



ADDRESS BY THE SPEAKER OF THE ECOWAS PARLIAMENT,

HIS EXCELLENCY

RIGHT HONOURABLE SIDIE MOHAMED TUNIS

On the First Annual Kwara Gender Equality Conference

**Kwara State, Nigeria
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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I would like to start by thanking the Kwara State Government and all the planners of this conference for affording me the honor to participate in this high level panel discussion on how to shape actions and policies in West Africa to improve outcomes for women. It gives me a greater honor to share this stage with Africa's First Female President, Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and other outstanding female personalities, to proffer ideas and advance recommendations on the development of women across West Africa. This is a bold step that seeks to afford women across our region the chance to be granted equal and full voice, participation and leadership everywhere and in every aspect and for making the case that we need the essential role of women to realize humanity's noblest and vital projects of sustainable development, peace and security.

2. When I received the invitation to participate in this discussion and present specifically on the role of ECOWAS in the struggle to increase female participation and social protection, I asked myself a few questions:

- I. What are the real issues facing women across our region?
- II. What steps have we taken to have them addressed?
- III. Are we making progress in our efforts to have these issues addressed?
- IV. If no, what is hindering us from making real and substantial progress towards addressing issues that affect women?

3. The answers to these questions could be diverse and the approaches to having them addressed could be different. However, the fact remains that women of Africa have demonstrated through their life and work, and their leadership in governance, diplomacy, and social norm that they make a difference; not just a small

difference but a big and critical one and we must continue to push them further in all we do.

4. ECOWAS as an institution has made significant progress in addressing women issues and securing a participatory framework for women. Since its formation, ECOWAS has adopted several instruments and established institutions to secure social protection for women and increase their participation in governance. One of such instruments is the Supplementary Act on the Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS Region. This Act was adopted by the 47th Ordinary Session of the Authority of the Heads of State and Government held in Accra, Ghana, on May 19, 2015. It, amongst other things, seeks to strengthen the economic activities of women, eliminate discrimination and achieve gender equality and equity through the development and effective implementation of laws and policies. It also seeks to increase the rate of women's participation at all levels of decision-making in the different sectors, particularly in the

political sphere, notably the processes of conflict prevention and management and the restoration of peace and security. It also calls on Member States to institute affirmative action to ensure effective gender equality in decision-making positions in public and private sectors and to take all necessary measures at all levels to establish the critical link between gender-balanced representation, good governance, democracy and sustainable development.

5. Furthermore, Article 63 of the ECOWAS Treaty on “Women and Development” calls on Member States to formulate, harmonize, coordinate and establish appropriate policies and mechanisms, for the enhancement of the economic, social and cultural conditions of women. Cognizant of the engagement of mostly women in the informal cross border trade, ECOWAS adopted the Gender and Trade plan of Action 2015-2020, with the objective to increase women’s productive capacity and export competitiveness and to promote gender-sensitive trade policy development and implementation among Member countries.

6. At its 26th Session, held on 31st January 2003 in Dakar, Senegal, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of States, approved the establishment of a Gender Technical Commission, a Gender Division within the Executive Secretariat, and the transformation of West African Women Association (WAWA), into ECOWAS Gender Development Centre. As part of its key activities, the center is involved in development of a Regional Policy and Advocacy on Sexual Harassment (an aspect of Gender-based Violence) in the Working Place and Educational Institutions.

7. The center amongst other things, mobilizes women and empower them to be active participants in the regional integration process and mainstream Gender in ECOWAS institutions and Member States.

At the ECOWAS Parliament, Article 18.1c of the Supplementary Act Relating to the Enhancement of the Powers of the Parliament, adopted by the 50th Session of the Authority of Heads of State and Government, held in Abuja on 17th December, 2016, mandates

each Member State to ensure at least 30 percent female representation in their parliamentary delegation. The truth is, I sincerely believe that the 30% is still very low, especially owing to the enormous contributions women are making in our states. This low percentage in women participation is not unique to the regional Parliament though. It spreads across our region at every level.

8. In 2017, the West Africa Brief, an online magazine published by the Sahel and West Africa Club Secretariat, reported that women in West Africa - as in many other parts of the world - remain largely underrepresented in the political sphere. Looking at the national percentages, women occupied only 421 seats in West African parliaments, representing 16.1% of all lawmakers. In West Africa, 12 out of the 16 countries had averages that were below the world average of 23.3% with Senegal being the notable exception having 42.7% of its parliamentarians being women. We must change the trajectory and tap into the rich capacity of women.

8. Today, I share this stage with Her Excellency Madam Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first female Head of State. The story of her leadership is awesome. She led the Republic of Liberia for 12 peaceful years and brought significant economic and human development to a nation that was devastated by 14 years of civil unrest. During her tenure as Chairperson of the Authority of Heads of states of ECOWAS, I watched her mediate and secure a peaceful resolution to the political crisis in the Republic of Gambia. I am talking about a WOMAN, affectionately called the Iron Lady.

9. No doubt, there are many of her kind out there. All they seek is a platform to excel and be who they actually are. It is therefore the prerogative of regional and multilateral institutions like ECOWAS to provide the space for women development and participation.

10. At the inauguration of the current legislature of the ECOWAS Parliament on 9th March, 2020, in Niamey, Niger Republic, where I was elected Speaker, I emphasized that the integration of gender

perspective into our mainstream politics and conflict management is key to designing an inclusive and effective development program for ECOWAS. I expressed the commitment that working with the ECOWAS Gender Center and Civil Society Organizations, we shall seek to explore avenues to build local capacity of women's groups and networks in peace building and conflict resolutions. We shall also endeavor to identify and remove obstacles to women participation in mainstream politics, peace building and mediation activities in ECOWAS States. I lamented that we have spent decades talking about the importance of gender equality and development. And while we talk, the situation of women and girls in ECOWAS Member States is at risk of further deterioration. We need an accountability framework that ensures that we all live up to our commitments to solve gender issues—in particular promoting women's access to resources, strengthening their economic capacities, improving the visibility of their contribution to the regional economy, and ensure equal access of women to basic

social services. Right here at the ECOWAS Parliament there is ECOFEPA, an association of Female Parliamentarians that have organized themselves to champion gender issues. I have expressed my commitment to work with them and promise to fund their programs.

11. I am hopeful that the resources coming out of this conference will be one that will boost our collective efforts at increasing female participation and social protection at every level of our social, political and governance structures.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

12. In conclusion, I want to thank the Executive Governor of Kwara State, His Excellency Abdulrahman AbdulRazaq, for the special recognition that has been accorded me and the great steps the Kwara State Government has taken towards achieving its gender equality goals. You have done immensely well Your Excellency, and I am very proud of the achievements you have made.

13. I also seize this opportunity to wish His Excellency Muhammadu Buhari, President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the wonderful people of this great Federation Happy Independence Day.

14. Once again, it has been a pleasure to have me address this forum and on behalf of the Bureau, Members, Secretary General and Staff of Parliament, I wish you fruitful deliberations.

I THANK YOU