

**REMARKS**

**BY**

**HIS EXCELLENCY DR. GEORGE MANNEH WEAH**

**PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

**AT THE OPENING**

**OF THE**

**INTERNATIONAL SHEROES FORUM**

**AND LAUNCHING OF**

**JEWEL STARFISH FOUNDATION**

**AT THE**

**MONROVIA CITY HALL**

**MONROVIA, LIBERIA**

**OCTOBER 17, 2018**

**Her Excellency Madam Clar M. Weah, First Lady of the Republic of Liberia;**

**Her Excellency Dr. Jewel Howard Taylor, Vice President of the Republic of Liberia, Host and 2017 SHEROES Awardee;**

**His Excellency Professor Yemi Osinbajo, Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Special Guest of Honor and 2018 HE FOR SHE Honoree;**

**Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Former President of the Republic of Liberia and Guest Speaker;**

**Her Excellency Dr. Joyce Banda, Former President of the Republic of Malawi, Chairperson of the SHEROES Foundation, and Special Guest of Honor;**

**Her Excellency Dr. Joice Mujuru, Former Vice President of the Republic of Zimbabwe and Special Guest of Honor;**

**Her Excellency Dr. Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, Former First Lady of the Republic of Ghana;**

**Madam Flossy Menson and Madam Maxine Menson, Co-Founders of the SHEROES Foundation;**

**Members of the Government of Liberia here present;**

**Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Guest Speakers; Panelists; Delegates, and Participants;**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:**

I am honored to be here at this auspicious occasion this morning, marking the opening of this very important meeting of the International Heroines Forum, an organization which is very close to my heart.

As a founding member of He For She, I am delighted to be in the midst of so many distinguished ladies, mothers, sisters, and friends, who have pioneered and championed the cause of women in leadership in Africa in almost every field of endeavor. But particularly in the political arena, you have broken the mold and shattered the glass ceiling time and time again, and by so doing you have been an inspiration to all women, not only in Africa, but in the entire world.

The theme of this year's Forum: **“ADVANCING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN LEADERSHIP”**, resonates very strongly with me, as I have a passion for the empowerment of women. I believe that as we encourage the participation of women in leadership, we enhance the prospects of our nation's growth and development.

I am of the strongest conviction that affirmative action must, and should be taken, to foster greater inclusiveness of women in national leadership. There are numerous studies and research which have proven that there is a definite correlation between women empowerment and sustainable economic development.

Madam Christine Lagarde, now serving as the first female Managing Director of the IMF, once said:

**“The evidence is clear, as is the message: when women do better, economies do better.”**

With 52% of our population consisting of women, any attempt to restrict their fullest participation is to do a grave disservice not only to our economic prospects, but to the women themselves, who are denied the opportunity to realize their full potential and contribute meaningfully to national development.

### **EXCELLENCIES, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

Liberia was the first African country to do away with the stereotype that only men could head an African government, when in 2005 we made history by electing the first female African President. We continue to take pride in the establishment of this historical precedent. In the same vein, we are pleased to recognize the presence here today of Dr. Joyce Banda, who became first female Vice President of Malawi in 2009, and the first female President of her country in 2012.

When I was elected as Standard Bearer of the Coalition for Democratic Change, the opportunity presented itself for me to demonstrate my commitment to the cause of advancement of women's participation in leadership, and to "practice what I preached". I therefore selected a female as my running-mate.

As you are aware, our victory at the polls provided us another historic achievement, when she became the first female Vice-President of the Republic of Liberia.

In another instance, when the National Elections Commission required each political party to put up a minimum of 30% of women for parliamentary election, I raised the bar for my party to 50%, and I am proud to inform you that all of those women who had the courage to run were successful.

Since my incumbency, I have also appointed a woman to be the first female Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of Liberia, and there is also a female who serves as Deputy Inspector General of the National Police. Similarly, I have appointed many women to Ministerial positions and to Boards of State-owned Enterprises and intend to appoint many more.

These are but a few examples of my strong desire and advocacy for gender equality and of increasing women's participation in governance in Liberia.

**EXCELLENCIES, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

I respectfully ask your indulgence to allow me to digress for a moment from your Forum Theme, although what I am about to say is very much part of the empowerment process for all women, whether in leadership or not.

With all that has been said, I must tell you that women still face a range of issues in Liberia, which hold them back in society and make social equality a significant challenge. The extent of gender inequalities varies throughout Liberia in regard to status, region, rural/urban areas, and traditional cultures. In general, the reality is that women in Liberia have less access to education, health care, property, and justice when compared to men.

Of particular concern to me is sexual violence. During the Liberian civil conflict, there were widespread reports of sexual violence towards women. Today, more than 15 years after the war, Liberia continues to grapple with high incidence of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls.

According to Liberia's Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection, from January to September 2017, a total of almost 900 sexual and gender-based violence cases were reported, of which more than 500 were rape cases, and 475 involved children.

These statistics provide alarming evidence that we are still not yet dealing with this problem in an effective manner.

As recent as last week, our news media was saturated with coverage of a very sad and tragic story, where it is alleged that one of the officers of an NGO established in Liberia for the purpose of protecting young girls from sexual exploitation, allegedly raped many of the very same girls, and infected them with the AIDS virus which eventually took his life.

This matter is now under investigation by the relevant authorities, and we must await the findings before drawing any conclusions. Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned, for stories like this one are indicative of an undeniable increase in the incidence of sexual violence in Liberia.

There is much that the Liberian government has already done to address this troubling pestilence in our society. Special laws have been passed, including the 2006 Law on Rape, with strong sentencing for offenders from 7 years to life imprisonment. However implementation of the law is currently inadequate, and does not seem to serve as a sufficient deterrent.

A Special Criminal Court was established a few years ago to try sexual offense cases on an exclusive basis. Yet there are very few convictions, as the legal processes are slow, the docket is crowded, and the prisons are filled with accused offenders waiting for trial. This encourages a culture of impunity.

There is an urgent need to fast-track these cases and increase the rate of conviction. I will seek an increase in budgetary support to provide for the Special Criminal Court to operate on a year-round basis, and also increase the number of judges assigned.

A Women and Children Protection Section was established within the Liberia National Police and other sub-stations throughout the country to cater to women and children who have been violated and abused.

Additionally, a Sexual and Gender-based Violence Crimes Unit was established at the Ministry of Justice to prosecute sexual offense cases and ensure the protection of women and children who have been sexually abused.

And yet the phenomenon continues to remain prevalent and seemingly entrenched in our society.

I have zero tolerance for sexual and gender-based violence, and I intend to personally champion my Administration's renewed efforts to eradicate this unacceptable cancer from our society.

In so doing, we intend to strengthen other measures to protect women from violence, and support victims, including removing obstacles to victims' access to justice; ensuring effective prosecution and punishment of offenders; implementing training for all law enforcement personnel; and establishing more shelters for women victims of violence.

**EXCELLENCIES, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

The Pro-Poor Agenda for Prosperity and Development, which is based on our Party Platform, and which is now emerging as our National Development Plan, commits to providing **Power to the People**, which emphatically includes women.

From a gender equality and empowerment perspective, we intend to pursue this by increasing our efforts to ensure women's equal access to education and employment. We also will improve access, quality, and efficiency of public healthcare, and strengthen efforts to reduce the incidence of maternal and infant mortality.

**EXCELLENCIES, DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:**

In closing, allow me to share a story with you. During a discussion about this conference that I had a few days ago, one of my colleagues "accused" me of being a feminist, under the mis-impression that only women can be feminist, which I told him was not the case.

To settle our argument, we Googled the word "feminist", and to my delight, this is the definition that we found:

**“A feminist is someone who organizes activities on behalf of women’s rights and interests, with the objective of achieving political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes, including seeking to establish educational and professional opportunities for women that are equal to those for men.”**

On the basis of that definition, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to declare myself as **“Liberia’s Feminist-in-Chief”**, and hereby pledge to the women of Liberia that I will do all that I can, during my tenure as President of this country, to fight for gender equality and empowerment.

And now, I would like to wish that you will have a successful Forum, and that your deliberations during this conference will engage, inspire, and empower not only the Participants, but all women everywhere.

I thank you.