**PRESENTATION BY**

**H.E. MRS. ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF**

**PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF LIBERIA**

**AT THE HIGH LEVEL DISCUSSION ON THE SUMMIT**

**THEME: YEAR OF WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS AFRICA DEVELOPMENT AGENDA 2063**

**JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA**

**JUNE 14, 2015**

Excellency Robert Mugabe, Chairman of the African Union Authority;

Excellency Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Chair of the African Union Commission;

Excellencies, Ministers;

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:

This year is historic because it represents 20 years since the women of the world gathered in Beijing to reflect upon their role and potential in society, to chart a new course for equality, equity and equal representation and participation in society.

Liberia commends our Chair, Dr. Zuma, and welcomes this High Level Discussion on the theme of the Summit: Year of Women’s Empowerment and Development towards Africa’s Agenda 2063. While it is true that the situation of women varies by country and region, there are common denominators or factors which propel or impede the path towards women’s full attainment of empowerment and development in Africa.

Just November of last year, the African Ministers of Gender and Women’s Affairs adopted the Addis Declaration on Accelerating the Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in a call to action for member states to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment as stipulated in the African Union’s Agenda 2063. The Declaration of the Heads of State and Government on this theme at the Twenty Fourth Ordinary Session our Assembly in January 2015 and the Communiqué arising from the Stakeholders Consultations, also held in January this year highlighted key areas of action that are critical if Africa is collectively to achieve women’s empowerment in all sector and spheres of the continent, if women and girls are to live dignified lives free from all fears and discrimination.

I will highlight a few of these areas:

In Liberia and throughout West Africa, as well as Africa as a whole, women are major players in the agriculture sector, providing 80% of the agricultural labor force, 76% of cash crop production, 93% of food crop production and conduct 85% of all marketing and trading, linking both rural and urban markets through their networks. Women’s access to land, finance, technology, information and markets provide the basis for value addition.

I am aware, as most of you are, of the Pre-Consultative Summit on the Financial Inclusion of Women in Agribusiness, which was held over the past days. This consultative summit, which concluded with a Declaration and Call to Action being adopted by the African Ministers of Gender. Let me take this moment to commend the Ministers of Gender, the participants and organizers of the Summit for a job well done and state that Liberia supports the “Campaign to progressively banish the hand held hoe to the Museum.” I am quite certain that the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) under NEPAD will take this as an opportunity to continue to provide support under which some West African countries were beneficiaries.

In West Africa, women are largely engaged in the informal sector, - agriculture, petty trading and Small and Medium scale Enterprises (SMESs). Therefore, it is important that women have access to the factors of production, land, finance, technology, information and markets, and acquire basic numeracy and literacy skills which will serve as an impetus for them to become financially independent and thereby leading to high productivity.

According to UNICEF, in 2012, an estimated 58 million children of primary school age were out of school, 53 per cent of them were girls. About one third of children out of school in the world live in West and Central Africa. Provision of quality education and training opportunities for girls (both formal and informal), is a catalyst in attaining sustainable development in West Africa, especially as we progress on the Post-2015 Agenda.

In 2010, it was stated by WHO that Africa accounted for more than 50% of maternal deaths. As Heads of State and government we must hold true to the commitments adopted in the AU Protocol on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol) in 2003, the Maputo Plan for Action on Sexual and Reproductive Rights in 2006, and all other international instruments on women’s rights.

It is important for sustained stability that women participation is increased in all forms of decision- making processes, conflict prevention, peace-building and law enforcement. Legal frameworks, and policies must be put into place and institutional mechanisms established/developed or strengthened.

There is a need to strengthen our resolve for women’s political participation, representation and active involvement in decision making. As of January 2015, 10 women served as Heads of State and 14 served as Head of Government globally. According to UN WOMEN globally, there are 38 States in which women account for less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in single or lower houses, as of January 2015, including 5 chambers with no women at all. In this regard we applaud Rwanda which has the highest representation in the world and we add to the list of notables South Africa, Senegal, Uganda, Mozambique, and Namibia. Sadly, West Africa, including my own country Liberia has not performed well.

Gender Equality matters, it its own right not, but it is also “smart and economic because it can enhance economic efficiency” addressing the gender gap, cost to the economy of our 23 percent of GDP, according to World Bank 2012 Report.