

STATEMENT BY

**H.E. MRS. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF
PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

AT

**THE WORLD ASSEMBLY FOR WOMEN (WAW) 2015
*“Towards a Society Where Women Shine”***

TOKYO, JAPAN

FRIDAY AUGUST 28, 2015

**Mr. Prime Minister,
Madam Marilyn Henson,
Madam Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka
Distinguished participants,**

I bring you warm greetings from the women and people of Liberia. On their behalf, I would like to express our thanks and appreciation for the support received from Japan and from other partners bilaterally and through international agencies and non-governmental organizations when we fought that unknown enemy, the Ebola Virus Disease. We thank equally our regional institutions and the African Union countries who mobilized private sector support, who dispatched brothers and sisters from several countries, who joined us, some of whom died for us. We thank also the many philanthropic organizations and individuals.

In our three neighboring countries, over 10,400 people died, some 4708 in my country, Liberia. It was truly a horrifying situation, as you saw on your television screens. In the midst of deaths, fears, sanctions, departure of friends, companies and citizens, closure of schools and markets, and the confused cries of our people, I strongly rejected the horrifying prediction that Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone would face 1.4 million infections before the end of January, that 20,000 thousand of the citizen in our three neighboring countries would die within months. I called on our people, especially our communities who rose to the challenge taking charge and taking responsibility to save lives and livelihoods. I joined my colleagues in Guinea and Sierra Leone to adopt a regional approach and response, to tell the world that this was not a threat to our countries or to West Africa, but a global one requiring a global response. On yesterday, Sierra Leone discharged the last patient and commenced the 42 day countdown. Today, Liberia stands tall as we mark the end of our second 42nd day which earns us another Ebola Free Declaration recognizing and the conquering of a setback which resulted from a rapidly contained outbreak in one community. More importantly, today, we remain fully confident of our ability to respond and contain any possible outbreak in the future. Liberia is therefore fully back to the business of rebuilding our economy which was hard hit resulting in GDP decline, as

investment stalled, construction stopped, airline cancelled, capital flight intensified.

This year's World Assembly for Women (WAW 2015), which builds upon specific actions called for in the September 2014 WAW, under the theme: **"Towards a Society Where Women Shine"**, comes at a time when advocates and propounders of Gender Equality and Women's Rights are undertaking critical reviews and assessments of the level of implementation of key women's rights and participation as enshrined in the 1995 *Beijing Declaration and Platform Action* and *UN Resolution-1325 on Women Peace and Security*. These reviews and assessments indicate clearly that women have made significant progress in all areas and levels of society. However, it is equally clear that **WE ARE NOT THERE YET!**

This is why I want to thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, for your decision to promote the advancement of women and for your support through this second successive WAW, to bring focus, doing discussion in the Forum and Round Table to those issues that many times are relegated to secondary concern – the cry of girls being raped or beaten, many in our region chartered off to bush schools or forced into early marriage; the risk and the indignity of having to perform a basic human function without privacy; the deafening silence of those who are forced to spend all their time searching for food or water for survival; the professional woman, who to succeed, has to be exceptional at the job and at the same time exceptional in full responsibility at home.

Distinguished Participants, if we are to move **"Towards a Society Where Women Shine"**, we must continue to tackle with more forcefulness a world in which 30% of women around the world experience either physical or sexual partner violence, where 20% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa suffer from non-partner sexual violence; a world in which 1.3 billion women do not have an account at formal financial institutions. While recognizing unprecedented success in a few countries, just as Rwanda which has the highest worldwide participation, we note that in Sub-Saharan Africa women account for only 22% of seats in National Parliaments. Both Japan and Liberia have much catching up to do at 9% and 10% respectively. Moreover, we note that 43% of women who represent the agriculture workforce have limited personal access

to credit, land and information, although they play the dominant role in ensuring food security for our region.

Mr. Prime Minister, Japan has played a major role in the formulation and implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was articulated in 2000 and will end this year. Recognizing that conditions in today's world are far from the ideals of the UN Charter and from achieving the indicators established by the MDGs, the Secretary General has made an unusual call for GLOBAL ACTION, to see this year 2015 as a unique opportunity to make a collective commitment to end poverty, to transform the world. It is a call to Global Leaders and to the people whom they lead to act with courage, to deliver, at this historical crossroad on the timeless promise made at the birth of the United Nations.

The successor to the MDGs, the Post 2015 Global Agenda the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provide the opportunity to deliver on that promise. As stated in the Report the world must ensure that women, youth and children have access to the full range of health services; ensure zero tolerance of violence against or exploitation of women and girls; ensure that women and girls have equal access to financial services; and the right to own land and property, ensure access to information; confirm the right to education and a safe environment to learn, recognize women reproductive health and rights; promote healthy behavior including those relating to water, sanitation and hygiene.

This World Assembly for Women provides us the opportunity to look back and examine the world today, an opportunity for all regions to express and to join the call for action, to declare and what they want in the world of tomorrow.

Similar call is made in the Common African Position on the Post 2015 Agenda building upon the lessons obtained in this year 2015 ***"The Year of Women's Empowerment and Development Towards Africa Agenda 2063"***. It is an Agenda which expresses the Africa we want, a peaceful and secure Africa, an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, values and ethics, and

Africa where development is people driven, unleashing the potential of women and youth.

The struggle to emancipate women from social and economic repression across the globe must start with us individually. Today, if each of us makes the commitment to denounce the subordination of a woman or a girl child in a household, your action will lead to increased equity for women. Our determination to impose confidence in our women and girls at the household level will not only increase productivity but will lead to increased autonomy and self-esteem, which are cardinal to everyday decision making by women. A woman with self-confidence is capable to manage herself, her family and nation.

I want to encourage men to see women's participation in the economic, civil and political life of community and nation as an opportunity or an investment to foster complementarity development for the benefit of society. I want to challenge the men who are listening to my voice to follow the good example of Prime Minister Abe, who realized that, with a strong woman his family will be strong, with strong women his community will be strong and his nation will prosper.

When advocating for women's empowerment, it is important that we remember that women are naturally nurturing creatures that have the capability to be impactful in the politics of their country. We should build on this trait as has been done Angie Brooks International Centre's award winning Women's Situation Room (WSR) which I Champion. The Women's Situation Room utilizes women's natural nurturing ability plus their abilities to negotiate and keep peace in a country during elections, in collaboration with the youth of their country (to whom they provide training, mentorship and guidance), they prevent and mitigate electoral violence. The WSR has been successfully replicated in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Kenya, Nigeria, and now Uganda. Women as far away as Afghanistan have asked for its replication as has Palestine women. The WSR is an example of women participating in sustaining the peace and security of their country. It also shows the youth of

the country that they are a value part of their society and as its WSR motto says "Peace is in our Hands".

Mr. Prime Minister, I made a commitment to share my personal experience on this long journey, a journey to success which epitomizes the struggle and the determination of women worldwide. It tells the story of activism, opposition political leadership, banker, administrator and international civil servant with a focus and firm determination to realize life's goals. It speaks to a deep concern about the social, economic and political inequalities that existed and still exists in my country.

The journey of participation in politics is always challenging in a highly male-dominated society, in an environment where cultural nuances, inhibitions, biases, prejudices and chauvinistic tendencies abound. In a journey in pursuit of transformation we want one cannot be deterred by these constraints.

I therefore joined other well-meaning Liberians to organize a political party which comprised mainly technocrats and experienced professionals to contest in the 1985 General and Presidential Elections. This landed me in the country's Maximum Security as a prisoner of conscience but was later released after increased international pressure on the ruling military junta. After release, I contested and won a seat in the Legislature as Senator-elect for the largest and most populous county in my country, but refused to be seated because the polls were massively rigged. This led to exile for my personal safety, but I remained committed to the hope for an evolving political trend back home. The attendant consequences of the rigged elections, and clampdown on dissenting voices led to a turbulent period, spanning over 14 years, in my country's history.

Through regional and international support, Liberians resolved to go to the polls in 1997 as a result of the Abuja Accord. In spite of my late return home, I emerged second in those elections process, which were generally free owing to the participation of several political parties but largely unfair due to

restricted access to every inch of the countryside by all but the party that won the elections.

This led to the resurgence of another round of conflict as turmoil engulfed the nation again. Strong and determined commitment by the international community backed by the United States, UN, the AU and ECOWAS finally brought peace in 2003, and a timetable for election two years later.

The 2005 election was nothing short of historical. For the first time, with the strong presence of international observers at the polling booths, people were free to exercise choice, to experience unprecedented participation in a vote free from intimidation. Women knew they had the right to vote and were not afraid to exercise that right.

For the first time in Liberia's history, women from all walks of life from marketers to professional, registered as voters in large numbers, making up more than 50% of the total. For the first time they engaged as full participants in the electoral process.

We went to the polls in October 2005 with 22 political parties but there was no clear winner. I made history when I won the run-off after defeating the football icon, Mr. George Weah. It was a victory, by and for the women of Liberia, Africa, the world and for all activists seeking equal voice, access, opportunity, visibility, and women's participation in all spheres of human endeavor.

Another historic moment in my sojourn was the great honor bestowed by the Nobel Peace Committee as the third African woman to receive the prestigious Nobel Peace Award. This was a victory for my country, for the women of Liberia and for those with whom we partnered during years of conflict and efforts to contribute to peace in the world.

In fulfilling Africa's most historical aspiration as its first democratically elected President, I know that I have the responsibility to represent the aspirations and expectations of women, to inspire and motivate women everywhere not to simply dream-dreams, but become resilient to achieve

their ambitions. I constantly repeat to women the now famous words I included in a commencement address at Harvard University, “If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough.” Women, dream big, think big, act big. The path is always rocky, but your conviction and determination will get you there. I have been down that same journey. You can make it.

Mr. Prime Minister, as I mentioned before, both Japan and Liberia have still a long way to go to achieve the world of women at the level of equity we desire.

I have had the opportunity to read the background papers of this year’s WAW and again I commend you for the progress and the level of your commitment to the women of Japan. I was particularly impressed by the clear quantitative targets that have been set for each area of focus for the legal framework that comprise of the Bill before the Diet; for the establishment of the Council of Men to support women for the Bill which calls for reports from Government agencies, local governments and private sector companies on specific actions/plans for women’s participation and advancement in the workplace. I applaud the women who joined in this commitment with vigor and I applaud the men who have committed to the achievement of the WAW goals.

Let me close with the quote that is the epitome of my life story, ***“The strength of a woman is not measured by the impact that all her hardships in life have had on her; but the extent of her refusal to allow those hardships to dictate who she becomes”.***

Distinguished Participants, the world smiles when women shine. Thank you for your kind attention.