

**Her Excellency Mrs. Jeannette
Kagame**

Opening Remarks

**Commonwealth Women's Forum
Kigali, 20 June 2022**

Your Excellency Ameenah Gurib Fakim, former President of Mauritius,

Your Excellency Mrs Ann Marie Davies, First Lady of The Bahamas,

Right Honourable Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary General,

Honorable Dignitaries,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning, and warmest welcome to Kigali!

We are pleased that, despite a two-year halt imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2022 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) is holding here in Kigali, Rwanda, under the theme, “Delivering a common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming.

Comprising four forums, today, we launch one of the most anticipated: the 2022 Commonwealth Women’s Forum!

I hope you share my high spirits!

This year's theme, "Delivering a Common Future: Transforming for Gender Equality" affords us the opportunity, to focus on four imperatives, to move the needle for equitable development, namely:

- women in leadership;
- women's economic empowerment;
- gender and climate change; and
- ending violence against women.

As if the challenges of women were not hard enough, the world today, is faced with a multitude of crises, which only serve to further widen the gender gap and deepen the economic divide, from the effects of COVID-19 to the impact of the Russia-Ukraine war, including:

- inflation (the hike in basic food and energy prices);
- disruption of trade; and
- the rising cost of debt, among others.

From the disproportionate impact, of climate change on women and men in the global south, to the predominantly female online bullying, sexual exploitation, and violence across the world, it seems that obstacles to equality have multiplied, mutated and evolved.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the last Commonwealth Women's Forum, held in London in 2018, in its stocktaking, acknowledged that, despite concerted efforts to transform the subordinate position of women and girls in society, and, notwithstanding progress made thus far towards gender equality, the advancement of women and girls was slow.

The Forum, called for greater investment to address gender inequalities, in all areas of social, civic and economic life, including in efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change.

This is a common thread, in almost all global assessments on progress towards achieving gender equality. With less than a decade to go, to achieve the SDGs, the urgency is palpable, particularly on SDG 5.

The Women's Forum is happening at the crossroads of critical economic and social change, where the young woman, particularly in tech and innovation, may just be that gamechanger that is needed, provided that the nurturing environment, resources and support is available.

The statistics on gender inequality, which will be repeated during this Forum may be uncomfortable to hear, but they serve, to highlight the importance of immediate action. After all, there is nothing pleasant about knowing that half of women across the world, have experienced, or know a woman who has experienced, gender-based violence. There is nothing tolerable about the fact, that, as we speak, three-quarters of a billion female children, are married, and this against their will! For as we all know, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, children cannot consent to marriage.

The draft 2020-2030 Declaration on Gender Equality, to be scripted over the next two days, must, mobilize CHOGM and the Women's Forum for decisive action. It must not tiptoe around the Gender Equality emergency, but dare to seek new and bold pathways to women's political, economic, and social empowerment, fully cognizant of the changing world and times where innovation, technology, climate change and geopolitical dynamics, are changing the global development platform.

It must defend, with gusto, the need for heavy investment in political will, advocacy, financial resources, partnerships, capacity and skills to attain the objective of gender equality, and the full empowerment of women and girls by 2030. The term "**global reset**" resonates with me. How can we reset the button on women's leadership, agency, engagement and empowerment?

For one, women's dialogues, must be in the mainstream of key decision-making structures and processes, and aligned with other important development issues, such as those currently ongoing in the other Commonwealth Forums:

- Youth;
- Civic; and
- Business.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the 2022 Kigali CHOGM Women's Forum, does not just occur, in a country that consistently pushes for the emergence and recognition of women in leadership.

It occurs in a country, where rape was used, barely 3 decades ago, as a weapon of war. Today, Rwanda is ranked by the World Economic Forum, as the 7th best performing nation in the world, in closing the Gender Gap.

Allow me, **Esteemed Commonwealth Friends**, to take you, for just a minute, down memory lane. The pathway of Rwanda's post-genocide reconstruction was littered, with the pain of fragmented families and wounded, traumatized women. Our Leaders and Liberators of the time, had to address the crises at hand, while devising a long-term gender-sensitive strategy to healing, that centered around the wellness, prosperity, and empowerment of girls, women and entire families.

Rwanda considers peace and security, a condition *sine qua non*, for the attainment of sustainable development. The role of women and girls must shift, from victims of conflict, to frontline defenders of lasting peace, within and between nations. The role played by women in peacebuilding, has been the cornerstone of Rwanda's development.

We too, can adapt our strategies for accelerated progress, our service provision, our collaboration frameworks, our militancy and advocacy, our education and research, and every tool in the arsenal with which we combat gender inequality, in order to transform, for better, the landscape in which we exist.

Distinguished Guests,

If not already, I trust that this Commonwealth Women's Forum will make you as confident in saying:

- Yes, we WILL ensure that there are more women in Leadership positions.
- Yes, we WILL achieve women's economic empowerment.
- Yes, we WILL do our part, to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change, especially on women and girls.
- Yes, together we CAN, MUST and WILL, end the Violence Against Women and Girls.

Distinguished Guests,

It is my hope that this Women's Forum goes down in memory, as the catalyst, of heartening and deep-lasting transformation, for women and girls in Commonwealth countries and beyond.

Thank you for your kind attention.