

**First Lady Jeannette Kagame's remarks
at the High-level Breakfast on Women in
Agribusiness during the African Green
Revolution Forum**

Saturday, 8 September 2018

Kigali, Rwanda

Honorable Ministers,
Distinguished Board members and senior representatives
from this session organizing committee,
Senior Management of international and local institutions,
Esteemed contributors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

I would like to begin by expressing my warm appreciation to the organizers of the African Green Revolution Forum, for bringing to Rwanda this impactful event on agriculture in Africa, and for gathering on this beautiful morning, many forward-thinking minds around the question of '**Advancing Women's role in Agribusiness**'.

I hope those of you, who are visiting us are having a pleasant stay in Rwanda, and that this forum will encourage you to come back to our country again.

Distinguished audience,

As we begin our discussions on the importance of advancing women's role in agribusiness, I would like us to first envision an entire year without food production.

Imagine a year, during which those women of our continent, those unsung s-heroes, whose faces we will never see, whose names we shall never know, decided to lay down their tools.

Just imagine, for a moment, the consequences of their refusal to work anymore, and the extent of loss that would be suffered during that whole year.

Indeed:

- 1/ we would lose out on the fight against hunger;
- 2/ we would lose out on holistic diets for our infants, with the risk of nutritional stunting in our children in years to come, including other health challenges associated with poor brain development;
- 3/ we would lose out on overall health;
- 4/ we would lose out on the economic gains made thus far from agriculture;
- 5/ We would lose out on the much-needed foreign exchange that year as a result of greater food importation;
Ultimately, we would witness the deepening of poverty, the escalation of crime and more violence against women as a deep-seated cause of household stress.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

We are doing a disservice to women – especially the smallholder farmers – by not acknowledging their hard labor in agriculture, by taking for granted the fact that they feed our continent and by under-valuing their contribution to socio-economic growth.

As leaders, and experts concerned with the advancement of agriculture and on increasing its productivity in Africa, I am certain that you can identify, even more consequences of not investing more heavily in women in agriculture. I am sure that you will be able to come up with lasting solutions to ensure better livelihoods for the most vulnerable, while at the same time turning subsistence agriculture into viable agribusinesses, not only for women, but for overall economic growth.

Distinguished audience,

This forum rightfully calls on all of us to look, in greater detail, at the important role that women farmers play in Africa in addition to the heavy burden they often play as sole breadwinners in female-headed households. According to the 2016 World Bank ‘Poverty in a Rising Africa’ Report, nearly one in four households in Africa are headed by women.

These women indeed deserve to be provided with the type of holistic support that takes into account their socio-economic needs to enable them to lift themselves, and their families, out of poverty, and to open up a new world of opportunities for them.

If we do not support those who are in fact capable of turning around our economies, and becoming agents of change in the communities in which they live, while catering to our food security needs, we will have to contend with an under-performing agriculture sector and the attendant consequences as we saw earlier. We would have deliberately regressed.

In Rwanda, agriculture employs over sixty seven percent of our population, with women representing about seventy percent of this workforce. However, despite this number, the agricultural sector contributes less than 40% to our country's GDP. As farmers adopt new techniques and technology, and benefit from the factors of production, the prospects for growth and competitiveness increase. Thus, the imperative to invest in women in agriculture.

As an advocate for gender equality and a firm believer in the capacity of women to create sustainable wealth for themselves and the future generations, I believe that, real transformation in agriculture, must include more robust investment for

women, who do indeed make the greater proportion of people working and relying on this sector and who, in reality, have the capacity to bring back the highest return on investment in agriculture.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

It has been proven that empowering and investing in women has a strong influence on the success of all sectors, so it is therefore in our best interest, to put women at the heart of our interventions.

Agriculture, as it is currently practiced, consumes a lot of women's time, keeping them away from other productive activities.

As a sector known for its high returns on investment, and its ability to create more industries, we cannot afford not to mechanize agriculture and embrace innovation more effectively and efficiently, so that women not only save time and energy but are also able to create additional industries, participate in the value chain and tap into emerging markets thanks to the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) Agreement.

In Rwanda, we have seen the importance, and tremendous impact of gender equality principles in promoting women. We have therefore committed ourselves to this goal by strengthening and implementing policies, such as the revised land policy, which affords our women the ability to own land, use it as collateral and create a new economic identity.

As a result we have witnessed first-hand the increase of household incomes among women, and the subsequent reduction of poverty. By 2005, one million Rwandans had been lifted out of extreme poverty – ten years in advance of the deadline set by the Millennium Development Goals, the forerunner of the Sustainable Development Goals.

More specifically, through the work of my organization, the Imbuto Foundation, I can testify to the impact that empowering and uplifting of women, and vulnerable communities in general, has had on the development of our country.

Esteemed audience,

Allow me to share, as an example, the story of a woman called Sphora, that especially speaks to the objectives of this event. Sphora is a beneficiary of our Imali Project - which aims to

empower vulnerable women living in rural areas, by introducing them to income generating activities, particularly through greenhouse farming, improved agricultural techniques, and cooperative management.

Sphora, a fifty-eight year old widow, is one of our beneficiaries, living in the Eastern province, with her five children, and taking care of four more.

Before joining our project in 2015, she relied solely on subsistence farming and was barely making ends meet. Upon joining our Imali project, Sphora, received training on growing tomatoes in greenhouses, financial literacy, marketing skills, as well as processing. Eventually, from the proceeds of her sales, she generated sufficient income to buy livestock, put nutritious food on her table, pay her children's school fees, ensure access to health services, and overall, has created a much better standard of living for her entire household than she had before.

Sphora, and other women like her, who have seen their income double, or triple, after joining agricultural cooperatives, stand out to me because, in many ways, they represent the realm of possibilities of agribusiness. In a way they afford us a resounding response to the following questions:

- Why is it important to invest in women in agriculture?
- What happens when women are given the tools to empower themselves?
- And last but not least, how do we create sustainable development in our communities, for dignified lives?

Distinguished Guests,

As key players in the agriculture sector, we must remember to carve out a special place, for women, at the heart of all our interventions, if we are to experience the scale of transformation we expect and to which we are indeed entitled.

It is crucial that we firmly anchor gender equality, and the empowerment of women in the changing landscape of national development, as well as consider it in our larger aspirations, as a continent, in order to contribute positively to the global fight against hunger, food insecurity, and the pursuit of a life of dignity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I believe that all of us here today, are of the same understanding that a lot more needs to be done. Therefore, as we start this session themed “Advancing Women’s Role in Agribusiness”, let

us all keep in mind that agribusiness is a trillion dollar industry, and that women must be a central part of it.

I wish to end by calling on all of us to channel our contributions and attention towards resolving the pertinent issues of access to knowledge, information and technology, land, finance and markets faced by women in agriculture, in order to sustainably increase productivity and transform the agricultural sector, for generations to come.

I thank you for your kind attention, and wish us all fruitful discussions.