

**Opening Remarks by H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
at the Celebration of Pan-African Women's Day
at the International Women's Conference
The Royal Palace Hotel
Bujumbura, Burundi
Friday, August 9, 2013**

*(Delivered, on behalf of President Sirleaf, by her Special Envoy,
Information Minister Lewis G. Brown, II)*

President Nkuruniza;
First Lady Denise Nkuruniza;
Other First Ladies of the Continent;
Officials of Government;
Representatives of Women's Organizations;
Special Guests;
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be here, in what is acknowledged as "the heart of Africa." Small wonder, therefore, that our delegation has received such a warm welcome and gracious hospitality since our arrival in Bujumbura, the pulse of Burundi, with its natural beauty.

I am equally delighted to participate in the celebration of Pan-African Women's Day at this International Women's Conference – a day when we honor the achievements of African women, and advocate for greater gender equality on our continent. Women make up 51% of the African family worldwide; they raise and feed their families, and are the bedrock for entire communities. With all that African women do, this is a day to celebrate us!

It is heart-warming to see so many women decision-makers present, to celebrate and promote women's leadership as an effective instrument in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in all aspects of our lives.

We are here, today, thanks to the vision and foresight of the founders of the Pan- African Women's Organisation (PAWO), who established it in 1962 – a full year before the Organization of African Union – to bring together African women's organizations in a single platform to get to know each other better, to share best practices, and for joint action to promote human rights and gender equality.

At a program, in May, to mark the 50th anniversary of PAWO, I was honored, along with other distinguished women leaders of Africa, to receive the 2013 Year of Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance African Union Award for Pan-African service. I used the occasion to urge women of the continent to unite for more leadership roles, while acknowledging the difficult task to be the first female President on the continent, the first post-conflict woman President and a Nobel Laureate President.

Dear Friends:

As we celebrate Pan-African Women's Day, allow me to use this platform to comment on the indispensability of women to Africa's development, be it in the political, economic or social spheres.

Politically, every woman here is aware of the difficulty we face in bringing women into political participation – from the grassroots up to the highest office in the land. We are seeing some progress in African women's participation in politics, although not at the levels we demand. Thankfully, Burundi is among the countries of this region that have made women's full political participation a priority and a reality.

Data compiled by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the basis of information provided by National Parliaments by 1 July 2013 show that of 189 countries classified, 30 have over 30% of women.

Rwanda tops the list worldwide, with 56.3% and 38.5% in its Lower and Upper Houses, respectively. The other eight African countries ranking high in women's political participation are: Seychelles, at 43.8%; Senegal, at 42.7%;

South Africa, 42.3% and 32.1%; Mozambique, at 39.2%; Tanzania, 36.0%; Uganda, 35.0%; and Angola, 34.1%. Burundi, coming in at number 30, has 30.5% women in its Lower House and 46.3% in its Upper House.

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.

My own country, regrettably, lags far behind, with a total of 13 women in our National Legislature – 8 in the House and 5 in the Senate, totaling 8½% of a total of 103 lawmakers. Just yesterday, our Women’s Legislative Caucus introduced a Parity Bill in the Plenary, which call for not less than 30% and not more than 70% for both genders in our Legislature. Clearly, we have work to do in getting this Bill enacted into law.

It goes without saying that when women are represented in greater numbers in parliaments, as well as at the grassroots level, their perspectives and interests are factored in, and their concerns are given higher priority. Gender equity in the corridors of power can and must happen in all corners of this vast continent that is our home.

Where, Dear Sisters and Brothers, would Africa’s economy be but for the women who farm the land, and carry the water, and take the goods to market? They are the bedrock of our economy. The face of agriculture around the globe, and particularly in Africa, is often female.

Statistics show that African women comprise 70% of sub-Saharan African agricultural workers and 80% percent of those involved in the food processing chain. Women toil in the fields that provide nourishment and income for their families. They contribute to commercial agriculture, which includes high value products such as fruits and vegetables, through the marketing of agricultural goods. Yet, more often than not, women’s contributions to the agricultural sector go unrecognized. In our part of the

world, women own less than 1% of the land and benefit from only 1% of agriculture credit.

Few small-scale women farmers are paid for their labor, and societal views of women's roles restrict their inputs in household decisions. Such beliefs also limit their access to land ownership, farm equipment, and credit – all of which are needed to be economically successful. These barriers ultimately inhibit women's ability to produce, and can make it difficult for them to escape poverty.

To sustain the impressive economic growth which Africa has registered, we will need to boost agricultural productivity. In order to do so, Africa will need its women – who constitute half of its 1 billion population, with over 853 million of them in sub-Saharan Africa alone. In other words, Africa must place a stronger focus on women at all levels of the agricultural value chain.

If our continent is to progress, there must be parity for its women in their access to land, finance, agricultural inputs and technology. Were that to occur, it is estimated that agricultural outputs in Africa would increase by up to 20% – one-fifth above current levels. We must overcome societal and other taboos that restrict women's full participation in Africa's development.

On the social level, Africa faces many challenges, all of them highlighted in the Millennium Development Goals – of poverty, high illiteracy, sexual violence, high infant and maternal mortality rates, HIV/AIDS, the effects of climate change. In addressing any and all of these challenges, the full participation of women is paramount; we must harness the potential of one-half of the continent's population – its women.

I had the honor to co-chair the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, to serve as a successor to the MDGs. The Report we submitted at the end of May drew upon the opinions of people around the world, through a very rigorous consultative process that was global, people-centered and planet-sensitive to address common challenges of

economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. At the same time, we all agreed that the international community should continue to work towards achieving the MDGs and to carry them forward after 2015.

Despite significant gains, much remains to be done about the place of women in African society. 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, this continent will rise when women take roles as educated and equal partners in society. There is no doubt 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.

We must spearhead efforts to promote gender equity and to advance and empower women. But getting to where we want to be will require the fundamental altering of the mindset and attitudes of a society that marginalizes women, and to make the participation of women inclusive in all endeavors.

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 socio-economic development.

We applaud the efforts of everyone involved in commemorating this Pan-African Women's Day, bringing together people from all over Africa, and beyond. We wish for PAWO another fifty years of continued success.