

Remarks by First Lady Jeannette Kagame

World Vision's 14th Annual Event

'Strong Women Strong World'

Friday, 30 November 2018

New York, USA

- **Excellency Ambassador Valentine Rugwabiza,
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Rwanda to
the UN,**
- **Excellency Ambassador Fatima Kyari Mohammed,
Permanent Observer of the African Union to the UN,**
- **Distinguished Board Members of World Vision,**
- **President Edgar Sandoval, of World Vision United
States,**
- **World Vision Celebrity Ambassador, Patricia Heaton,**
- **Distinguished Partners,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good afternoon.

I would like to begin by expressing my sincere gratitude to World Vision for the invitation to address this **‘Strong Women Strong World’** event.

Indeed, beyond my pleasure at being your guest today, I want to acknowledge the brains behind this initiative, for their continued commitment to create opportunities, to plead the case for women and girls' empowerment. Every one of these occasions brings us even closer to the full realization of who we really are, and of our potential to shape new realities, and break new ground for the betterment of women and girls around the world. I am genuinely honored to spend this moment with you.

Distinguished Guests,

“She Can”, as stated by World Vision's catch-line for this forum, expresses what I am sure each participant in this room knows, and must have repeated to themselves and to others, countless times over the years.

That women and girls are capable of bringing about significant change to their environment, despite undeniable obstacles that stand in the way of their advancement. That

the impact of this change could be many times as powerful, if such impediments were removed from their paths; and that consequently, they should be considered as mighty agents of change.

We all have at least one story of that one woman or girl, who has sparked off remarkable changes around them, because they had been able to enjoy the many benefits of gender equality and social justice, beginning with equal access to knowledge, and education.

The story of Yvette Ishimwe is telling in that regard. A young Rwandan woman in her early twenties, Yvette studied physics, chemistry and biology in high school at a time when our Government had started to push for girls' increased enrollment in the STEM cohort. While in school, she decided to create a social enterprise called **'Iriba Clean Water Delivery'** to extract water from natural sources such as

lakes, and to treat it using a water purifier system, before supplying it to households at an affordable cost.

A simple yet innovative concept, allowing communities living in water-scarce environments, to access clean, potable water available at arm's length!

Dear Friends,

In Rwanda, like everywhere else, the role of women is changing, and opportunities need to expand, in order to keep pace with the evolving aspirations of all members of our society.

It is an imperative to consider the dual role that women embrace in these modern times. Traditionally, most were expected to focus exclusively on the family sphere, and fulfill their responsibilities as wives, mothers and caregivers.

In today's fast-paced world, women are seen as full participants in both the private and public arena. Their roles have shifted from mothers and caregivers, to an increasing acceptance of their role as leaders, in their own right.

As a result, our interventions should be carefully designed to provide balance to this evolving chapter in the book of women.

Both roles should be seen as complementary and foundational – for the children, the family, and ultimately for society at large. Women should not be made to choose between one option or the other; nor should they be riddled with guilt and shame, at not being able to optimally fulfill either one or the other, or for the tradeoffs they choose to make in life.

We must intensify our resolve to change cultural practices that limit women to specific roles, in a thinly veiled attempt, at keeping them steps below their male counterparts.

For us in Rwanda, this has meant not only entrenching supportive policies and legislation, but also changing cultural beliefs that limit women to specific roles, while overlooking the supportive and nurturing role of men.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Rwanda, '***Kuremera***', or “giving back”, is a mechanism which practically speaking, requires families and neighbors to support the most vulnerable by either gifting food and livestock, or repairing and building their neighbors' houses, depending on the needs of those concerned.

Today, this powerful social equalizer, is practiced at a national scale, as reflected in members of our communities,

progressively climbing from one social classification to a higher one, according to our ***Ubudehe*** system.

The lesson for us all, is that in order to have a real impact in improving lives and livelihoods, philanthropy and empowerment must go hand in hand.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Rwanda as most countries today, operates within a framework of set deliverables based on national and international strategies for sustainable development. One in which a country's vision for its own well-being and future is respected, and partners readily align with it, since no one knows better than the ones most concerned, what is best for them.

In the same idea, I have seen first-hand through the work of my organization, the Imbutu Foundation the impact of

empowerment tools, that have turned youngsters into change-makers, leaders and yes, torchbearers and mentors.

For example, my Foundation offers awards to **Best Performing Girls** in schools and **Scholarships** to well-performing students from families with financial difficulties, to encourage them to aspire to excellence, and open pathways for a better future. This kind of recognition also inspires and motivates other students to work hard, aim high and positively influence the course of not only their lives, but that of their community and country.

Patricie Uwase, whose story you will see in the video shortly, perfectly illustrates Imbuto's philosophy. Once a Best Performing Girl Award recipient, she is now a leader in government who continues to use her position to be a champion for girls.

These examples are the *raison d'être* of Imbuto Foundation.

In Kinyarwanda – the Rwandan language – Imbutu means ***seed.***

The seed symbolizes the people we serve, the girls, women and youth who are learning to be go-getters, and solution-providers that we can all look up to.

Dear Friends,

Our recent history taught us that we had to be deliberate in the actions we took to rebuild our society, in the aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi.

As a nation, we chose *to stay together, to be accountable to one another, and to think big*, for we knew true reconciliation and unity, called upon us all, to assess frankly the causes to our country's past failures, if we were to achieve sustainable, and holistic, development for generations to come. It was therefore only logical that on this path to recovery, we simply

could not create any more division, and purposely chose to empower our men, and women, equally.

The beauty of our work – yours and mine – lies in standing on equal footing with those that we are called to serve and with whom we walk on the road to self-empowerment, while being respectful of their aspirations, and generous with our guidance.

So here, I would like to acknowledge World Vision for coming to Rwanda at a critical time, and for their consistent efforts to provide the necessary tools and opportunities, to those in need, to help them create a better life for themselves.

Although the past 25 years might seem short in the life of a nation, we had to deal with what seemed as insurmountable crises, as demonstrated by the following:

- Over 1 million Tutsi men, women, and children were slaughtered;

- Thousands of families were completely wiped out;
- Hundreds of thousands of women were systematically raped, as part of a deliberate campaign to infect them with HIV/AIDS;
- 50,000 widows and 75,000 inconsolable orphans were left alone;
- 650,000 persons were internally displaced, while 2 million people, used as a shield, were encouraged by the extremist Genocidal regime to flee with them to a neighbouring country.

For years now, you have complemented government efforts and partnered with vulnerable families in Rwanda, supporting many essential programs, ranging from child protection, education and food security, to health, nutrition and water sanitation – all of which are critical in uprooting inequality and poverty.

In closing, allow me to reiterate that we need more allies for this noble cause, if we are to remove the last-standing,

structural barriers to progress, and the mindsets that still undermine the ability of our women and girls, to awaken to the full potential and power that lies within them.

I have the pleasure to invite you now, to hear directly from Rwandan women, in the video that will play shortly.

Thank you for your kind attention.