

Opening Remarks of the Chair
at the Gender Empowerment Workshop
held on
Monday, March 26, 2007 at the
British Council, Tower Hill
by
Dr. Mrs. Nemata Eshun-Baiden
Founder and First President of the 50/50 Group of Sierra Leone

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I want to add my voice to the Hon Ministers - Mrs. Abator Thomas' in welcoming you all to this opening ceremony *of the workshop based on the theme: "Women belong in the cabinet or boardroom just as much as in the kitchen".*

Recently, I was in the office of a highly successful Sierra Leonean woman and what she had on her desk gave me real food for thought. Listen to this: "A woman's place is in command."

Of course, we are not asking to be in command, at least, not yet. All we are asking for is to be allowed to work side by side with the men of this country in order to make it a better place for us and for our children.

Your Excellency, President Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan-Kabbah, thank you for again demonstrating that you are a man of quality by joining forces with us today in our quest for equality.

At the back of your invitation you will see that we are quite aware of the challenges that lie ahead of us: "Whatever women do they must do twice as well as men to be thought half as good. Luckily, this is not difficult."

Welcome Lesley! In 2000, you told us that when you were not successful in the 1979 elections into parliament in Britain, you used what then seemed like a defeat, as a springboard for helping women who wanted to do the same. Since then you have been traveling all over the world organizing and facilitating workshops like this one. The last time we spoke, you were in Tunisia in North Africa and then in Iraq and Senegal, Afghanistan, Aceh, Indonesia, Kosovo, - believe me , I have lost count.

As the honourable Minister pointed out, it was you Lesley who started us off. Thank you. I am sure you are not only here to share with us more of what you have experience of, but also to see what strides we have made since you were last here in November 2000. Well Lesley, the story so far is:

- that this government looks like no other government before it in terms of recognition of women. We have more women MPs, cabinet ministers and women holding prominent positions that were previously male preserves. The Local government Act of 2004 provides a statutory 50/50 gender balance affirmative policy for ward committees but sadly not yet for parliament,
- Also, we have no quotas
- We have increased our female MPs from 6 to 19 which is better than what you achieved in Britain in 1997 but we are still not satisfied because there are 124 MPs and we would like to have 62 female MPs.
- We also now have 3 full cabinet ministers out of a cabinet of 24. We are still not satisfied because we would rather have 12 full cabinet ministers.
- We also have 3 deputy ministers out of 21 but we are still not satisfied as we would rather have 11 female deputy ministers
- There is no mandate that those political parties who do not make 30% of their candidates women must not be allowed to take part in the elections as was done successfully in neighboring Liberia.

Even as we admire them and hope to emulate them, we cannot help but be envious of our neighbour -Liberia who now has a woman as President. Then there are countries like Mozambique (30%), Rwanda (48.8%), Afghanistan and Iraq (32.8%) and SA who have all achieved over 30% representation of women in their legislatures. Lesley Abdela, you have experienced it all and we sincerely hope that by the end of your second day here, you would have shown us tricks that will get us not 30% but the 50% representation that God decreed for us.

Let me end by leaving you with 8 reasons why you should support us women. Thanks to Nick Demeter of NDI who emailed it to me on International Women's Day.

1. Women's political participation makes democracy more inclusive as they make up over 50% of the population in most countries and we don't want over half of the population uninvolved in shaping their future!

2. Women bring with them a different perspective

3. More women in politics means better policies for women and children... and everyone else, too!

4. Electing women decreases corruption in government as women tend to be more honest and less corrupt than their male counterparts

5. Empowering women benefits societies as women are consumers, breadwinners, mothers, teachers and social service providers, among other things and so have long-lasting, dramatic effects on their families. Educated women, for example, are significantly more likely to make sure that their children go to school, receive proper health care and nutrition, and grow up in financially stable homes. .

6. Women help build peaceful and stable societies

7. Women work better for their people in their constituencies

8. Women are a valuable, relatively untapped resource! Thousands of women in Sierra Leone stand ready to use their professional expertise in public life;

"Madeleine K. Albright, Chairman, NDI

The 50/50 Group is incapable of doing all that it wants to do on its own. We are grateful to our current partners like the OXFAM, WFD, NDI, ENCISS etc.

Today, we are collaborating with the British Council for this workshop. As the honourable Minister pointed out, the British Council has given their unstinting support to the Group from day one. We can never thank them enough for their interest, their continued interest. I was worried when Rajiv left but his successor Tom has been marvellous!! By the way, I found out that like Rajiv, Tom has a genuine interest in the issues perhaps because he grew up in a very male dominated Ireland and not only has 2 dynamic sisters but also wants his 2 daughters get a 'fair go' in life. Tom is also trying to create a better world for his 2 daughters!! That we have an international facilitator in our midst is due entirely to him. Ladies and Gentlemen I think we should give the British Council a big hand as I invite the Director, Mr. Tom Walsh to give his opening remarks.

