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**INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2020**

**Gender Equality and Sustainable Development: Nurturing a  
Win-Win Synergy for National Growth & Productivity**

**By**

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(Delivered on Monday March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020 during the International Women's Day  
Celebration organized by the Women Study and Development Centre, AAUA).

## **Preamble**

I would like to start this presentation by thanking the Acting Director of the Women Studies and Development Centre (WSDC) of this great institution, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko (AAUA), Ondo State, Nigeria, Dr Mrs. Kikelomo Olugbemi, and the entire women of AAUA, for inviting me to attend this very important global event, and for the privilege to deliver this year's speech to mark the International Women's Day, an event celebrated annually across the globe.

## **Introduction**

March 8 was proclaimed the International Women's Day by the United Nations (UN). The first time it was celebrated at the UN level was in 1975. Its aim is to emphasize the importance and significance of women to achieving peace, equality, and societal development. On International Women's Day like this, we remind ourselves on the need to create an enabling environment for our women to gain full and equal participation in national and global development. This year's celebration is special because we are looking at a very important tool that can help us as a nation and society to achieve sustainable development, i.e. GENDER EQUALITY.

Talking about GENDER EQUALITY, it has been discovered that many people have a misconception about this concept. Permit me to make some clarifications here. By GENDER EQUALITY, we do not mean women should be made more powerful than men or one gender is superior to the other. Rather, we mean creation of equal platform, equal playing field and equal opportunities for both genders to thrive. In other words, gender equality is "the state in which access to rights or opportunities is unaffected by gender" (Oxford Dictionary). GENDER EQUALITY does not mean that men and women become the same; only that access to resources and opportunities is neither dependent on, nor constrained by, their sex (UNFPA, 2005).

The opposite word to GENDER EQUALITY is GENDER INEQUALITY and where this is the situation, we often see one gender being excluded or disadvantaged when it comes to access to resources and opportunities. In many countries of the world, including Nigeria, it is generally the female gender, i.e. women, who are excluded, marginalised, and disadvantaged in relation to access to economic opportunities and

decision making. I believe many of you will agree with me that to ensure gender equality, fairness and equity in our society today, strategies and programmes must be introduced to compensate for women's historical and social disadvantages in this country that prevent women and men from operating on a level playing field.

Talking about the role Gender Equality will play in achieving sustainable development is like talking about the role or importance of air and water to human survival and sustainability. I am sure you all know that human being needs air and water to survive on daily basis. Likewise, we need to always look at issues from the lenses of GENDER EQUALITY to arrive at the destination called SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT that we all clamour for. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Agenda 2030, is a global agenda for development containing 17 goals with 169 targets covering a broad range of sustainable development issues around the globe (Olaniran, 2018a). On 2nd of Aug 2015, 193 countries, including Nigeria, agreed to the following 17 goals:



**Source: UNDP (2020).**

### **The 17 Sustainable Development Goals**

1. NO POVERTY (End poverty in all its forms everywhere)
2. ZERO HUNGER (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture)

3. GOOD HEALTH AND WELLBEING (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages)
4. QUALITY EDUCATION (Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all)
5. GENDER EQUALITY (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls)
6. CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all)
7. AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY (Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all)
8. DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH (Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all)
9. INDUSTRY, INNOVATION, AND INFRASTRUCTURE (Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation)
10. REDUCED INEQUALITY (Reduce inequality within and among countries)
11. SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES (Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable)
12. RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTIONS (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns)
13. CLIMATE ACTION (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts)
14. LIFE BELOW WATER (Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development)
15. LIFE ON LAND (Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss)
16. PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels)
17. PARTNERSHIP FOR THE GOALS (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development).

Permit me to quickly highlight the role of GENDER EQUALITY in achieving each and all these goals. I am strongly convinced that GENDER EQUALITY is a vital tool we cannot afford to ignore in meeting the sustainable development by any nation or society. It is, therefore, important to highlight clearly how promoting GENDER EQUALITY can help in the actualization of these 17 goals by the year 2030 which is the deadline set by the UN for this agenda.

## **GOAL 1 & 2: End poverty, hunger; achieve food security, improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.**

Seventy percent (70%) of the world's poorest people are women (Hyde, 2016). Empowering women is a key first step to overcoming the obstacles that lock individuals into a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. If we are serious about closing poverty gap, we must work towards closing the gender gap in educational opportunities, access to employment, and appointment to political offices and key positions in industries. Furthermore, provision of basic and functional literacy skills to women will boost their capacities and skills for economic prosperity. Do you know that the literacy level of a mother can affect the survival level of her child? In developing countries, according to the World Literacy Foundation (2012), a child born to a literate mother is 50 percent more likely to survive past the age of five. A literate mother will not only observe good hygienic practices, but also engage in productive economic activities that will raise her family's standard of living. If we are really serious about ending poverty and hunger, and achieve food security, we must take women empowerment seriously.

## **GOAL 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.**

A healthy mother is an asset to the family. Unfortunately, many of our women in rural communities do not have access to basic literacy and education that can improve their state of health and well-being. This results in poor household and personal health, hygiene, and nutrition. According to the World Literacy Foundation (2012), non-literate people, particularly mothers, are more likely to adopt poor nutritional and hygiene practices in their homes. This leads to a higher rate of disease, accidents, and other health issues, which in turn raises demand for medical services and causes job absenteeism (due to illness on the part of either the partner or the children). To ensure healthy lives for all women, we must eliminate all forms of health illiteracy in them. Health illiteracy is the inability to understand basic healthcare facts, causing an inability to make good health decisions. I call on the government and other stakeholders in the health sector to introduce special health intervention for rural women as a way of helping them to achieve healthy and improved lifestyle.

#### **GOAL 4: Inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all**

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with abundant human and material resources but plagued with high rate of illiteracy. About 11 million children are reported to be out-of-school in the country, majority of them are girls, while thousands of non-literate women mostly found in the rural communities are doing petty trading and other agricultural businesses without reading, writing and arithmetic skills (Olaniran, 2018b). Gender gaps in education in Nigeria are too obvious. Although there has been a significant increase in enrolment rates for girls at the primary and high school levels, the percentage of out-of-school girls in the country is still high and this is evident in the number of teenage girls on our streets hawking all manners of commodities to make ends meet. Literate and educated girls with equal access to opportunities will surely grow into strong, smart women who can take up leadership roles in the society. Inclusive and equitable quality education for all can only be possible if government and other stakeholders give adequate attention to the funding and promotion of women education and training in all spheres of human endeavour. I, therefore, propose the establishment of special funding scheme to take care of less privileged and disadvantaged girls and women in education.

#### **GOAL 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls**

Gender issues are increasingly recognised as important in the development process. A free and just society is the one that gives equal chances to male and female in terms of access to employment, promotion, and other social and economic opportunities. Equality is only possible when there is increased awareness, a transformation in attitudes, and a removal of unequal practices that are deeply rooted in the society. An increase in gender awareness means gender sensitization, and the recognition of a need to incorporate women into the development process as active participants. Gender awareness contributes to changes in the attitudes and behaviours of individuals, and of groups. The debate about GENDER EQUALITY is so important that we cannot afford not to talk about it unless we want to deceive ourselves. This is the reason why the United Nations devotes the whole of Goal 5 to

the campaign and advocacy for GENDER EQUALITY so that each nation of the world can realise its importance and close every gap that leads to inequality in the society.

**GOAL 6 & 7: Availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation; access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy for all**

There is need for government to place women at the front of campaign for availability and sustainable use of water. The reason is simple, men are always away from home while women are the ones using and managing water day-to-day. Women are often responsible for fetching water and using it for domestic purposes such as cooking and washing, therefore, neglecting them when it comes to availability and management of water does not make sense. A growing body of evidence shows that water provisions and management can become more effective when women participate in the key decisions that lead to water management. Also, there is need for governments of developing nations and other stakeholders in environmental sectors to create awareness among women, especially on issues related to water and sanitation such as water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse, and environmental sanitation, among others. This awareness should be targeted majorly to the people living in rural areas, especially those in the riverine areas where fish farming is rampant, by letting them understand the more affordable ways of improving water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing the release of hazardous chemicals and materials into their waters. This can be done easily through effective community education programme designed and discharged in indigenous languages of the target communities.

**GOAL 8 & 9: Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment for all; resilient infrastructure, inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.**

One of the greatest social problems in Nigeria today is large scale youth unemployment despite being a potentially wealthy nation with abundant human and material resources. A good percentage of graduates of tertiary institutions in Nigeria are unemployed. This is traceable not so much to population but to the type of education students receive in schools as the nature of education which is operated from the post-colonial Nigeria has been placing certificate acquisition over skills acquisition. Students generally receive little or no training in skills useful for



employment in the country's labour market. They are generally educated in theoretical areas of arts and sometimes in the sciences which gave rise to what has been described as "white – collar job syndrome". Investing in women's economic empowerment programme sets a direct path towards ensuring sustainable economic growth in any society. Women make enormous contributions to economies whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees. According to the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), improvements in GENDER EQUALITY would generate up to 10.5 million additional jobs by the year 2050. You can imagine having additional 10.5 million unemployed youths fixed for employment in Nigeria, which can become a reality when women are adequately empowered.

**GOAL 10, 11 & 12: Reduce inequality; make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe and sustainable; sustainable consumption & production.**

The gap between the rich and the poor has widened in both developing and developed nations of the world. The global economic meltdown has caused serious pain to individuals and threatens to widen significantly further the gap between haves and have-not in our society. Education policies focusing on GENDER EQUALITY and equity in education may be a particularly useful way for nations to increase earnings mobility between generations and reduce income inequality over time. This is possible by giving equal educational opportunities to both male and female, and to both disadvantaged and advantaged students, laying a pathway for them to continue to higher levels of education and eventually secure good jobs. An educated woman will not only guarantee sustainable cities and communities, but also a sustainable future. Education at both formal and non-formal levels, therefore, is the best tool to reduce inequality and make our cities and human settlements safe and sustainable.

**GOAL 13, 14 & 15: Combat climate change and its impact; conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.**

The changes in climatic condition poses threat to every human being. While women play an immense role in agriculture and natural resource management in Africa, they have greater financial and resource constraints, and lower access to information about climate change management. Because of this constraint, women

face unique challenges when it comes to adapting to climate change. A changing climate can lead to scarce natural resources such as water and vegetables, therefore leading to a severe impact on the family nutrition. Meanwhile, putting women at the fore front of climate change action is a necessity for every government and society to ensure sustainability of water, oceans and marine resources.

**GOAL 16: Peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, access to justice for all; build effective, accountable and institutions.**

Ensuring a peaceful and inclusive society requires the participation of women. Achieving a peaceful and inclusive society will remain a mirage if we keep widening the gender gap, or neglect the role of women in achieving peaceful and harmonious society. Women, being the mothers and grandmothers, are the caregivers and first teachers of children. They can play a vital role in educating young people to value peace and not conflict. The role of a woman in society places her in a unique position to be a maker and builder of peace. I, therefore, call on everyone seated here to stand against all forms of gender victimisation and violence such as rape, trafficking of women as sex slaves, and the pandemic child marriage practices. These and many more contribute significantly to the violence in our society today. We must all rise and kill these menaces.

**GOAL 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development**

To strengthen the means of implementing these goals and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development, we must all stand for GENDER EQUALITY in our homes, offices and societies. We must not keep quiet in the face of GENDER INJUSTICES AND INEQUALITIES. We must all become advocates for greater female representation in politics, economy, religious cycles, and institutions of higher learning like ours. We must strive to give our daughters quality education that can make them stand tall in whatever society they chose to stand.

## **Conclusion**

As I conclude, I use this presentation as a call to action towards encouraging the government and all stakeholders to stand for GENDER EQUALITY in all their actions and decisions. Permit me, distinguished audience, to use this occasion to make some requests:

I call upon the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Ondo State Government to join the leagues of nations such as Russia, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan by pronouncing March 8<sup>th</sup> of every year a public holiday as a way of recognising the immense roles of women in nation building and sustainable development.

I call on the Federal Government of Nigeria and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to declare 2023 a year of Women in Politics by encouraging all Political Parties to present only female candidates for Presidential, and perhaps Governorship Elections.

I call on the distinguished and highly esteemed council of AAUA to encourage women candidacy to the office of the Vice Chancellor of this great citadel of Learning.

I believe our campaign for GENDER EQUALITY will make more sense if we deliberately make these decisions in order to allow for more women representation

I imagine a society where all people have equal rights and opportunities.

I imagine a society where women and girls are not afraid of walking home late at night, and men and boys are not trapped in oppressive masculinities.

I imagine a society where men and women get paid equally for work of equal value and share the care work at home.

I imagine a society where gender equality is maintained in political leadership and corporate boardrooms and factory floors.

I imagine a society where women have equal say in decisions that affect their lives, their policies, and their environment, from villages to cities.

Such a society is possible, and it would come to pass in our lifetime.

Thank you all for listening!

### **“In a Gender Equal World, Everybody Wins”**

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