

**First Lady Mrs Jeannette Kagame's
remarks at**

**the Rwandan Women and Youth
Empowerment Conference**

London, 24 June 2017

Excellency Ambassador,

Honourable Minister of Sports and Culture,

Distinguished Friends of Rwanda,

Esteemed panellists and speakers,

Fellow Rwandans,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mwiriwe neza.

Allow me to start by sharing the greetings of His Excellency President Paul Kagame to all of you here present, and to say it is my great pleasure being here, for this first Rwandan Women and Youth Empowerment Conference held in this beautiful city of London.

This very special gathering allows us to come together, as Rwandans, and citizens of the world, to not only celebrate our Rwandan identity and culture, but also gain more

insight into where we come from, and what has driven us to our present reality.

Indeed, being together on this day gives us another opportunity to learn what it entails to fully own and promote the values of our land, whether we reside in Rwanda, or in its 6th province.

Esteemed Friends of Rwanda,

Thank you for accepting our invitation to this conference, and for walking by our side through the years, as our journey was marked by abysmal pain and loss, but through it all, by a strong will to overcome it all, for a better tomorrow for our future generations.

Bavandimwe dusangiye Ubunyarwanda,

Nagira ngo mbabwire ko twebwe abari mu rwa Gasabo, duterwa ishema no kubagira nk' abaduhagarariye muri iyi Ntara ya 6 mwaremye yiyongera kuri 5 dusanganywe.

Kugira igihugu ntako bisa! Iyo umaze kubona igihugu ntikigira umupaka. Aho uri ufite indangagaciro z'Ubunyarwanda uharema u Rwanda, ugakorera u Rwanda ugakumbura u Rwanda.

Mu rugendo rwo kubaka u Rwanda rwacu rwari rwarazimye, byadusabye kugira amahitamo atubereye nk'Abanyarwanda. Ntitwirengagiza kandi ko benshi muri twe twagize inshingano zituma twikorera imitwaro ituremereye kubera ubukana bw'amateka twanyuzemo yasoreje kuri Jenocide yakorewe Abatutsi. Imwe mu ngaruka za Jenocide nuko twisanze imbaraga z'igihugu zitatanirijwe mu mahanga atandukanye, ari nabyo byatumaga bigaragara nk'ibigoye gutekereza ko uyu muni twaba turi aho tugeze mu kwiyubaka no kubaka igihugu cyacu muri rusange.

Kongera guhuza imbaraga n'ibitekerezo by'abanyagihugu byasabaga kwemera kunywa umuti usharira ari nawo watubashishije kwirenga, tukiyunga, tugakorera hamwe ngo duheshe Agaciro u Rwanda twasubijwe. Turabashimira rero ko mutatatiye igihango cy'Ubunyarwanda.

Distinguished Audience,

Being here today, surrounded by many of you, reminds me of how far we have come as a people, as we are currently commemorating for the 23rd time the Genocide against the Tutsi, which led to the total breakdown of our society.

This terrifying and scarring chapter of our history left us with a nation that needed to be rebuilt, from the ground up, honouring the memory of the million people who had fallen victims to hatred, and vowing to never go back to those darkest times, when some members of our community ceased to be viewed as humans.

For our nation to be reborn out of its own ashes, we knew that first, we had to analyse the many factors that led to such dehumanisation. We also drew inspiration from the strength exhibited by our resilient survivors, and devised home-grown solutions, based on pre-colonial traditions that placed social harmony at the centre of everything, by valuing every life.

We focused all our energies, our hearts and minds, towards rebuilding a stronger nation; one in which all its men and

women would be seen first, as the son or daughter of this land, and could rightfully contribute to a sustainable development, allowing us to take our place, among other thriving nations of this world.

Fellow Rwandans,

You have created new homes away from Rwanda, and learned to adapt to new cultures, to create a space for you and your families, in these new communities.

One could argue that the diaspora experience is marked by common factors, regardless of the place of origin of the person who is subjected to it.

Leaving one's nation behind, leads to a very complex situation, in which many have struggled to find the right balance between adjusting to their new environment while holding on to their traditions, in order to not lose themselves in a foreign land.

This diaspora experience is also often accompanied by heavy nostalgia of those moments spent with families, rejoicing with music and dancing, celebrating each other's social and professional accomplishments.

And too many of us know the reality of fighting to stay standing, for our families to go through life, and thrive, without the strong support system of our communities.

My fellow Rwandans,

Despite the distance, in our eyes, you remain a reflection of Rwanda, of its people, its culture, and its potential. We look to you to be the example of truly dignified Rwandans, the kind that exemplify the concept of *Agaciro*, in all your professional and social circles.

Kwanga gupfa kwacu “**Resilience**” gutuma buri wese aho ari, mu bushobozi bwe uko bungana kose yiyumva muri urwo rugendo rwo kubaka u Rwanda nk’ igihugu gifite kandi giharanira kwihesha *Agaciro*. Iryo shyaka rero murikomeze, mukunde u Rwanda, mubitoze abana n'abandi bakiri bato batagize amahirwe yo kurubamo, murukumbuze amahanga munarusure kenshi kuko “Umwana ujya iwabo, ntagira umutangira, ntanateguza”.

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

I call on you today to remember to maintain our own identity, as *abanyarwanda*, learning from such practices as *Ndi Umunyarwanda*, which allowed us to take knowledgeable steps towards restoring our Rwandan identity, values and culture.

We know that before colonialism, century-old customs and traditions governed our relationships within our communities, forging a sense of unity, in a common identity as ‘Rwandans’ first, before identifying ourselves with the socio-economic class we belonged to.

With colonialism came new religions and administrative rules, that had no interest in maintaining the social balance initially found in our nation. In order to satisfy their economic needs, colonialists successfully pitted social groups against one another, giving the power to those who helped them further establish their power in our regions.

We were no longer united, and progressively lost the core of who we were as ‘*abanyarwanda*’.

Ndi Umunyarwanda therefore found its paramount relevance in a post-genocide era, as it created a space for all of us to open up about our painful past and experiences, in an attempt to help forever deconstruct those racist stratifications.

Fellow Rwandan Women,

Allow me to highlight here that in our pre-colonial history, the place of the woman in our communities carried great weight, as a person whose opinion mattered in both private and public affairs. This consideration was also translated in the holistic care and protection given to the woman, throughout the different stages of her life, as she was prepared to fulfil her role of wife, mother, and above all, to embrace her place as a valued member of her community, whose wellbeing was a priority.

Looking back at the years of our liberation struggle, up to the aftermath of the Genocide that devastated our country, it was only logical that women could not be left behind, as they too had a significant role to play in the rebuilding of our nation.

This philosophy helped us go beyond our constitutional requirement of the minimum 30% of women in public leadership positions, and achieving the highest rate worldwide of women representation at the parliament, with 64%; and 40% female representation in our cabinet.

While we acknowledge that women still need to be better represented in certain fields like the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields (STEM), we also notice that more women are progressively stepping into their rightful place, no longer feeling held back by their gender, thanks to continuous awareness raising involving successful role models, as sources of inspiration.

So to you, mothers and daughters of our beloved nation, and custodians of our culture, I urge you to further embrace your 'soft' powers, to raise the younger generations into thriving members of society, who will not fall prey to the many dangers awaiting them, so they too can be leaders in their communities.

Young Men and Women,

I also urge you to realise that although you live in another part of the world, you still have so much to gain by holding on to our culture.

So, learn to take pride and value your Rwandan-ness.

Be inspired by the positive traditions and practices of your land, and emulate them wherever you go.

Use your time here, as an opportunity to shape your mind and discover ways of adapting your different perspectives of the world, to help you contribute to what Rwanda is striving for.

Reflect on how you will shape yourselves, and your country, into the Rwanda we want, as indeed, the world and for that matter, Rwanda is constantly in a state of change and progression.

Follow more closely the achievements of your fellow youth living in Rwanda, those, who regardless of their socio-economic background, are adding their own personal touch to our communities, by creating innovations that redefine

the fields of arts, media, ICT, entrepreneurship, logistics, economics, health, agriculture, and education, just to name a few.

Establish connections to exchange knowledge with those of us at home, and be part of our development by taking a bigger interest in the socio-economic and political life of Rwanda, and let your voice be heard.

Remember that Rwanda is a nation that has put in place institutional mechanisms supporting gender and youth empowerment, as we believe that true and sustainable development will only be achievable if we bring all stakeholders to the table.

Young People,

With 70% of our population being under 40 years old, the responsibility to lead this country falls on you, and you must prepare for it today. It is therefore imperative that you carry with you, the culture and values of your country, as they will inform what you can do, for the good of our people.

Allow me to share with you the words of the late Cyprien Rugamba in the poem:

IKIVI

“Urumve shami nashibutse... Uzase nanjye, urenzeho
Unsumbye Ndabigusabye
Usoze ibyanjye kandi uterure ibyawwe, Mwana wanjye
Jya utuganya utwaza.”

NTUMPEHO

“Umuco mwiza wakureze, Ntugatume udindira.
Mu by’abandi jya utoranya ibyiza, Ibifutamyeye ujugunye.
Niba urabukwa iby’ahandi Ugata n’urwo wambaye,
Ntumpeho.”

UMUCO WACU

“Uwanga umuco wamubyaye
Asa n’ishami ryihakana aho ryatoshye.
Umwana mwiza ni umwe uvuga Ivuko ryiza ryamubyaye,
Agahora arisingiza.”

Take pride in who you are, and carry this strong sense of self in all the things that you pursue in life.

Let this identity of yours be a guiding compass, giving you the confidence to embrace your beliefs, and stand with ***Dignity.***

Do not ever fear holding your Rwandan flag, up high.

Esteemed Guests,

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to express once again my gratitude for conferences such as this one, as they afford us the chance to share, and communicate our dreams and hopes for our beloved Rwanda.

May today's discussions help us all take conscious steps to continue working tirelessly for the fulfilment of our potential, and establish the strong Rwanda, we know we deserve to live in.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish us all fruitful discussions.