



Speech by Her Excellency

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on Monday 02 October 2017

at 11 45 hrs

Wilson Centre, One Woodrow Wilson Plaza

Washington, DC

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here today and to speak at the Wilson Center as part of the distinguished Women in Public Service project of the Global Women's Leadership Initiative.

I would like to thank Ms Gwen Young for the kind invitation to speak, and to share some thoughts on the critical importance of access to quality education, with special attention to innovation and STEM programs that emphasize inclusion of women and girls.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly declared February 11th as the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, coinciding with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, also known as Agenda 2030.

The SDGs are built on a strong foundation of science, technology and innovation (STI) with a consistent call for gender equality throughout. The standalone goal on gender equality is bold and clear, and will serve as a guide post in our collective efforts to achieve gender equality in all spheres of human activity and advancement.

The SDGs are an opportunity to commit to a new mindset -- one that disrupts inertia and discards old prejudices, introducing new ideas that are big, creative, realizable and sustainable.

The global education gender gap has seen impressive declines around the world: in Sub-Saharan Africa between 2004 and 2014, 94% of the education gender gap was closed. In my country, Mauritius, a big catalyst for progress was when education became free in 1976.

Notwithstanding this impressive gain, a 2016 UNESCO report provides new evidence that gender gaps in education persist: sixteen million girls worldwide between the ages 6 and 11 will never start school, compared to 8 million boys.

The gap widens when one moves beyond education to factor in future employment and wage earnings. In fact, the World Economic Forum finds that Sub-Saharan Africa was still at only 68% gender parity as of 2016.

Yet see opportunity for women and girls to advocate for their interests, rights and social transformation, particularly through information and communication technology.

In colleges, women are catching up in science and math, and businesses are realizing that a more diverse workforce adds shareholder value and contributes to achieving the bottom line.

In fact, at the extreme of the education scale, the WEF reports that as of last year, my country of Mauritius ranked highest among 142 countries in the women-to-men ratio of students enrolled in PhD programs, with 1.32 woman to every man.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Science, Technology and Innovation have the power to disrupt and shift trajectories as STI increasingly influences all aspects of life today, not just careers directly in the sciences.

STI solutions are required to grow business and social enterprise, improve health outcomes (including sexual and reproductive health), provide clean energy, manage the environment and develop infrastructure.

The SDG Gender Goal directs the global community to *“Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.”*

The ability of women to access, benefit from, develop, influence and lead these sectors will directly impact whether we achieve the Planet 50:50 goal to “to make national commitments to address the challenges that are holding women and girls back from reaching their full potential by 2030.”

Moreover, as history shows science serves as the basis for informed decision-making and effective impact assessments in all sectors.

Of course, having women in leadership positions—in science, business and public office—is a powerful signal for both men and women. Just think of the iconic role model that Marie Curie played more than 100 years after winning her two Nobel prizes. And it was certainly heartening to see that the thick glass ceiling of that ultimate male bastion, the Marine Corps, has just been broken with a female marine graduating from the gruelling Infantry Officer Course (the first among 36 pioneering women who have tried to accomplish this milestone since 2012).

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If women are left out of full participation in 21st century aspirations, we will not achieve gender equality, nor realize our broader goals for growth, prosperity and well-being, including scientific advancement. We simply cannot afford to draw from anything other than 100% of our talent pool if we are serious about transforming African and global economies into sustainable enterprises driven by innovation.

I firmly believe that no team can even contemplate a win by leaving 52% of the team on the bench.

We need more women who can raise awareness and lead by example. I am looking to the present generation to carry forward this torch.

Unfortunately, in Africa as in the developed world, the number of women in STEM declines steadily on the arc from secondary school to university, laboratories, teaching, policy making, decision-making and leadership.

There are great divides in women's access to, participation in and leadership within STI sectors, despite being on the frontlines of energy use, climate change adaptation, economic production, and as protectors of extensive traditional knowledge.

In the formal STI sector worldwide, women make up under 10% of those in innovation hubs and funding by venture capitalists, and only 5% of membership in national academies in science and technology disciplines. We are similarly underrepresented in research and development, publication, leadership in government and the private sector, and so on.

We must address urgently the disconnect between the interest and ability of women to provide brainpower, and their inclusion in the formal power structure of science.

The reasons for this disconnect are many, ranging from access to technology, to education and investment gaps, to unsupportive work environments, to cultural beliefs and customs around childcare, and to persistently diminishing stereotypes.

Globally, girls demonstrate no less interest in science and math education in primary school than do boys, then start to select themselves out of STEM courses in early secondary school. Societal attitudes and bias hinder girls' self-confidence and ambition, with science and technology often considered male domains.

But change is coming, slowly but steadily. Pressing ahead, making yourself heard, pulling each other up and making a lasting impact on your world: that is what we must do, for the benefit of all.

We need to celebrate the incredible achievements of women in science, technology and innovation, and galvanize the global community to do more to ensure that women's participation in the formal sector is the rule, not the exception.

In the informal sector, where women's ingenuity is already the rule, we must be awarded commensurate recognition and support.

The International Day for Women in Science is an annual reminder of these opportunities and obligations, holding us accountable for advancing women in science, technology and innovation to achieve gender equality, and by extension, our development goals.

This ambition is complex and deep, but it starts at the most basic level: in the education of children. Parents, teachers and community leaders influence how young women choose their career paths.

That choice begins early in school, and continues all the way through higher education. When science is rejected as a career choice, it is often due to limited information and the dearth of positive role models to encourage young girls to participate.

We all know that the family unit may be the most influential factor, so parents must be brought in early so that they can

learn of opportunities for their children. To many poor and rural parents, these are not only beyond their exposure, but also beyond their imagination.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

My own path to a career in science and leadership indeed started with my parents. While my personal journey is only one of many and may not constitute the ultimate jewels of wisdom, as Mark Twain said and I quote:

“It is better to have second-hand diamonds than none at all.”

(Unquote)

My journey began as an only daughter. I have a younger brother. He and I had the privilege of being raised by loving and supportive parents. I realize that my early experience is rare and fortunate.

My father, who was a schoolteacher, believed in equal opportunity for boys and girls. Importantly, from an early age I was allowed to make choices for myself. The significance of this of course is that I also had to suffer the consequences of those choices.

At school, I was blessed with motivated teachers who encouraged me to discover the beauty of the natural world, helping to demystify it by answering the endless questions that occur to a curious 12-year-old.

To an aware child, a positive response to the classic questions – why is the sky blue? Why are some plants yellow while most remain green? – is a portal into the inner world of the mind.

It may not be a coincidence that my teachers were women – or as we thought of them, “lady teachers” -- having attended a Catholic convent school.

These religious and lay role models reinforced my interest and courage in following my fascination with science.

So, when relatives urged me to seek the advice of a career guidance counsellor, I did.

We are in 1978. Man had already walked on the moon nine years before; the world's first "Test Tube Baby", Louise Brown, was born that very year.

The transformation that science could bring to human lives was real, it was tangible... and it was mind-blowing.

Yet despite my advantageous starting point, surrounded by enlightened parents and engaged teachers, the counsellor discouraged me from studying science.

The reasons were as short-sighted as they were disappointing: I was female and science is not for me. And

when I return to Mauritius after my studies, there will be no job opportunities for me.

I was a pretty stubborn young woman, so maybe the opposition galvanized my determination.

In the event, shortly thereafter I returned home from school and announced to my father that I was going to follow my heart and study chemistry. I never looked back!

I pursued my higher education in chemistry in the UK. After earning my undergraduate degree, I took what turned out to be a valuable year to get some hands-on experience and learn the ropes in industry before earning a scholarship for my PhD.

I turned down an opportunity to do a post-doc in the US, instead returning home, where I later became the first woman professor at the University of Mauritius, in 2001.

A decade later, I took a risky leap into the world of entrepreneurship and established CIDP. After that, was elected President in 2015 where I have been using the bully pulpit to advance STEM education and enhancing the role of science, technology and innovation in national development plans.

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But while we have improved access to education, we need all the firepower at our disposal to tackle global challenges: climate change, population growth, food and water security an Since launching my career, things have changed for the better in Mauritius and in many parts of Africa.

But while we have improved access to education, we need all the firepower at our disposal to tackle global challenges:

climate change, population growth, food and water security and health challenges, to name some of the biggest ones.

Facing these existential threats, we must realize that it is not just a moral issue to educate our girls.

Gender equality is critical for the economic well-being of both men and women. We must bring all our human resources to bear on these huge challenges.

As Arancha Gonzalez, Executive Director of the International Trade Centre has said and I quote:

“When women participate in the economy, growth is stronger and it is inclusive.” (Unquote)

We know - based on a wealth of research and experience - that empowering women is a necessary and critical economic game changer for any country.

Studies reveal, for example, that if women were to participate in the labour force to the same extent as men, national income would increase by 5% in the U.S., 9% in Japan, and 27% in India.

I would be remiss if I didn't pay tribute to late Wangari Maathai, scientist and the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, for having raised our consciousness about environmental protection.

She drew on her observations from the point of view of a child and fought for what she believed in to protect and safeguard the forest in her native Kenya. I am confident that another Wangari Maathai will emerge to tackle Africa's development challenges.

Undeniably, government has a key role to play in promoting the position of women in the labour market. Affordable

childcare, parental leave and workplace flexibility are all critical tools for equal opportunity.

Equal pay and better opportunities for women promote diversity, reduce inequality and boost economic growth for everyone. In Africa, women feed the Continent.

Women must be empowered with knowledge, technology, financial resources and land. Increasing women's access to finance mechanisms and removing the legal barriers that still exist in many countries are among the ways to make sure that women can stay in the work force and achieve their fullest potential.

In the fast-paced world of scientific research in particular, any long period away from the lab threatens the ability to be creative, publish and be regarded by colleagues as a productive asset.

Fortunately, many countries are getting the message about the need for gender equality. The G-20 nations, representing 85% of the world's GDP and two-thirds of its population, have pledged to reduce the gap in labour force participation rates between men and women by 25% by 2025, and to create over 100 million more jobs, contributing to economic opportunity and poverty reduction for all.

As admirable as this goal may be, the sober fact is that at this rate, it would take over 150 years to achieve full economic gender equality. Are we prepared to wait that long? Certainly NOT.

Our generation of women, and our daughters', has the opportunity and the power to bend the arc of history towards greater gender equality and more inclusive global growth.

It is a moral and economic imperative that we bring our collective weight to bear to achieve this future much sooner than a century-and-a-half from now.

Women can sustain the momentum by voting with our time, our wallets, our social media accounts. We should be able to run our homes as well as run for office, learn the ropes to climb the corporate ladder, and become successful entrepreneurs. In doing so, we can show the way for younger women who are following us.

As Madeline Albright said and I quote:

“there is a special place in Hell for those women who do not help other women!” (Unquote)

It is our sacred and privileged duty, as successful women, to create a “Club of Giants” in leadership positions, becoming the best versions of ourselves in numbers that cannot be

dismissed. We must hire more women, invest in them and promote civility among us.

Much remains to be done. But as an eternal optimist, I am confident that it *will* be done, because it *must* be done. One of the great gifts of leadership is the opportunity to work every day with and for the next generation: leading by example, learning from their insights, and sharing ideas to keep the momentum going.

Only in this way will we ensure that equal work and equal pay become a global reality, and that women's rights will be fully respected. After all, women's rights are civil rights, and civil rights are human rights. Let us get to work now.

Thank you.