

00:04

I was the first woman president of an African nation. And I do believe more countries ought to try that.

00:21

(Laughter)

00:22

(Applause and cheers)

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Once the glass ceiling has been broken, it can never be put back together -- however one would try to do that. When I assumed the presidency of Liberia in January 2006, we faced the tremendous challenges of a post-conflict nation: collapsed economy, destroyed infrastructure, dysfunctional institutions, enormous debt, bloated civil service. We also faced the challenges of those left behind. The primary victims of all civil wars: women and children.

01:42

On my first day in office, I was excited ... and I was exhausted. It had been a very long climb to where I was. Women had been those who suffered most in our civil conflict, and women had been the ones to resolve it. Our history records many women of strength and action. A President of the United Nations General Assembly, a renowned circuit court judge, a president of the University of Liberia. I knew that I had to form a very strong team with the capacity to address the challenges of our nation.

03:08

And I wanted to put women in all top positions. But I knew that was not possible. And so I settled for putting them in strategic positions. I recruited a very able economist from the World Bank to be our minister of finance, to lead our debt-relief effort. Another to be the minister of foreign affairs, to reactivate our bilateral and multilateral relationships. The first woman chief of police to address the fears of our women, who had suffered so much during the civil war. Another to be the minister of gender, to be able to ensure the protection and the participation of women. Over time, the minister of justice, the minister of public works, the minister of agriculture, the minister of commerce and industry.

04:35

Participation in leadership was unprecedented in my administration. And although I knew that there were not enough women with the experience to form an all-women cabinet -- as I wanted -- I settled to appoint numerous women in junior ministerial positions, as executives, as administrators, in local government, in diplomatic service, in the judiciary, in public institutions. It worked.

05:30

At the end of 2012, our economic growth had peaked at nine percent. Our infrastructure was being reconstructed at a very fast pace. Our institutions were functioning again. Our debt of 4.9 billion had been largely canceled. We had good relationships with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the African Development Bank. We also had good working relationships with all our sister African countries and many nations all over the world.

06:30

Our women could sleep peacefully at night again, without fear. Our children were smiling again, as I promised them during my first inaugural address. The reputation and credibility of our nation, lost in the many years of conflict, were restored.

07:06

But progress is never guaranteed. And in our legislature, in my first term, women were 14 percent. In the second term, it declined to eight percent, because the environment was increasingly toxic. I had my fair shares of criticism and toxicity. Nobody is perfect. But there's nothing more predictable than a strong woman who wants to change things, who's brave to speak out, who's bold in action.

08:01

But I'm OK with the criticism. I know why I made the decisions I made, and I'm happy with the results. But that's why more women leaders are needed. For there will always be those who will tear us down, who will tear us apart, because they want the status quo to remain.

08:34

Although sub-Saharan Africa has had major breakthroughs in women's leadership and participation, particularly in the legislature -- in parliament, as it's called -- so many women, 50

percent and over, one of our nations, well over 60 percent, the best in the world -- but we know that's not enough. While we must be very thankful and applaud the progress we have made, we know that there is much more work to be done. The work will have to address the lingering vestiges of structural ... something against women.

09:39

In too many places, political parties are based on patronage, patriarchy, misogyny that try to keep women from their rightful places, that shut them out from taking leadership positions. Too often, women face -- while the best performers, while equal or better in competence -- unequal pay. And so we must continue to work to change things. We must be able to change the stereotyping. We must be able to ensure that those structural barriers that have kept women from being able to have the equity they rightfully deserve.

10:59

And we must also work with men. Because increasingly, there is recognition that full gender equity will ensure a stronger economy, a more developed nation, a more peaceful nation. And that is why we must continue to work. And that is why we're partners.

11:43

I will be launching a Center for Women and Development that will bring together --

11:52

(Applause)

11:59

women who have started and are committed to their joining of leadership. With women who have excelled and advanced in leadership together. Over a 10-year period, we strongly believe that we will create this wave of women who are prepared to take, unabashedly, intentional leadership and influence throughout society.

12:58

This is why --

13:01

(Laughs)

13:03

at 81, I cannot retire.

13:06

(Applause and laughter)

13:08

(Applause and cheers)

13:15

Women are working for change in Africa. Women are working for change throughout the world.  
I will be with them, and one of them, forever.

13:42

(Applause)

13:48

Thank you for listening. Go out and change the world.

13:55

(Applause and cheers)