

Remarks by *First Lady Jeannette Kagame*

at the

**Motsepe Foundation's Department of Gender Equality,
Wellness and Leadership (GEWAL) Summit**

in celebration of

International Women's Day

Theme: **Harnessing the Role of Women in the Pandemic
Recovery**

08 March 2021

Zoom Virtual Event

My Dear Sister, Dr. Precious-Moloi Motsepe,

Honourable Minister, Maite Nkoana-Mashabane,

Esteemed Speakers and Panelists,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning !

It is a great pleasure to join you here today – a day reserved for not only celebrating women, but also reflecting on the challenges we face, and exchanging ideas on how to sustainably improve our lives.

Allow me to begin by thanking the Motsepe Foundation, for this timely opportunity to discuss, with great minds such as those gathered here, the possibilities of **Harnessing the Role of Women in the Pandemic Recovery**.

Dr. Motsepe, your efforts to promote the quality of life for all in your country, governed by the African philosophy of '*Ubuntu*', resonates more powerfully than ever.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it unprecedented challenges. Its initial consequences have had a ripple effect on all socio-economic sectors, and has threatened to bring nations and communities at a standstill.

Women and girls, unsurprisingly, have been affected the most. They are more at risk of infection given their roles as caregivers, not only within their families, but also as frontline healthcare workers.

Furthermore, challenges faced by various sectors, most especially in education, have had a different impact on women than their male counterparts. Women in general, in comparison to men, are economically strained, as many have had to limit their work and economic opportunities, to respond to increased household responsibilities.

My country has also learned that, out of tragedy and necessity, Rwandan women have demonstrated unimaginable resilience. Post-genocide data recorded that women and girls made up 80 percent of Rwanda's surviving population. They bravely stepped in to fill the leadership void. And aided by women's civil society groups, lawmakers have introduced some of the most women-friendly policies in the world.

I am proud to report that since 2003, Rwanda has consistently had the highest female representation, proportionally, of parliamentarians in the world—currently 61.3 percent in the lower house. And 53.3 percent of seats in the Cabinet are occupied by women.

Rwanda's values and expectations for women have changed in a generation, as more of them have entered the government's ranks. Their impact has been inspirational, in addition to shaping laws and policies. Today, seeing women in parliament, has given women and girls, confidence and pride, as we also acknowledge that behind such accomplished women, there are open-minded and selfless men, free of traditional norms, that too often, limit women from flourishing.

Esteemed audience,

Allow me to highlight here, an interesting fact about gender equality in Rwanda, as women did not have to fight for their rights in the streets. Rather, these rights were achieved through a conducive environment and legislative action, thanks to the vision of our leadership, as expressed by President Kagame, "We cannot claim to be on a sustainable path to transform Rwanda, if we exclude women who are more than half of the population."

However, despite these significant achievements, changing conservative mindsets is not something that happens overnight. Gender relations within families, do not always change at the same pace, as government policies. No matter how vast the power of a woman is in public, it can still stop at her front door.

We must therefore, ask ourselves what should be the next steps towards gender evolution, in our private spheres.

How must we engage men and boys, in instilling gender-equality principles from a young age?

How must parents, teachers, and community leaders, tackle gender norms standing in the way of real change, within our families and society, at large?

Indeed, what connecting dots will help us see these frameworks, policies, laws, and enforcement mechanisms, effectively transform our homes, to totally free ourselves of all imbalances?

Distinguished Guests,

Like the rest of the world, Rwanda has not been spared by the COVID-19 pandemic. From lessons learned during the Ebola crisis, the country quickly set up a national crisis committee of key ministries, when the first cases were reported in March 2020.

One year later, all systems were ready to dispatch 340,000 doses from a biomedical warehouse in Kigali, to district hospitals, and onward to hundreds of health centres across Rwanda. This vaccine shipment should protect about 171,500 frontline personnel, as well as other priority citizens, such as those over 65, or with underlying health conditions.

One year into the COVID-19 crisis, we take a moment to point to, both the disproportionate burdens that women and girls carry, and the centrality of their contributions.

For this, mitigation measures would need to include a comprehensive, and culturally sensitive approach, that integrates challenges of employment, childcare, and education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude, it is my deepest wish that we truly embrace the spirit of ‘Ubuntu’ — that our dear host Dr. Motsepe passionately promotes — and walk away today with a renewed commitment, ideas and deeper connections geared towards protecting the most vulnerable, and precious among us.

The late Nelson Mandela once said, “It is a unique woman who can turn the whole world around, and make it the best living place to experience.”

I encourage you, my fellow sisters and dear daughters, to embody his belief - because we, as leaders, sisters and mothers, must continue working hard, especially during this pandemic.

As the past year highlighted the gender inequities around us, together we must continue challenging the status quo. To the sons, brothers and husbands, we count on you to adhere to the “HEforSHE” principles, and walk the journey with us to level the playing field, and effectively build the road to recovery.

Together, let us not lose the lessons of the pandemic, but rather, ensure that women and girls harness their true powers in their homes, their countries, and the world at large.

I thank you for your kind attention, and wish us all a Happy International Women’s Day!