

**Her Excellency Mrs. Jeannette Kagame's  
Remarks  
at  
The International Council of Nurses  
Conference  
May 6, 2011 Malta**

- **Rosemary Bryant, President of the International Council of Nurses,**
- **David Benton, CEO of the International Council of Nurses,**
- **Paul Pace, President of the Maltese Union of Nurses and Midwives, our host association,**
- **Members of the National Nurses Associations,**
- **Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning,

Which better excuse is there than honouring an invite to be among nurses, on this beautiful island of Malta? I feel safe and protected already as I stand here to pay tribute to the 13 million nurses all over the world, for the endless sacrifices and the impact they continue to make in healthcare.

Thank you, Ms Bryant, for inviting me to address this session on **‘The Role of Women – Building Nations and Educating Girls’**. When I received the invitation, I was humbled to have the opportunity to share experiences with members of such a noble profession. There is a special place in my heart for nurses and I believe that in another life, I would probably have been one, but I guess I am not as brave as you are.

Nursing truly is a calling; it is about restoring dignity and normalizing the lives of people whose everyday realities have been changed, sometimes forever, by their condition. Although nurses are often short on sleep, time and energy, they are rarely short on caring. With that

much care, attention and reassurance half the battle toward recovery is won.

Speaking of battles, I always see a lot of similarities in the type of call of a care provider and that of men in uniform. They are often the unsung heroes. During the Rwandan liberation struggle, nurses played an immense role in attending to wounded soldiers, much like Florence Nightingale – the Mediterranean Angel - did during her time. With insufficient trained medical personnel and supplies, nurses worked tirelessly to preserve and protect the lives of soldiers and others in the harsh battlefield environment. Whether on the battlefield or in the hospital, nurses are heroes.

As front-line service providers and key members of the health care system, the demands and expectations on nurses are enormous; the council was wise to select professional practise, regulation and socio-economic welfare as its pillars.

The Rwanda Nurses and Midwives Association is proud to join this council, and looks forward to contributing and learning from you. The association is only 16 years old but has come a long way, as has the nursing profession in general. Some of the key achievements that the Association and Council of Nurses and Midwives have registered, include advocating for the establishment of more specialized institutes, and creating a career development path for professional nurses and midwives through training and e-learning programs.

As you are aware, the majority of nurses are women and Rwanda is no exception. I know you are keen on hearing more about the role of women in nation building, particularly in Rwanda. Indeed, the theme for this

session resonates deeply with me and my fellow Rwandans, because it has been a guiding principle in the development of our country.

For you to appreciate how far we have come, you must understand the magnitude of the situation we inherited as a country. In 1994 the genocide was committed in Rwanda:

- 1,000,000 people were killed,
- 1/2 a million children were left orphaned,
- 36% of households were led by widows,
- 28,000 households headed by children,
- 3.6 million hostages were taken to neighbouring countries,
- It left a highly traumatized society,
- A social and cultural fabric that was completely destroyed

But today the country is stable, secure and on the right path to recovery and progress. Women have been instrumental in this process of nation-building and this is reflected in our policies that are aimed towards building a nation of skilled, dignified and empowered Rwandans. As you have seen in the video, the national constitution provides for at least 30% of women in decision making organs. We have surpassed this minimum and now at 56%, we have the highest representation of women in Parliament in the world.

In Rwanda, we have understood that a nation can flourish only if women participate on an equal footing. As President Kagame said *'Participation of women is not a debate, the discussion is on how best we can do it'*.

It has also been important for us in Rwanda to approach nation-building in a holistic manner, given the challenging environment of a country that is rebuilding its physical and economic infrastructure. This means that every woman and man must be fully engaged in the socio-economic transformation agenda, of which health and education are key pillars.

In health, we have chosen to promote access to disadvantaged populations, through a Community Based Health Insurance scheme, known as 'Mutuelles de Sante'. This has considerably reduced financial barriers and as a result, health insurance coverage has increased from 3% in 2002 to 92% in 2010. Communities identify their most disadvantaged members, who cannot afford to pay and the government pays the premium as well as treatment costs. Increased access to health care is a means to reduce the number of maternal deaths.

The Government has also set up a daily assessment called the Maternal Death Audit, which puts a face and a name behind each statistic. The audit provides information on the circumstances of each death, and identifies preventive measures at all places where these tragedies can occur such as hospitals, health centers and communities. From 8 maternal deaths a day, we now have 1 death every 36 hours. This is still unacceptable; giving life shouldn't result in a life threat, it has to change in order to attain MDG 4 and 5 on maternal and child health.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

At the very heart of every intervention lies the participation of the community. In every village in Rwanda, three community health workers are elected by the village and are responsible for watching over the communities' health. One of the three community health workers is a

maternal assistant, whose role is to look after pregnant women and infants and advise on a range of maternal and child health issues.

Last year, new technologies based on mobile phones were initiated country wide to help with community health management. For example, Rapid SMS is used by community health workers to alert health facilities in case someone in the village needs urgent medical attention.

As you are all aware, our continent went through quite a challenging phase with the outbreak of the AIDS pandemic. We can now say, with a sigh of relief, that the universal access to life prolonging treatment means that HIV/AIDS in Rwanda is manageable. In less than a decade, we have succeeded in reducing and maintaining prevalence rates from 13% to 3%. Part of the reason for this relative success is a national Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission of HIV/AIDS (PMTCT) combined with community mobilization to increase HIV testing, and creating awareness in youth.

The increased access to prenatal consultation has been used as an entry point, to the PMTCT program, subsequently benefiting pregnant women and the other members of the family such as the spouse and children. Incidentally, on 12<sup>th</sup> May which is Nurses' Day, Rwanda is launching a new campaign to eliminate the transmission of HIV from mother to child, as a final push to achieve Millennium Development Goal 6 to Combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

We know that health and education are intrinsically tied together; we understand that the more educated a woman is, the healthier the family will be.

An important component of the upbringing of our girls includes teaching them how to protect and take care of themselves. Just two weeks ago, Rwanda launched the first ever comprehensive cervical cancer vaccine and testing program. The vaccine targets adolescent girls between 11 and 15 years of age, who are not yet sexually active; and screening will be provided to women aged between 35 and 45 years.

As we speak, the first doses of the national vaccination have been completed for 100,000 girls all over the country through schools and community outreach. As part of the vaccination program, children receive essential information on life skills, family planning, HIV prevention, and gender equality.

The Imbuto Foundation, which I founded, works to empower youth who we envision as Mountain Movers and Agents of Change. We are involved in pioneering efforts to promote girls education and women's and economic empowerment. There is no doubt in our minds that educating girls and women is the best way to contribute sustainably to nation-building.

Guaranteed access to basic education has resulted in impressive enrolment rates for both boys and girls. Net primary enrolment currently stands at 95%. However, girls face additional barriers that affect how well they do in school. This is why Imbuto Foundation is committed to promoting girls' academic performance with a deliberate focus on encouraging women to take up science and technology.

Every year, the Foundation rewards school girls with the highest examination marks as a way to encourage them and their peers to excel consistently and raise awareness in the communities; we also recognize

outstanding young women achievers and have created interactive platforms for mentoring and building confidence. As you can tell, we do our best to take care of the ladies.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I conclude, I would like to commend the International Council of Nurses for the Girl Child Education Fund (GCEF), which supports school-aged orphaned daughters of nurses in developing countries, in partnership with the Florence Nightingale International Foundation. It is heart-warming to see that your compassion extends beyond the confines of the health facilities you work in. This *guardian angel* spirit is what makes a difference in all our lives.

Imagine - if you can - a world without nurses. It is like a body without a heart. Nurses are the heartbeat of healthcare. This is why we must support the nursing profession, strengthen it and commit ourselves to ensuring that our communities are in safe hands. Above and beyond your skills and knowledge, it is your dedication; patience and selflessness that touch the lives of the many people you meet. As someone once fittingly said, “*A nurse will always give us hope, an angel with a stethoscope.*”

Allow me to end by thanking the International Council of Nurses once again for this invitation and the Maltese Union of Nurses and Midwives for hosting us.

Thank you for your kind attention and I wish you all Happy Nurses Day in a few days to come.

