

Daring the Difference to Bridge the Gender Gap: Enabling Women to Participate On an Equal Footing with Men

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This presentation is based on International Monetary Fund Managing director, Christine Lagarde's idea of "Daring the Difference to Bridge the Gender Gap: Enabling Women to Participate on an Equal Footing with Men".

As part of the international Women's Day celebrations, we celebrate women's achievements and their wisdom. We celebrate those women who have taken the world on, women who make things happen, women who have that captivating beauty and strength of personality that embraces life in all its endless variety; women who have transformed their own lives and the lives of others through their hard work, guts and acts of compassion. We

recognise and celebrate inspirational women – women doctors and directors, politicians and poets, scientists and heads of corporations and charities who make a positive impact in the 21st century. We celebrate women who today have economic power as consumers; political power as voters; cultural power as tolerant citizens, ecological power as conservationists.

We also celebrate the power of women over men. The pages of history are filled with records of great leaders whose achievement may be traced directly to the influence of women. Most of the men in history and to date who have accumulated great fortunes and achieved outstanding recognition were motivated by the influence of a woman. There are scores of men who have climbed to great heights of achievement because of the stimulating influence of their women or their wives.

We celebrate the hundreds, if not thousands or even millions of women around the world who have made the world a kinder and fairer place with their brilliant personalities, ideas and achievements. We are in an era when attitudes and behaviour towards women have changed, thanks to the struggles of suffragettes, feminists and enlightened men. As an African Woman I pay homage to some of the most inspiring women from Africa and from the Bible and the actions they took towards the "Women's Walk to Freedom". Thanks to the 100 women from 17 countries in Africa who in 1911 over 100 years ago, agreed with the idea as a strategy to promote equal rights for women.

Most of us will be familiar with the women's fight for equality, which has taken many forms - starting from the women's suffrage movement in the 19th Century, moving on to the Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was adopted by the United Nations in 1979, followed by the Beijing Platform for Action declared at the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference in China.

More recently, among many other initiatives and affirmative actions has been the introduction of Electoral Gender Quotas. Quotas have also been introduced in boardrooms in the business world. We have also had Gender Equality at the core of the concluding United Nations Millennium Development Goals. And yet again, we once again, we have Gender Equality as a priority in the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda.

This year, the United Nations theme for International Women's Day says "Equality for Women is Progress for All". With the overall theme of Inspiring Change, I believe as women, we need to be creative and pro-active in our quest to attain the much desired and very elusive equality for women, an equality which we have been fighting for, for over 200 years. To attain women's equality, I believe we need take stock and look at those factors that have held us back. While it is inspiring to see that women's equality has made many positive gains over the years, it is evident that these gains are too few and far in between. To date, we still have a huge gap in gender parity in many areas. It is heartbreaking that after 200 years we are still fighting for women's equality and, there have so far only been a few women who have had the privilege to hold very prominent and visible high ranking positions of real power, real influence and real authority.

At the same time, the majority of women continue to be discriminated against and women's rights continue to be violated through all forms of violence against women including early child marriage, lack of adequate education, female genital mutilation, human trafficking, feminization of poverty, the rape of women and girls as a weapon of war, restricted positions of authority in business and politics, the list of violations of women's rights even in the 21st century is endless, despite all the various initiatives and affirmative actions taken over the years.

I believe that to attain this very elusive gender equality, as women, we need to take the bull by the horn and dare the difference that continues to hold us back in order to inspire the much needed change that is required to attain women's equality and eventual progress for all. During the United Nations General Assembly held in 2013, UN Women reiterated the call for the inclusion of and investment in women's rights and gender equality in order to bring transformative change to women's lives and enable real progress in the context of a future global agenda.

It is no secret that in many countries, cultures and social conditioning have prevented women from unleashing their full potential, especially in leadership roles. To dare the difference and bridge the gender gap, we need to change our behavior and attitudes by unlearning the traditional mindsets and social conditioning that has held us back. Apart from unlearning the traditional mindsets and social conditioning, as women leaders we need to empower our fellow women to continuously improve and push the limits that have been placed on our full participation in the political, economic and social spheres.

To dare the difference and close the gender gap as women, we need to reassert ourselves. We need to muster the character, skills and confidence to command respect and authority in order to be effective and influential players in the global agenda. It has been said many times over that women are the back bone of society. And as women we already have what we need. All we have to do is to simply uncover what we already have.

Like most African countries and other parts of the world, in Rwanda women are culturally expected to seek the permission of their husbands before engaging in any form of business, social or political activity.

However, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, Rwandan women who lost their husbands found themselves thrust into the role of bread-winners having to take on leadership roles in society, business and politics. Rwanda remains the only country in the world with a female dominated parliament. Because of the high number of women in political decision-making, Rwanda is also one of the few countries committed to Resolution 1325 of the UN Security Council adopted in the year 2000 with a view to enabling a greater participation of women at all levels of institutional prevention, management and resolution of conflicts and the special protection of girls and women from sexual and other violence.

You will see that in the case of Rwanda, men had to die in order to pave way for women. We do not want all the men to die in order for women in the rest of the world to have an opportunity to showcase their full potential. What needs to die is the system, a system that discriminates against women and puts limits on women's full potential. Because a system and society that tries to run on half of its brain power, and half its human capability, by blocking the role of women in problem solving, in economic leadership, and in political role, is in fact, a society that runs on half of its human resources and one that is bound to fail. In order to achieve progress for all, the gender gap must be closed to ensure that the potential of every woman and girl is fully utilized.

As women, we need to be proactive and to inspire the change ourselves. We need to empower one another as women, to find out how much strength and power of conviction there is among us. As 21st century women, we need to believe that it is actually politically correct for women to compete and contribute to social, economic and political activity on equal footing with our male counterparts, without feeling that we are overstepping our boundaries or compromising men's masculinity. To dare the difference and close the gender gap, it is important to empower ourselves so that women and girls can become effective and influential players in a future global agenda in business, politics, society and the environment.

To do this women and girls need to be equipped with the necessary leadership skills that are required for women to dare the difference and close the gender gap which include the fast tracking of skills development and knowledge transfer. To dare the difference we, as women, need to have a plan that advances our careers through top-notch training, leadership development, mentoring and networking opportunities, to expand our skills and our networks of women movers and shakers who can influence the global agenda.

A recent study shows that companies with the highest representation of women in their senior management teams enjoyed a higher return on equity than do those with fewer or no women in senior management. It is therefore evident that incorporating women is vital to the future of business and politics, because women bring with them the valuable contributions that diverse perspectives bring to business and politics to break down gender and economic inequalities.

To dare the difference and close the gender gap, as women, we need to reassert ourselves and inspire our own change. The ability to assert ourselves lives in all of us and we just have to tap into it, because the strength of a woman is limitless and this has been proven throughout the ages, through countless acts of compassion, humility and most importantly strength. And it is not just physical strength, for we have a greater strength - emotional strength. We have the strength to endure the hardships of the world and continue where physical strength fails. We as women, can continue because of this gift granted to women by the very hands the almighty God, our creator. To conclude, as women of the 21st century we should use all our talents, strengths and wisdom to inspire change and lead humanity as a whole to a future of gender equality in order to attain human prosperity and progress for all.