

It is Time for Women

By Ibim Semenitari

*It is past time for women to take their rightful place,
side by side with men,
in the rooms where the fates of peoples, where their children's
and grandchildren's fates, are decided.*

- Hillary Clinton

Protocols

Human history is enriched by stories of great women who helped change the course of the world. From the days of Queen Esther to the profoundly wealthy Bilkisu, from Cleopatra to Hildegard of Bingen, who was consulted by kings and popes of her time, and from Queen Elizabeth 1 to Queen Amina of Zaria and Queen Kambasa of Grand Bonny (both of whom were warriors), as well as modern day amazons like Indira Ghandi, Margaret Thatcher, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti and Margaret Ekpo there are worthy examples of how women, surrounded by exacting circumstances, overwhelmed by adversity and bigotry, rose to the pinnacle of human reckoning.

Indeed, throughout history, women have excelled, in spite of the narratives and laws of society; written, spoken and silent, which have conspired to make them weaker than men. In most communities of the world, these have threatened – and, in most parts, succeeded – in confining women to sub roles in politics, the work place, education and the home. In these societies, despite their energy, humanity, intelligence, hard work and moral authority, women still struggle to be acknowledged in equal measure as men. Even in the Niger Delta region, where I come from, women who have increasingly established themselves as bread-winners of their families, still find boundaries and hurdles foisted upon them.

That said, it gives me immense pleasure to welcome you all to this rather auspicious evening. We are gathered here for the Command Performance of the play, Little Drops, by the great Nigerian playwright, Professor Ahmed Yerima, who demonstrates an uncommon sensitivity to women issues. Today, through the medium of play, we gather to commemorate the International Women's Day. The theme for this year's celebration is ***"Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality,"*** which has spawned the campaign: ***"Pledging for Parity"***.

According to the United Nations, this year's commemoration, officially on Tuesday, March 8, "will reflect on how to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, building momentum for the effective implementation of the new sustainable development goals. It will equally focus on new commitments under the UN Women's Step It Up Initiative, and other existing commitments on gender equality, women's empowerment and women's human rights."

This year's celebration is not coming soon enough, importantly, because of this very engaging theme. Since 1792, when Mary Wollstonecraft laid down the first definitive

principles on women empowerment with her stirring tract, **“A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”**, society has struggled to find the moral courage to embrace and entrench gender parity. As a result, the world has faced more challenges than it ought, dithered where her feet ought be surer, because women, proven to be unquestionable and inspiring leaders of history, have not been given equal opportunities and representations.

As Wollstonecraft wrote in that great tract, “Virtue can only flourish among equals.” Nothing can be truer. Even more so, nothing is more certain than her declaration that “The beginning is always today.” Indeed, nothing is more moral and urgent.

It is said that the World Economic Forum had predicted in 2014 that it would take until 2095 to achieve global gender parity. One year later, unfortunately, it estimated that the pursuit of that goal, already limping along on stilts of established frustrations, had slowed to snail pace, and that gender gap would not close entirely until 2133.

That must change. Women cannot continue to be surprise packages on the platform of historic and global achievement, their worth only recognized because they overcome hurdles, their roles in society restrained by prejudice, fear and to sub-plots. Women cannot continue to trail in a society that defines them as weaker, that puts them in the straightjacket of male-dominated narratives. Because it is a fact that women, by numbers alone, are more than half the world’s population.

That is why Pledging for Parity is a campaign that we all – men, women and children, as well as all people of good conscience – must support. It is in recognition of the importance of women, in their capacity to positively impact the world. It is the right thing to do.

Tonight’s play, so unimpeachably rendered by Professor Yerima, shows the women of the Niger Delta are faced each day by great environmental, political, social and economic challenges. The society so easily neglects – and, inadvertently, stokes – their torment. Women and children have suffered, for too long, the consequences of the conflicts in the region, one that is scarcely highlighted in all intervention strategies to address regional challenges and the attendant agitation for resolution. One of the characters in today’s play puts it succinctly: “They fight their wars, yet we and our children are left with the scars...”

Little Drops presents, in stark and startling relief, the sad painting of this reality. It is one that the NDDC was established to tackle, in the pursuit of the Mandate to facilitate the sustainable development of the Niger Delta region. Indeed, the Niger Delta Development Master Plan makes specific provisions for the advancement of women issues, some of which this play treats. Women must continue to play this important role, beyond the stage, beyond the portrayals of drama, taking it to the communities and creeks of the Niger Delta.

NDDC, on our part, must continue to encourage and support them, as we work to facilitate overall regional development. We must continue to work to improve the living conditions of our people and alleviate their suffering. It is one we are determined, by the Grace of God and the will of humanity, to accomplish.

What we are watching today, therefore, is as much entertainment and drama, as it is a campaign to bring, once more, to national conscience, the anguish and travails of the

women, children and people of the Niger Delta. It is part of programmes which we have lined up to raise awareness, encourage industry among the people and improve human capacity.

To this end, we have concluded arrangements to begin the Girls in Engineering, Mathematics and Science (GEMS) programme, as well as institute the Queen Kambasa Awards for Excellence. GEMS aims to encourage young girls in the region to embrace science and technology, as well as to provide quality manpower that will enable them participate in the predominant oil and gas sector of the region, while the Queen Kambasa Awards recognize the first known queen of the Niger Delta. In her honour, NDDC aims to recognize and reward achievement of Niger Delta women in different spheres and, in doing so, inspire women to excel in whatever they do. It is important to create role models for our young women and girls by showing them the path to excellence.

After so many years of neglect, growth deficits, decay of infrastructure and rampant poverty, the burden of development is, indeed, great. Recognising this, the Federal Government identified important stakeholders that must work together, as development partners, to move the region forward. These partners, working with the NDDC, under the new standards of probity, due process, proper application of funds, clarity of vision and engagement, which President Muhammadu Buhari has ushered in, will help ensure greater synergy and accelerated growth.

The challenges besetting the Niger Delta region, even today, continue to be a national tragedy; just as the challenges facing the North-East region are. The Niger Delta is too important to be neglected. Today, the Gulf of Guinea presents a better operating environment than the Middle East and it is important, even in the face of adverse oil economics, to take full advantage and make it the hub of global oil and gas business.

As we rebuild every facet of our national life, especially the Niger Delta and the North-East regions, as we set Nigeria on the path to change, under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari, the marginalization of women, too, must change. Women, all over Nigeria, have shown great capacity to drive the course of development. In more and more homes of the Niger Delta, they have assumed roles of bread-winners, holding society by the scruff of neck and demanding to be taken seriously.

We must support them more and more. We must put structures in place that identify their strengths and contributions, that provide them with opportunities to maximize them. In doing this, we would be helping to make our dear country great again, a vision which Nigerians have affirmed.

As our mother, Mrs. Aisha Buhari, Wife of the President, declared on March 31, 2015, "Nigerians are aware now more than ever that the people have the power to sway the fate of a nation... We must see this as a triumphant show of democracy, a change for the better."

If I may paraphrase, Nigerians are aware, now, more than ever, that women, strong and committed, have the power to sway the course of society. "A strong woman," Mia Sophia says, "is one who feels deeply and loves fiercely; her tears flow just as abundantly as her

laughter... A strong woman is both soft and powerful, both practical and spiritual. A strong woman, in essence, is a gift to the world..."

I invite you all to sit back and enjoy this great show, let your hearts listen to its urgent call, let your conscience be stirred so we all can move into action, towards making our society one where virtue can flourish.

Once more, I am immensely grateful to our mother, Mrs. Aisha Buhari, for finding time to honour us with her presence, as well as join her considerable voice and immeasurable worth in advancing the course for which we are all gathered here today.

Thank you and God bless you all.

BEING SPEECH DELIVERED BY **MRS. IBIM SEMENITARI**, AG. MANAGING DIRECTOR/CEO, NIGER DELTA DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION, **NDDC**, AT THE COMMAND PERFORMANCE OF THE STAGE PLAY, **LITTLE DROPS**, IN CELEBRATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, SUNDAY, MARCH 6, 2016, AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CENTRE, ABUJA.