

Address

by

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia**

At the Opening Ceremony of the 2nd Meeting of

“Women for a Better World”

On the occasion of International Women’s Day

Madrid, Spain

March 7, 2007

Your Royal Highness, Queen of Spain;

Your Excellency, Vice President of the Government of Spain;

Your Excellency Luiza Diogo, Prime Minister of Mozambique;

Honorable Foreign Minister of Niger;

Honorable Ministers, Officials of Government and International Organizations;

Distinguished Women of the world;

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Let me first thank the organizers and in particular, Your Excellency Maria Teresa de la Vega, for the kind invitation to participate in the activities commemorating International Women's Day and the newly established network "Women for a Better World" to give more meaning and action to principles and progress outlined in the "Declaration of Mozambique".

We commend the Spanish and the Mozambique governments for the initiative aimed essentially at ensuring the active participation of African women in "every sphere of political, social and economic life. We commend all countries in the European Union that are working resolutely to introduce equality policies thereby joining the fight against gender violence and helping to bring parity among women in high level positions in the world.

I recently visited Rwanda where I was honored and participated in activities marking the 10th anniversary of the Rwandan Women Parliamentary Forum. The participants at the Forum noted with pride and appreciation Rwanda's world record of nearly 49 percent participation of women in parliament. This high level

of representation by women is an essential element in the country's effort to weave the threads of peace, while simultaneously establishing the tenets of democracy thereby turning a sad page of history into a positive chapter of nation building and national healing. I believe that Mozambique has a similar story to tell, its own representation in parliament well exceeding the average for African countries.

Some thirty years ago, the nations of the world through the instrumentality of the United Nations, set aside this important date, March 8, in recognition of women's contributions to international peace and development. The global community hoped then, that through the collective efforts and endeavors of humankind, global peace and advancement could be enhanced through the observance and consolidation of women's human rights in every corner of our world. Similarly, the United Nations established the Trust Fund to support action to eliminate violence against women and to promote the enhancement of women's role in society.

Today, thirty two years on, the need for highlighting what may be regarded as this generally symbolic international action, remains as relevant today as does the urgent need to give it practical expression in our respective societies. Today the Fund for women remains without the necessary stature and resources to make an impact equal to other specialized interventions of the United Nations.

Indeed, gross violations of women and girls' rights continue with impunity impacting severely on the well being of thousands of women particularly in impoverished and strife torn nation states.

Yet, we must admit that compared to several decades ago, there is now more global sensitivity and awareness regarding the acts of violence against women and girls. In some societies, institutional efforts have been accelerated and policies have been evolved to tackle anti-women and anti-girls attitude.

In the forefront of these efforts have been organizations comprising women and girls themselves, who have taken up the challenge to change their own conditions for the better. And, in many cases and many countries, such efforts have not gone without crucial support from their male counterparts.

This is worth noting because the machinery of governance and levers of power to effect crucial socio-economic reforms remains largely in the hands of male dominated power centers. This means that for any sea change to occur in the conditions of women, including uprooting gender based abuses, the sympathy and cooperation of husbands, brothers, and sons would be required.

Women groups have been quite successful in cultivating this kind of collective support, and are building upon successful approaches to engender comprehensive frameworks for combating gender related violence in their respective societies.

As my country, Liberia, emerges from years of civil war, we face the unenviable challenge of dealing with not only the recurring violence against women and girls, but its aftermath on the victims and society at large. Rape has and continues to be a major form of violence, particularly among girls.

But there is a change in my country, a change that has made me the first female President of an African nation. Therein lies the challenge, a challenge to me to represent the expectations and the aspirations of women in Liberia and Africa not only to enhance their role in society but to act resolutely and convincingly to end the impunity that enables violence against women to continue.

To this end, some of our civil society groupings in the country particularly the Association of Female Lawyers of Liberia (AFELL) have been successful in promoting legislation aimed at increasing penalties for rape and assault of various kinds against women. In fact, as opposed to previous laws relating to the crime, rape is no longer a bailable crime in Liberia, and the minimum penalty for it is now 10 years.

Additional efforts are being exerted to ratchet up the crucial factor of sensitization of our population – especially the tradition-bound sections — about the need to promptly report cases of gender based violence of any kind.

This strategy is increasingly effective in discouraging the ‘conspiracy’ of silence that once made successful prosecution of rape and other forms of violence

against women and girls so difficult. The fear of stigmatization, which generally characterizes rape issues, is slowly but surely diminishing.

We have adopted other measures. We have women in strategic positions. I have appointed a capable woman as the first female Inspector General of the Police Force which has established a special unit within the police to deal with all sorts of gender based violence. Similarly, we have strengthened our Ministry of Gender and Development which operates a Special Unit to formulate sensitization programs and to provide support and information to women affected by violence. We have launched programs to support the education of girls and enforced compulsory primary education.

Friends, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Much more remains to be done if we, collectively, as nations, as governments, as civil society, as leaders are to succeed in discouraging and subsequently eliminating impunity against gender based violence. We must search for an appreciation of the causes/conditions that create the environment for perpetrating and perpetuating those conditions.

In so doing, we might conclude that poverty and exclusion, conflict and discrimination constitute the breeding grounds of gender based violence.

The struggle for basic daily survival on the part of millions of desperate families drives girls and women into situations that virtually guarantee abuse of their

rights. In their quest to cater to the needs and welfare of their poverty-stricken, sometime ageing parents and guardians, our young girls are often easily lured into unimaginable circumstances and conditions prevalent with the potential for sexual abuse and violence against their persons.

A deprived environment leads to prostitution and early marriages real temptation for many of our socially disadvantaged girls and women – We also are now more than ever before conscious of the health implications of such sexual abuses, as evident in the disproportionate spread of HIV and AIDS among the female populations of our affected societies.

Traditional practices and perceptions also continue to pose problems for effectively dealing with violence by men against their womenfolk. The conspiracy of silence that often accompanies domestic violence against girls and children more often than not inhibits action by those so victimized and those expected to protect them.

Ignorance of the law also plays a significant part in the struggle against impunity for sexual violence against women and girls. Certainly, many a time, victims of sexual abuse of one kind or the other hardly know their rights under the law. Thus violence committed against them and subjugation to harsh domestic working conditions pass for 'traditional' norms of 'family' life, and therefore draws little or no disdain against such otherwise criminal actions against vulnerable women and girls.

Excellencies, Distinguished Participants:

There is an imperative need for a robust comprehensive strategy designed to protect vulnerable women and girls and to ensure them equal opportunity and a meaningful role in society. Such a plan of action should be woven around finding short to long-term practical solutions to the conditions that foster violations of women and girl's rights, and the impunity go along with them.

Strategic thinking is needed to ensure that women and girls rights, and indeed those of vulnerable groups, are protected in conflict situations. The application of international laws and sanctions to gender based violence—physical and psychological—and the threat to perpetrators that they would eventually pay for such egregious offences, could help to deter potential perpetrators.

International efforts, including sustained campaigns, must be encouraged in building a culture of peace and stability, a culture of non-violence approaches to resolving national and international disputes and disagreements, and in the fostering of appropriate environments for conflict resolution.

International support in terms of resources must also be sought and mobilized for the purposes of enhancing the learning capacities of women and the girl child especially in Third World countries. Special programs for girls, skills training, education and literacy programs for grass root women are essential and have proven successful in changing women roles in society.

Ongoing efforts by governments and rights advocates should be given more impetus in sensitizing the public and in dealing with minimizing conditions for violations of women and girls' rights,

In particular, robust steps must be undertaken to combat child and marriages, educate families and communities on the evils inherent in such 'traditional' and 'cultural' practices, while touting the need for the education of the girl child and the empowerment of women generally.

Parents, guardians and community elders must be encouraged to openly discuss these issues and inculcate the practice of speaking out publicly against especially cases of rape and forced marriages.

Governments in the affected societies must never relent in instituting and reinforcing legal mechanisms aimed at enforcing laws against gender based violence and the stringent imposition of penalties arising thereof.

Towards this end, our judicial systems must be strengthened and capacitated. They must be made to remain corruption free and incorruptible. Judicial personnel must be sensitized as much as the rest of society respecting the nature of the crimes perpetrated against women and girls, and the need to comprehensively deal with impunity in the circumstances.

Networking involving local non-governmental organizations, female civil society groupings, and international support agencies should be facilitated and

strengthened. Effective complaint, counseling and monitoring mechanisms, coupled with guarantees of confidentiality in dealing with gender based violence, must be established and institutionalized for dealing with impunity.

Distinguished Participants,

Let us use this commemorative occasion as an opportunity to make a determination on where we are today and how far still we have to go in giving real meaning to the Mozambique Declaration, promoting economic self sufficiency for women, ensuring their access to assets, knowledge and political leadership. Let us resolve to do all that we can to not only minimize the potential for gender based violence, but to ensure that 50 percent of the world population have the opportunity to reach their full potential to make the world a better place through their contribution to a more humane society.

My Government remains committed to these principles. We will, with the support of the international community, remain a champion in these causes. We commend and will work with the Women for a Better World Network in achieving this end.

I thank you for the opportunity to join you at this meeting.