

Opening Remarks by Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

President of the Republic of Liberia

At the International Spain-Africa Meeting,

“Women for a Better World”

Valencia, Spain, March 27, 2010

**Your Royal Highness, the Queen of Spain;
Your Excellency, Deputy Prime Minister of the Presidency of the Government of Spain;
Your Excellency, the Mayoress of Valencia;
Your Excellency, President Michelle Bachelet of the Republic of Chile;
Your Excellency, President Tarja Halonen of Finland;
Your Excellency, the Founder-Partner of the Women for a Better World Meetings;
The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations;
Honorable Ministers, Officials of government and International Organizations;
Distinguished Participants:**

My thanks to the organizers of this event, and for the invitation to visit this beautiful city; a city that knows the value of a good woman, having enjoyed the leadership of its female Mayor for nearly 20 years!

Two years ago, we gathered in Madrid for another annual meeting similar to this, a meeting dedicated to assessing the progress of women. A little over a year ago, the Deputy Prime Minister, Senora de la Vega, was gracious enough to postpone the 2009 Women for a Better World Meeting so that women who would have attended, including herself, could participate in the International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, which President Tarja Halonen of Finland and I co-convoked in my country. I thank the many of you in this room who also participated in that event.

The Colloquium was a major showcase that brought together women leaders from far and wide to discuss how to empower women to be more effective leaders, and to share and implement best practices on economic empowerment, climate change and sustainable development.

Together, we produced “The Monrovia Declaration” and “The Call for Action”, which President Halonen and I brought to the attention of the United Nations General Assembly in New York last September.

We also launched the Angie Brooks International Center, named in honor of the prominent Liberian trailblazer, Mrs. Angie Elizabeth Brooks. Earlier this month, we marked the first anniversary of the Center, whose emphasis is training women in leadership development and empowerment.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

It is, sadly, still true that we need the world to be better, as the Meeting’s name suggests, and women – especially women working together – have a vital role to play. Events such as this one are so very important, therefore, because they offer the chance for women from around the world to reach out to each other, to unite, and to be stronger in partnership than we could ever be individually.

At the same time, such Meetings are a bittersweet experience. I am filled with hope when I see the determination, the potential, the drive of women to improve their lives and the lot of their families, communities, and countries. What saddens me is that such events are needed at all; that the gender that makes up more than half the world’s

population still must fight for our rights as if we were a minority, rather than that most unusual of phenomena: an oppressed majority.

Nevertheless, today's event is needed, because women all over the world still face huge challenges. According to a recent UNIFEM report, women remain a smaller proportion of salaried workers than men. Women hold between 7.7 percent to 28.1 percent of Ministerial posts. Five regions include countries with no women in Government. Disparities in proportion of women in parliament range from no women in some countries to a high of over 40 percent in countries like Rwanda and Uganda being cases in point.

In my own country, for example, despite the legal and policy changes that we have introduced,

- women account for only 14 percent in the Legislature;
- Adult literacy rates are almost twice as high for men as they are for women;
- And at every level of education, there are higher enrolment rates among men than women.

The good news is that we are making progress!

On empowerment, I am an example of how women can take their place at the top table of international politics, thanks to the staunch support of the women of Liberia.

A US\$22 million grant from the Danish Government for a nationwide program will strengthen the position of women in our society. Moreover, my Government has worked

hard to empower women by placing them in positions of authority so now a third of the Ministers and County Superintendents I've appointed are women, as well as half the Associate Justices on our Supreme Court.

On economic development we have:

- Trained over 40 rural women's groups in better agriculture techniques, to help them improve their income and efficiency;
- The Sirleaf Market Women Fund, which I initiated, has raised US\$2 million to construct or renovate markets; and
- The National Rural Women Program now has one-third of rural women in every county as members.

In the area of sexual and reproductive health, we have:

- Focused, in particular, on reducing maternal and child mortality by building 2 antenatal care clinics, and starting work on 21 new primary healthcare clinics across the country;
- We are upgrading all the county hospitals to provide comprehensive emergency, obstetric and neonatal care services, and also upgrading health centers;
- We have opened two additional midwifery schools to train midwives who are crucial in efforts to reduce maternal mortality;
- And we developed a national road map for maternal and newborn mortality reduction, as well as a National Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy.

In recognition that rape is a continuing problem in our society, we passed a strong law criminalizing rape and making it a non-bailable offense.

In education:

- **We are working to improve girls' enrolment in schools, to overcome the steady drop-off as they move from primary, through junior high, to high school and on to university.**
- **And next week, I will have the pleasure of launching our Economic Empowerment of Adolescent Girls and Young Women project, to train 2,500 young women ready for direct employment in the private sector. We know only too well that when we lift our girls, we lift Liberia.**

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants,

Meetings like this, and the national focus of International Women's Day, are necessary in driving our message across the globe, spreading news of these successes and turning our aspirations into action. We are headed in the right direction, but we are not there yet.

I am sure that this Meeting will serve as another step on the path to the day when such an event will no longer be needed – the day when women take their rightful place as equals, alongside men, in making this world a better place for all.

I thank you.