

New African Woman of the Year 2016

The New African Woman Forum, which was held last week in London, drew some of the most influential women on the continent, with its theme, 'Changing the game and changing the future'. At the end of the forum, the panellists concluded with the message, "Women's empowerment is a human rights issue and makes good business sense."



Ghana's Foreign Affairs Minister Hannah Tetteh emphasises a point during the session discussing how African women are "Changing the game and changing the future". Other Panelists from left to right are: Mareme Mbaye Ndiaye - MD Ecobank Rwanda; Bineta Diop - Africa Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security; and Razia Khan - Chief Economist, Africa at Standard Chartered Bank

Among the attendees were Malawi's former president, Joyce Banda; Ghana's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hannah Tetteh; Special Representative of the President of DR Congo on Sexual Violence and Child Recruitment, Jeanine Mabunda Lioko; and Oby Ezekwesili, former Nigerian Minister, VP of the World Bank's Africa division and co-founder of the missing Chibok Girls campaign #bringbackourgirls.

Other panellists included Mareme Mbaye Ndiaye - md Ecobank Rwanda; Bineta Diop - Africa Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security; Razia Khan - chief economist, Africa at Standard Chartered Bank and SABMiller Europe md, Sue Clark

Banda said, "There is an obligation for women's participation to be part of the continent's strategy, with traditional belief systems preventing women from serving as active citizens and leaders. We need to strengthen the women's movement. We need to encourage and support fellow women when we get into leadership. We must realise that there is a growing concern globally regarding violence against women in politics. This is the reason why former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, current chair of National Democratic Institute, is spearheading the Campaign to Stop Violence against Women in Politics, launched at the '#NotTheCost' Conference.

A key message coming out of the New African Woman Forum is that gender is an issue that needs to be embraced as much by men as by women; otherwise, the outcome will not change. Tetteh mentioned the key role her father played in her life and mentioned the lead role played by two heads of state – Ghana's late president John Atta Mills and the country's current president John Mahama - in giving her high level ministerial positions, trusting her competencies and making a case for her in a field still dominated by men. Men, therefore, are key actors in furthering women's empowerment.

"We need an Africa where women participate fully in decision-making and shaping the African inclusive growth story," said Geraldine Fraser Moleketi, the 2016 New African Woman of the Year.

Education critical

Education was also a central theme of the discussions. If Africa is to achieve the goals of Agenda 2063, we need a quantum leap in women's economic empowerment and this can only happen by investing in women's and girl's education. Moderator Moky Makura, from the Gates Foundation, said that education is a matter of survival in Africa, as statistics show that children under the age of five are more likely to survive if their mother has a secondary education.

The media can also play a bigger role. Right now men occupy too many senior positions in media and technology. It is imperative to eliminate gender-biased programming and therefore women need to be involved in decision-making in the leading media groups in Africa. Women should also be instrumental in the development and adoption of new technologies in order to optimise fuller participation and impact.

It was acknowledged that women entrepreneurs and employers face significantly greater challenges than men do in gaining access to financial services. However, that is not the only barrier to entrepreneurship. Women need to encourage each other more in the workplace and be supportive of each other. Olajumoke Adenewo, the New African Woman in Business Award winner, spoke about inclusiveness of growth with job creation, saying that this should be targeted at women and youth who are our present and future. "A leader is someone who has a voice and can deploy it. Women need to be told it is possible."

The forum concluded with women game-changers in the audience telling their stories, not only to raise awareness about the work that they are doing to uplift their own communities, but also to inspire future generations to emulate innovative and exciting approaches to making a difference to their societies.

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