

- **Our gracious host, Her Excellency First Lady of Ethiopia  
Mrs. Roman Tesfaye,**
- **My sisters and fellow First Ladies,**
- **Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good afternoon,

In Rwanda we dedicate the whole month of March to celebrating women and girls, so I bring you warm wishes from Rwanda for this special month and particular special thoughts from the mothers and daughters of my country. This year's theme is: *'Make it happen: Strive for Sustainable Development'*.

I believe that as women, today's theme calls for us to look within ourselves as well as externally, to better understand the factors that influence our active participation in the economy.

Thank you Mrs. Tesfaye, for inviting us to share our thoughts on the journey women have made, to define more clearly our contribution to the economy.

In order for our individual countries and the continent to attain our shared goal of prosperity, both men and women must work extremely hard. The key to becoming economically empowered, is if both men and women work together and complement one another.

In order for one to effectively and sustainably participate in the economy, a solid policy framework and a conducive environment of peace and stability are necessary. These are important prerequisites for economic growth and prosperity of any country.

In Rwanda we are working to create these conditions for women, who comprise 52% of our population and whose contribution to their families is as important as it is, to the economy of our country.

Allow me to share some of the policies and programs that have formed a strong base for lasting financial inclusion, particularly for women:

- Rwanda's leadership has been clear and consistent about placing women at the heart of the national agenda and

considers gender a cross-cutting pillar in all sectors of the economy,

- Rwanda has put in place various laws to safeguard women's social and economic rights including laws pertaining to use and ownership of land; equal succession and inheritance rights for men and women,
- By law all citizens have the right to equal opportunities and equal pay,
- Our One Cow per Poor Family program, which enables families to utilise the cow for increased agricultural output as well as provide nutrition for children, has lifted a large number of women out of extreme poverty,
- Rwandan women with a better economic standing took initiative and have committed themselves to uplifting their less fortunate sisters, by giving them cows as part of the One Cow per Poor Family program,
- Ubudehe (a social classification system) aimed at reducing poverty among the poorest is supported by a credit scheme that enables the less fortunate, majority of whom are women, without collateral to obtain credit to set up income-generating projects,

- Rwandan girls have benefited from the 9 year basic education program; retention rates have become better because of improved school proximity and girls' enrolment rate at primary school is at 98%. We all know the pivotal role education plays in economic development,
- Technology also affords us with opportunities for staying ahead of the economic curve, so we have made deliberate efforts to encourage women and girls to enrol in science and technology related fields. This places our youth and girls at the cutting edge of new technology and its explosive potential for accelerated growth,
- By law at least 30% of women in public institutions must hold decision-making positions. Currently, 64% of our Members of Parliament are women, nearly 50% of our cabinet is female and 43% of Supreme Court judges are women.

Distinguished audience,

At the Imbuto Foundation, which is an initiative I started to encourage the youth, a considerable part of our resources go towards to empowering girls.

Allow me to mention just a few of these efforts. Every year we motivate girls to excel at school by awarding those who have done well in national examinations. This social mobilization campaign sensitizes the community, parents, teachers, civil society, boys and local leaders to collectively support girls' education; today over 3,000 girls have been recognized and supported.

Empowering the youth is a priority for Rwanda, we are of the same view at the Imbuto Foundation. That is why, in addition to encouraging girls to perform well at school, we hold various forums where we impart financial knowledge to the young people. About 9 months ago, we held a '*Financial Fitness*' forum where seasoned finance experts shared knowledge and tips with 300 young people, on saving, spending and investing.

It would make a difference if women could begin sharpening their financial acumen and building a healthy relationship with money, by understanding basic concepts of financial planning, economics and entrepreneurship early on.

I trust Mrs. Tesfaye, who is an economist by training, will agree that the earlier we start preparing women with tools to become financially literate, the better chances they will have to become vibrant drivers of the economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Even with maximum political will, and support from civil society, we continue to face challenges with respect to financial inclusion.

A global female leader, perhaps correctly, stated: 'too many women, in too many countries speak the same language, **silence**'.

We see several girls lacking confidence, preferring to remain on the periphery of economic progress.

We should not use our cultures or socialization as excuses to miss out on opportunities, for achieving economic success.

- How can we as women prepare ourselves to become more engaged in economic activity?
- How do we espouse an attitude of boldness and confidence?

- How do we orient ourselves towards deeper financial inquiry?
- How do we develop the art of innovation so needed for successful business undertakings?
- Can we facilitate and sustain platforms for more women-owned Fortune 500 enterprises in Africa?

As I end my remarks,

I want us to pause for a moment and ask ourselves what the end goal of empowerment is.

Aung San Suu Kyi said it well: *'The education and empowerment of women throughout the world cannot fail to result in a more caring, tolerant, just and peaceful life for all'*. It surely cannot fail to spur the double-digit economic growth rates Africa so badly needs to move to middle income status.

Ladies, what is really holding us back?

Thank you for your kind attention and for graciously lending ear to my thoughts.