Today, Africa is proud to have a female Prime Minister, one female Vice Head of State, and two female Heads of State – one of whom will face elections in two years, and the other will leave office within four years. This represents a particular challenge, as we must make sure that there’s someone that will succeed us when we move on. We have a steadily rising number of women in parliaments – up by more than 11 percent since 1995. Southern Africa has done especially well, with some of the largest proportions of women in local government, parliament, and cabinet in the world. The Seychelles Parliament has 44 percent women; South Africa, 42 percent; Mozambique 30 percent. Furthermore, 41 percent of South Africa’s Cabinet Ministers are women, as are 32 percent in Mozambique.

This regeneration is expertly illustrated by the immense strides made in gender equality in Rwanda. After parliamentary elections in September, the proportion of women in the country’s Lower House reached an unprecedented 64 percent – the highest in the world. Many attribute this transformation to the post-conflict reconstruction process, where women, girls, boys, and men worked together to rebuild the country. However, I attribute this to the enlightened leadership of President Zuma and President Paul Kagame who leveled the playing field through constitutional and legislative reform.

In Liberia, women now occupy 31 percent of senior ministerial positions and the numbers are swelling. On International Women’s Day this year, I resubmitted the Gender Equity Bill to our Legislature, which calls for 30 percent of all institutions of governance to be occupied by women. Despite the correction of long years of neglect, it is not easy for a woman President to convince legislative colleagues on the need to expand the power of women. However, we will continue to press until this legislation is passed.

Advances in gender equality are not confined to governance. Across Africa, many more girls and boys are enjoying gender parity in education; legal restrictions limiting women’s economic

participation have been halved since 1960; and many countries are starting to pass laws and provisions to improve women's access to land and inheritance.

These advances are remarkable and demonstrate great faith in Africa's future. With strong leadership on gender equality and equal representation in government, our continent will continue to make steady advances in women's education and equal access to services, thereby laying the foundations for more stable and peaceful societies.

This hopeful and rosy picture must not, however, cover the reality and the great challenges we face in trying to break down traditional beliefs of oppression and subjugation that are perceived to be natural social orders.

For every woman president, for every woman senator or corporate leader, millions of others are kept in servitude, relegated to a lower echelon of society. Seventy percent of the 1.3 billion living in extreme poverty are women who perform 66 percent of the world's work and produce half of its food. Thousands of African women continue to be denied access to power and resources, to be discriminated against, to suffer restricted mobility, to be married off as young brides. These women often lack access to the most basic services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. Advances in these areas require continuing strong, decisive leadership from both men and women in positions of power.

In Liberia, we are working hard for gender equality on many levels – from personal security to political and economic empowerment. We are still dealing with the sad legacies of the past. We are still confronting lingering social values which tend to treat women as lesser beings. My election to the presidency eight years ago was a momentous occasion, because it signified that our people were able to rise above ancient beliefs in women's inferiority to accept that a professional person with integrity from any gender can lead a nation out of the ashes of destruction. Nevertheless, this giant step for one woman does not necessarily mean progress for the great majority; it is a first step in a march that must be sustained.

Violence against women is one of the most persistent and most neglected injustices. Around the world there are as many as 1.5 billion people currently affected by conflict and organized political violence. Thousands, even millions, of women in these countries will be vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, with profound effects on their physical and psychological well-being. The cessation of hostilities does not mean peace of mind for all, especially women. They bear the scars of conflict more than anyone else. These injuries affect their ability to work, to pursue a livelihood and fulfill familial and community roles. The economic costs to the victim's family, community and society are enormous.

I thus applaud the leadership of British Foreign Secretary William Hague and the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Bangura, who is here, for pursuing the "Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict," which was signed, in September, by 113 countries, including Liberia. The Declaration contains practical and political commitments to end the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon of war.

We equally applaud the leadership of the African Union, represented by the Commission

President here, Dr. Zuma, which has developed a roadmap on women in conflict, including activities such as the appointment of a Special Representative of Sexual Violence in Armed Conflicts, and the training of African Union staff on the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

In Liberia, through the pain and anguish experienced by each of these victims, we have found the strength and the courage to start to build a new, transformed society – where women enjoy equal rights and fair treatment, and where their productive role in society and the economy is acknowledged. In my country, women occupy high-ranking government positions; rape, though continuing, has been criminalized; and women have greater property and custodial rights.

Now a few thoughts on the way forward.

First, we must better understand the challenge posed by gender inequality, particularly that relating to sexual violence. We need to understand the root causes of discrimination and to tackle them head-on. Better data and monitoring will be crucial. The Post-2015 High-Level Panel called for a “Data Revolution” through the new global development agenda. This data revolution is pivotal for true gender equality.

Second, we must continue to push for high female representation in politics. We have come a long way, but we cannot afford to be complacent. The presence of more women amongst lawmakers will have a positive influence on political processes and rights. They must occupy decision-making positions and have the opportunity to show leadership in other sectors. Not only is this morally right, it also makes good economic sense. Women’s empowerment spurs economic performance and boosts income.

Third, we must create space for civil society to hold governments accountable. In Liberia, a lively civil society is a vital spur for our progress. And in Southern Africa, for example, the 2008 Protocol on Gender and Development finally came into force in 2012, in large part thanks to civil society pressure and a strong culture of accountability.

Finally, we must carefully examine our culture and social norms to understand why gender inequality is tolerated and perpetuated. National programs to redress inequalities and, in particular, to eradicate gender-based violence, must draw on traditional structures and community leaders for they are the gatekeepers of norms and cultural practices. Working in partnership with these leaders, both male and female, we can start to reconstruct the ideologies that fuel this scourge as we seek true social transformation.

The new measures for social progress must be looked at from the perspective of gender equality, the way in which society treats its people, how it respects the individuality and rights of every human being, how every person is given the same opportunity, the same justice and the same freedom. This is a struggle that must be waged by men and women all over the world.

Indeed, we have made some progress in women’s equality, and there can be no turning back.

I thank you.