

Speech delivered by Dr. Taiwo Afolabi, Group Executive Vice Chairman, SIFAX Group at the Global Summit on Women Empowerment on Friday, October 28, 2016 at New York, United States of America.

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

I consider it a great honour the invitation extended to me to speak at an important international forum like this which key objective includes a comprehensive evaluation of the socio-economic, political and intellectual development of women globally.

I appreciate this opportunity and hope my speech will do justice to the topic while the recommendations will provide some roadmap that could help all the stakeholders in the advocacy of women development.

I will be speaking on: **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS: THE NIGERIAN CASE STUDY.**

From time immemorial, women have been a critical stakeholder in global human development. Be it in science, education, politics, human rights and medicine, among others, the impacts of women cannot be diminished.

Women control most of the non-monetary economy (subsistence agriculture, domestic labour etc.) and play an important role in the monetary economy (trading, wage labour, employment, etc). Everywhere in the world, women work both around the home and outside the home.

The woman as a person is an agent of reproduction of human life itself. This places her in the position of the life blood of the entire humanity. She is the first teacher, the sustainer and maintainer of the home, the peace maker, the symbol of beauty and major moulder of the character of the child. It is safe to describe

her as the mother of the human race. As mothers and wives, women do exert considerable impact on the productivity of the male gender.

Even in the work place, by their sheer psychological, physiological and intellectual make up, they do perform more than mere complimentary roles in the production process. Women like Cleopatra, Rosa Parks, Florence Nightingale, Mother Theresa, Princess Diana, Oprah Winfrey have written their names in gold for their sterling contributions to the development and advancement that we all enjoy today. There are countless other women in various communities all around the world, who have defied the odds stacked against them, to genuinely and sustainably developed their society.

Some Female Shining Lights

Please permit me to highlight the contributions of few of the women who had shaped our world by their sheer determination, empathy and courage.

Let me start with **Rosa Parks**. I am sure this would resonate with not just a few of us here. Rosa Parks was born in 1913 and grew up during a time when people of colour were oppressed in the United States. On December 1, 1955, she refused to obey when she was told to move to the back of the bus to allow a white passenger take her seat. This simple act of a tired woman on a bus just wanting to get home made her a symbol of the civil rights movement. Her act of defiance sparked a series of nationwide demonstrations by blacks across America that eventually led to the repeal of the discriminatory law and an inspiration for blacks to push for more equality rights.

Another shining example is **Mother Teresa**. The Catholic nun was born in 1910, and during her long lifetime, she helped thousands of people who were sick, starving, and otherwise hurting. In 1950, Teresa founded the Missionaries of

Charity, a Roman Catholic religious congregation, which in 2012 consisted of over 4,500 sisters and was active in 133 countries. They run homes for people dying of HIV/AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis; soup kitchens; dispensaries and mobile clinics; children's and family counselling programmes; orphanages; and schools. She was an icon of selfless service, and inspired others to follow in her footsteps. Known throughout the world for her kindness, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, and millions mourned when she passed away in 1997.

Let me also highlight one contemporary example - **Oprah Winfrey**. One of the most well-known women in our modern times, Winfrey was the influential host of a long-running talk show, as well as dabbling in the arts – she became a famous actress with a star turn in “The Colour Purple.” Today, she owns her own television company, and continues to shed light on the things that matter to her, such as health, family issues and the eradication of child abuse. Because I am dwelling on Nigeria as a case study, I will also showcase some women who have defied the odds to get to the top of their game, thereby inspiring a whole generation of Nigerian women and contributed or contributing to the country’s development.

Queen Amina was born around 1533 in Zaria, a province of today’s Nigeria. She was the daughter of Bakwa of Turunku. Their family's wealth was derived from the trade of leather goods, cloth, kola, salt, horses and imported metals. Although Bakwa's reign was known for peace and prosperity, Amina chose to hone her military skills from the warriors of the Zazzau military. As a result, she emerged as leader of the Zazzua cavalry. Many accolades, great wealth, and increased power resulted from her numerous military achievements.

Amina led her first military charge a few months after assuming power. For the rest of her 34 year reign, she continued to fight and expand her kingdom to the greatest in history. The objective for initiating so many battles was to make neighbouring rulers her vassal and permit her traders safe passage. In this way, she boosted her kingdom's wealth and power with gold, slaves, and new crops. Because her people were talented metal workers, Amina introduced metal armor, including iron helmets and chain mail, to her army.

Folorunsho Alakija is a Nigerian businesswoman who is the richest African woman and also the richest woman of African descent.

She is a business tycoon involved in the fashion, oil and printing industries. Alakija is ranked by *Forbes* as the richest woman in Nigeria with an estimated net worth of \$2.1 billion. As of 2015, she is listed as the second most powerful woman in Africa after Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and the 87th most powerful woman in the world by *Forbes*.

Folorunsho, who was born in 1951 in Lagos, Nigeria's former capital, studied at the Pitman's Central College, London. She also studied fashion design at the American College, London and the Central School of Fashion.

She made her fortunes from the oil industry after her company, Famfa Limited, was granted an oil prospecting license (OPL) about two decades ago. On 9th March, 2016, she became the first female Chancellor in Nigeria with her appointment at the Osun State University, Osogbo.

Through her foundation, Rose of Sharon, she has empowered thousands of less privileged women. She is a great philanthropist.

Professor Dora Akunyili was the Director General of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) of Nigeria and Nigerian Minister of

Information and Communications from 2008 to 2010. Following her appointment as the Director General of NAFDAC in April 2001, Akunyili established as a top priority the eradication of counterfeit drugs and unsafe food in Nigeria.

She was a pharmacist and government administrator who gained international recognition for her relentless battle against drug counterfeiting in Nigeria while significant progress was made under her watch as the rate of the drug-counterfeiting menace dropped significantly.

Her achievements can be viewed against the background of countless lives that were spared from the evil effects of counterfeiting which include various terminal diseases and avoidable deaths.

Oby Ezekwesili

Ezekwesili holds a master's degree in International Law and Diplomacy from the University of Lagos, as well as a Master of Public Administration degree from the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. She trained with the firm of Deloitte and Touche and qualified as a chartered accountant.

A former World Bank Vice President and co-founder of the global body, Transparency International, Ezekwesili served as a senior government cabinet official in Nigeria for over six years with responsibility spanning ministries of Education and Solid Minerals, where she recorded outstanding achievements.

Ezekwesili started off in the former President Olusegun Obasanjo's administration as the Pioneer head of the Budget Monitoring and Price Intelligence Unit (aka Due Process Unit). It was in this position that she earned the sobriquet of "Madam Due Process" for the outstanding work she led a team of professionals to do in sanitising public procurement or contracting at the Federal level in Nigeria. She

was the architect of the Bureau for Public Procurement legislation, the NEITI legislation and the new Minerals and Mining legislation.

As the World Bank Vice-President Africa Division, a position to which she was appointed in 2007, she was in charge of the bank's operations in 48 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and supervised a lending portfolio of over \$40 billion.

Upon the abduction of over 200 school girls by the insurgency group, Boko Haram, two years ago, Ezekwesili, alongside others, founded the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) advocacy group, which campaigns relentlessly for the safe release of the girls. The group has been able to secure the support and endorsement of various global personalities including Michelle Obama for their advocacy. I am glad to report today that just about a fortnight ago, some of the girls were released by their abductors. Aside President Muhammadu Buhari, Nigerian military and other supporting international agencies, the Ezekwesili-led BBOG group deserves commendations for the feat.

Time will not permit me to tell you about other outstanding Nigerian women like Mrs Ibukun Awosika, chairman of First Bank Plc, one of Nigeria's leading banks, A great entrepreneur of note; Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, a great administrator and a global financial expert; Ms. Arunma Oteh, Treasurer and World Bank Vice President, among others, whose achievements, impacts and contributions to the country remain a beacon of hope for millions.

Women Empowerment

According to www.importantindia.com, women empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society.

Women Empowerment also involves increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights, such as:

- freely live their life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity,
- have complete control of their life, both within and outside of their home and workplace,
- to make their own choices and decisions,
- have equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities,
- have equal social status in the society,
- have equal rights for social and economic justice,
- determine financial and economic choices,
- get equal opportunity for education,
- get equal employment opportunity without any gender bias,
- get safe and comfortable working environment

Despite the fantastic achievements women had recorded globally, most of their contributions had not been recognized until some few decades ago when the United Nations declared the Decade for Women (1976-1985) making it mandatory on governments to focus on issue of women as an integral component of national development.

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. Consequently, subsequent conferences on women were held in Copenhagen, Denmark 1980, Nairobi in Kenya 1985 and Beijing in China 1995. However, an international news magazines 'Africa Today' reported in July 1995 that the full implementation of all the strategies and recommendations of the various conferences on women

issues had still not been achieved and enthusiasm was waning. According to the magazine, the UN itself reported that only six out of the 184 ambassadors to UN are women and only four out of the 32 UN specialized agencies and programmes are headed by women.

The Nigeria Case Study

Nigeria is currently the biggest country in Africa in terms of population and with its over 180 million citizens, the country is about a quarter of the total population of the African continent.

Just like every continent of the world, the issues around the girl-child and women empowerment have continued to receive attention from the continent, especially in Nigeria.

Please note that the case study of Nigeria is similar to that of almost all the countries of Africa.

Before I highlight few of these initiatives, let me quickly pinpoint some of the inequalities that are suffered by women in Nigeria. I will address this under three major sub-headings – legal, political and socio-cultural constraints. I will anchor this section on the fantastic research work done by Joseph Egwurube - 2016 titled: “Challenges Facing Women Empowerment in Contemporary Nigeria.

Legal – There are many legal provisions that are considered unfavourable to women. One of them is found in the Nigerian Police Regulations. According to Egwurube, “The Nigerian Police Regulations provide among others that women police officers, who wish to get married, unlike their male counterparts, must apply for permission to get married and be so permitted before they can get

married or that an unmarried police officer who gets pregnant shall be discharged from the Force, and shall not be re-enlisted except with the approval of the Inspector-General of Police.” There are many other related provisions across the different levels of government – Federal, State and Local.

Political – Women’s participation in the electoral process and governance is still acutely low. Just a handful of women hold elective or administrative positions. Egwurube attributed this to two major factors – self-imposed constraints and systemic constraints. According to him: “The self- imposed constraints include the relative unpreparedness or unwillingness by women to take part in the wear and tear of electoral and partisan political activities. Such unwillingness is linked to many other systemic constraints, the most important of which is male dominance and monopoly of decision making since independence compounded by a relatively long spell of military dictatorship with very minimal female presence at federal and state power structures. “

Socio-Cultural - The patriarchal system is firmly entrenched in Nigeria. This system bestows an inferior, weaker and silent status on women. The system is accompanied by a motley of cultural and religious beliefs some of which are integrated into customary law and infringe on the rights of women. The negative impacts of this include the loss of identity by women, where she is only seen as a wife of a man; subtle support for unbridled violence against women and the preference of the male child over his female counterpart, particularly in the access to quality education.

Confronting the Issue

Despite this seeming institutionalised gender discrimination, several attempts have been made by the government, public agencies, private individuals, women-

based and corporate organizations to address the inequality. Women are taking the lead in this direction. Women's voices are now being heard clamouring for an improvement in their socio-economic status and for the recognition of their immense contributions to national development.

First, there are many government-funded agencies, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organizations that have been formed to champion the cause of women empowerment and see to the end of gender discrimination against women. Some of these include National Council of Women Societies and Women in Business (WIMBIZ), among others. They organize public events where women advocacy is done. Seminars, conferences and skill acquisition training are also organized to economically empower women.

Second, the platform of pet projects of First Ladies, wives of Nigerian presidents and state governors, have also been useful in confronting discrimination and women empowerment. Starting from Late Mrs Maryam Babangida in the 1980s, which established the Better Life for Rural Women, to the current First Lady, Mrs. Aisha Buhari's Future Assured. Some of the issues that the First Ladies projects have worked on include poverty alleviation, skills acquisition, soft loan, legal rights enlightenment, free legal services, women unemployment, women reproductive health, maternal health care, girl-child education and infant mortality.

The major drawback of this strategy is that such projects are tied to the tenure of the husbands of such initiators. No matter how laudable their objectives and impacts are, such projects are abandoned by successive governments.

Thirdly, various government's political pronouncements have also attempted to address the challenge of women discrimination, particularly in the political space.

For instance, both presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Goodluck Jonathan promised to allocate about 30 percent of government senior administrative positions to women.

Fourth, corporate organizations in Nigeria are also not left out in women empowerment. With instruments like scholarship, internship, mentorship, business and finance education and SME financing, various businesses are doing their bit to liberate the womenfolk from the clutches of women discrimination and inequality.

Permit me to briefly highlight the impact of the philanthropic arm of my company, Ajoke Ayisatu Afolabi Foundation (AAAF). It was established in January, 2008 to provide support for the less privileged and the most vulnerable. The foundation promotes wellness, skills development, opportunity sharing, emergency response to financial assistance to widows, orphans, and person living with disability as well as other vulnerable persons.

Critical issues such as education, health, family support and skill acquisition get the utmost attention of the foundation. Since its inception, over 1,000 women across the country have benefited from the foundation's skill acquisition programmes. Computer appreciation, make-up, arts & craft, and fashion designing, among others are areas where they women have been trained. Upon completion of their programmes, soft loans are also extended to them to start their businesses.

Hundreds of widows also get monthly stipends from the foundation to cushion the debilitating effects of losing their spouses, who are usually the family bread winners. Women also enjoy periodic free medical services, which are done in collaboration with relevant medical centres. Health enlightenment for women in rural communities is also a key strategy for the foundation.

In the area of education, children of the most vulnerable, especially from homes where women are bread winners, are given free scholarship. About \$60,000 are spent annually on school fees of about 500 beneficiaries. The result of this investment is showing with superlative academic success of the beneficiaries. One of them, Esuma Oyinyechi Joy, a girl recorded one of the best results in the national high school graduation examination conducted some months ago.

Recommendations

1. **Legal Reforms** – The executive and the legislative arms of government must form a synergy in addressing the problem of lopsided legislation in the country. Urgent steps must be taken to repeal and expunge such laws from the legal books. These should be replaced with laws and provisions that provide equal access for the female gender.
2. **Political Reforms** --- Our women must be encouraged by all the political parties to actively get involved in the political process. Various incentives need to be dangled before the womenfolk to stimulate their interest in politics and governance. Government also needs to move beyond rhetorics and institutionalized the quota to be given to women in cabinet positions.
3. **Education** – Free and compulsory education must be provided by the government for all children of school age, with particular emphasis on girls.
4. **Government** should endeavour to criminalise any form of job discrimination against women. Offenders should be made to pay face the full wrath of the law. Same should

also be extended to perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence against women.

5. Government should encourage through tax rebate and other favourable economic policies corporate organizations which are committing huge funds into women empowerment programmes.

6. To improve their economic potential in view of their dominance of the informal economic sector, government should facilitate the establishment of financial institutions that cater largely, if not exclusively for women's business funding needs.

7. Strong public enlightenment campaign against retrogressive socio-cultural practices should be undertaken by the government to restore the confidence of women and allow them contribute their quota appropriately to national development.

Conclusion

My conclusion will be a 2003 quote of Mr. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, who said:

“When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier and better fed; their income, savings and reinvestment go up. And what is true of families is also true of communities and, in the long run, of whole countries...”

Thank you.