

First Lady Jeannette Kagame's Remarks
at the
Women Leaders in Global Health Conference

Saturday, 9 November 2019

Kigali, Rwanda

Your Royal Highness, Princess Dina Mired,

Chancellor of the University of Global Health Equity, Mr Paul Farmer,

Executive Director of Women in Global Health, Mrs Roopa Dhatt,

Honourable Ministers and Government Officials,

Distinguished Leaders of the Academia,

Honourable Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

It is inspiring to join you all here today, and indeed a great honour for us in Rwanda, to host this significant conference on **women's representation and leadership in the health sector.**

Thanks to **the University of Global Health Equity** and **the Women Leaders in Global Health Initiative**, Rwanda has the opportunity to provide a platform for great minds like yours, to deliberate upon and find solutions to the theme of the day.

Before I begin, let me welcome you all, new and seasoned visitors, to Kigali. I hope that, beyond this conference, you will free some time to experience and enjoy the offerings of our city, in the land of a thousand hills.

Distinguished Guests,

Quality health care is not the preserve of a privileged few, but the fundamental right of all citizens, regardless of their economic status, gender, race, **disability**, religious or political inclination.

To afford all human beings access to the quality health services and care they need, when they need them, is to afford them dignity and control over their own lives.

To achieve this, however, we need more than strong policies, laws and mechanisms in the health sector. We need the *right* people in the *right* places, making the *right* decisions at the *right* time, to guarantee every individual's *right* to health.

We also need diversity at the top; a leadership that is representative of the population it serves, and one that can bring to light – in the most accurate way possible – and address the multifaceted nature of our health needs and aspirations.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in short, we need more women at the top.

According to statistics of the World Health Organisation, female health workers make up 70% of the global health workforce, yet only 25% of women hold leadership positions.

In Rwanda, for example, over 50% of civil servants, in the health

sector are women, yet only 18% are specialists - a far cry from the 82% male specialists.

Additionally, in Rwanda, women dominate primary healthcare. To-date, more than 66% of our Community Health Workers are female - handling more than 50% of health conditions.

These statistics highlight two sides to the reality within the health sector:

1/ We do indeed have a significant number of qualified and experienced women contributing to the health sector, but;

2/ We have not created the space for them to make decisions, and voice their, clearly informed, opinions on what ought to be the solutions, to the challenges facing the health sector.

Distinguished Leaders and Partners,

I humbly believe we ought to start by assessing the role of the woman in families across the world.

The woman is often, if not always, the one expected to care for the wellbeing and health of her family.

She will be the primary person catering to the health needs of

her husband, her children, and sometimes her own parents and siblings.

This natural predisposition for the woman to become her family's first caregiver, sometimes from a young age, shows us that she has some of the key prerequisite qualities we ask of healthcare providers, namely:

- selflessness and,
- a sense of urgency and responsibility towards the wellbeing of those around her.

However, as time passes by, and this woman starts making decisions as to her future professional path, we notice that a significant few, will be the ones pursuing a leadership position, in a health-related career.

Distinguished guests,

I believe the different topics to be tackled over these two days, therefore give us the platform, to carefully dissect this gender gap, in order for us to fully understand why women do not make their way up the health professional ladder, in more significant numbers.

Indeed, improving women's leadership in the health sector,

requires a multi-faceted, multi-partner and multi-sector approach, as it speaks to the enforcement of gender equality and equity, across the board.

It begs the questions of:

1/ whether women in the sector, are equipped with the right training, and confidence to take on leadership roles;

2/ whether the sector itself, is ready to accommodate and promote, the next generation of women leaders and health practitioners.

3/ And last but not least, whether the environments, in which they work and live, are conducive for them to live a balanced life.

Indeed, how do we foster a friendly ecosystem for the woman who has chosen to pursue her calling, even if her profession will require an extensive education, followed by demanding work hours, and time away from her family and other social obligations?

Perhaps that is why so many of you female doctors choose to marry within your own professions. 😊

How do we prepare the men to not feel threatened by a

growing generation of women, seeking leadership roles, and thriving in them? I believe you are too strong to be threatened.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The truth behind this matter, is that the health sector, like the majority of other sectors, needs to rid itself of its dominantly male perspectives.

Health institutions and enterprises need to enable, the mainly female technicians to join the ranks of CEOs and leaders. The intimate knowledge that they possess of their fields, stand to transform the sector as a whole.

We can only do this by:

1/ creating and availing opportunities for capacity building and training, especially on leadership, while learning to see beyond our narrow lenses, and focus on what we stand to gain, when we prioritize the needs of our community, as a whole;

2/ creating strong female networks, from which the next generation of female health practitioners, can get the mentorship, and guidance they need, to take their careers to the next level, and by;

3/ promoting platforms, such as this conference, that allows those concerned, to genuinely discuss the common challenges, and collectively come up with solid solutions.

Honourable Guests,

Looking at the list of discussions and sessions, set to take place during these two days - I am confident that we will all walk away with concrete ideas, and implementable recommendations, on how to improve inclusivity in this important sector.

Let us be pragmatic, in our quest to create a more unbiased world; a world that our future generations will fully thrive in, away from inequalities that have, for too long, been holding ***all*** of us back.

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