

PROGRAM DATE: 2018-07-26

PROGRAM NAME: WOMANITY – WOMEN IN UNITY

GUEST NAME: ELLEN JOHNSON SIRLEAF – FORMER PRESIDENT OF LIBERIA

SPEAKER	TRANSCRIPTION
DR. MALKA	Hello, I'm Dr. Amaleya Goneos-Malka, welcome to 'Womanity – Women in Unity'. The show that celebrates prominent and ordinary African Women's milestone achievements in their struggles for liberation, self-emancipation, human rights, democracy, racism, socio-economic class division and gender based violence.
DR. MALKA	Joining us today in Sandton, South Africa, is the former President of Liberia who served as the country's 24 th president and first elected female head of state; President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Welcome to the show!
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	Thank you.
DR. MALKA	It's such a great privilege to host a leader like you who's lit the torch that lights the way for other women, particularly in Africa, to make their respective journeys possible. President Johnson Sirleaf, your political career started in 1985 and 20 years later in 2005 you took office as President of Liberia; at the beginning you were faced with many challenges like rebuilding a country coming out of civil war, debt, or re-establishing lost infrastructure. Reflecting on your 12 years in office, what have been some of the most memorable accomplishments that your administration achieved?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	I always start off with my accomplishment with the fact that we maintain peace. Peace over 12 years compared with the two decades before when we were always in conflict. I believe also I give women a voice as I went around the country, particularly in rural areas, encouraging women to participate in discussions in town hall meetings, in government and we were able also to get women in the professional realm to hold strategic positions countering what as usual that they sit in the soft spots. I always say that we gave hope. Hope to a nation that was in despair when we came into office, so I'm not going to mention the things like the infrastructure, the restoration of roles and power and water because we've got a long way to go in those things, but I think the real things are the qualitative things about people being able to know that they now have a future.
DR. MALKA	And when you talk about the qualitative components, those for me usually are the soft pieces but they're the parts which get the machinery running. It's about, as you said, it's hope; it's something which works on an intrinsic level as opposed to an extrinsic level that motivates people to do more.
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	Absolutely and I think that's where I put the emphasis, that's where I encourage women to take positions, to get involved, to be economic agents such as our farming women, our market women, to provide them with more comfortable environments in which they can do their work. Those were the things that I think are lasting, those are the things that build the dignity of people and encourage them to take ownership in their country, to be proud of themselves and...so that's where I think it really matters and I'm glad that I was able to do that, I'm glad that today women, when I go into rural areas, they can stand and say Madam President thank you, you gave us a voice.
DR. MALKA	And that's one of the things that I think is remarkable about you and I recall, it must have been about five years or so ago that I did a presentation and I quoted you where you said " <i>I look at those societies where women have been given the opportunity and those are the societies that succeed.</i> "

<p>PRESIDENT SIRLEAF</p>	<p>Absolutely and I just, you know, women across Africa, women across the world today can stand up and say, you know, we are part of this, we can take charge, the future belongs to us and that's what gives me great satisfaction. As I move around I meet young girls and they come and they say wow, you know, you inspired us, what can we do? I say I'm just glad that whatever I represent with your aspirations and your expectations and if I can just continue to give you that motivation through my experience, then I think, I really feel like I've earned my way and I've earned my place.</p>
<p>DR. MALKA</p>	<p>It's a great igniter and I have to say that when I was doing the research on you for this particular interview, it made such an impact on my views as a woman, as a person and I really think that your personal story; your professional story and your political story and the journey that you've endured and encountered needs to be written about and taught to other women in Africa as a role modelling effect to follow. At what stage in your life did you realise that pursuing the political arena and serving your country would become such an integral part of your journey?</p>
<p>PRESIDENT SIRLEAF</p>	<p>When I was in prison. I think that's when one realises that, you know, I have stood for something. It's something that of course offended; something that got you into trouble, but to learn in prison means you've taken a position; you stood apart, you stood up for something. You took a risk. So at that moment you say, you know, if I've come this far to the place where I am seen as countering the status quo, so to speak, then I know I'm doing the right thing; I'm doing what my heart tells me to do, what I figure my cause is right and at that point you dedicate yourself to doing more, doing more to working with the people, to being able to promote those principals for which you stand and so this moment I think when I was in prison, of course at that point you never know what's going to happen to you but I think it gives you strength, it gives you courage, it reinforces your commitment and your courage to those things, you know, that you hold dear, those things that you want to fight for in life. So that's...that's when one begins to contemplate and say I've come this far but there's another road to go, I can go further.</p>
<p>DR. MALKA</p>	<p>And it's a tremendous test of character because I think some people could either forgive or regress but in your case, you went on, you fought and it was a tremendous breakthrough in fighting for your beliefs and motivating other people to join you in that cause.</p>
<p>PRESIDENT SIRLEAF</p>	<p>That's absolutely right and that really provided me a much larger constituency, a much larger following because many people looked and said if I can take that kind of a risk, if I can put myself in danger so to speak, this is something that they truly believed in so yes, it was a motivating factor for me, a motivating factor for women because women were indeed my greatest supporter and when I was in prison thousands of women wrote an appeal, you know, asking for my release so...so they...whatever I do, I say it has its own base; its own dedication to the women of Liberia and to the women of Africa who also joined this fight, many of them wrote letters, many of them made appeal, many of them networked, you know, with the women in Liberia for my release. So I believe that women have been so strong in my career, you know, so much a part of my experience and my success and I think it's an inspiration to women all over and there's so many other women across Africa which look across and see those who have stood up, those who have demonstrated great courage for what they believe in, for what they stand for, which is needed now to get into high political positions.</p>

DR. MALKA	Absolutely right, one of the things that I think have...that being a female political leader sometimes touches on sensitive points, whether it is culture, religion, tradition; in your experience do you think women leaders face different types of expectations and demands to their male counterparts and are they judged differently?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	Yes, because women leaders are always under the microscope, there's always somebody, particularly in a continuing male dominated world and they're looking to see if there will be mishaps, looking for errors, looking for utterances that may suggest fear or the lack of determination and so women are always placed under these conditions where you're being watched, you're being monitored, you're being looked at because you know people don't want to see a wave of women leadership across the world because we've never had it. It's been male dominated all along and you and see a resistance, a resistance to a change in which we say leadership structures are changing worldwide and creates fear, but tell the good part about it is that women have shown perseverance, have shown determination and in all areas of society not just political leadership, but leadership in civil society, leadership in the church, leadership in our traditional societies which are really strongly male dominated. There's a breakthrough but that breakthrough also puts us under great stress to ensure that whatever is our example, that example sets a stronger course for women victories and for women ascendancy in leadership. So those expectations and aspirations of women stand out when you're in leadership and you know that you've got to deliver because by doing so you encourage, you motivate, you incentivise women all over the world to continue to seek even higher levels of positions throughout society.
DR. MALKA	And I would say also that it provides exemplary examples of women's competence on display to men, to understand that women can do it and they can be successful in terms of their leadership.
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	Absolutely and every woman going into leadership demonstrates a certain amount of competence. They could only reach there by showing that they have equal, sometimes I say narrowly equal, I think super – more than equal – strength because of what they face, because they're always being guarded; someone's always looking at them. But women's competence, as a matter of fact I say I go beyond competence. Women have equal competence when they compete and that's why they win because they've demonstrated that but women also bring a special, special value to leadership and that's the sensitivity of being a woman. A sensitivity to human kind, to being able to care about people, so seek the welfare of people without compromising the decisions you have to make, you know, the competence you have to demonstrate and so women leadership, like I say, brings something more to a society than just being a leader.
DR. MALKA	It's that qualitative aspect that's coming through again. In 2011 you were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize with Leymah Gbowee of Liberia and Tawakkol Karman of Yemen; in recognition for the non-violent struggle for the safety of women, for women's rights and full participation in peace building work; please can you tell us more about the efforts undertaken by Liberia that led to this award?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	We...we had a society that was in a way lost. A generation of young people, girls and boys, young men and young women, who for two decades had suffered conflict, had been denied opportunities for school, for a good life, for jobs and our taskforce to bring them out of that situation of despair, to start to deliver to them the basics to which they were entitled and that they had been denied for all these years of conflict. My work in that regard, my

	<p>work with women, the other Liberian Leymah Gbowee also worked very well with women to be able to bring peace; to challenge the warlords that were there; only women could have done that because these were vicious men, these were men who, you know, who had brought our nation to this situation and so I think the Nobel Prize was a recognition of my years of work with women, my being able to contribute to the better welfare particularly women in the informal sector. Rural women who did...who farmed, women who were basically marketeers, who did their work sometimes in such horrid conditions of rain and sun, sitting down in market places; being able to improve that I was able to build markets across the country. I established a programme that I call 50,500,5000 so that was to construct or repair 50 schools; to train 500 teachers and to give 5000 scholarships to young girls; a very successful programme, we call it a Liberia Education Trust and I think that made a big difference in the lives of those 5000 young girls who probably would never have gone to school. I think it's a combination of all the many things that we were able to do that convinced the Nobel Prize Committee, you know, that I should be included to get the Nobel Prize and that also meant for me great motivation, the recognition of what I did only inspired me to do more as President of course I...there's so many other things that I had to do to move the nation from the state it was in, to make institutions functional once again, to restore basic infrastructure, to start to promote democracy; those were the callings that I, you know, that I worked on and Liberia still has a long way to go, let me say that, but what we've accomplished at least provides the foundation and enables successive governments to build upon that foundation to bring Liberia back to where it ought to be.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Everything that you've said, it's almost as though it would take a couple of lifetimes to achieve and yet in your 12 years of office you've really managed to make incredible inroads and education of young women I think is particularly admirable because without an education people simply don't have a choice, there is no other option for them to pursue other than poverty.</p>
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	<p>Absolutely. Education is the key to everything we do, the knowledge obtained through education not only provides us with the capacity to choose well, to do well, the capacity to think through issues that we face and many of us will face crises, particularly as women, but being able to think through how you address the crisis, how you solve the crisis can only be done if you have a solid education and so I think everyone I would encourage every young girl out there to seek as much of an education as you can. Go as far as you can, learn as much as you can and even for us who are older, I'm still learning, you know, being here in Johannesburg today, meeting the elders, all those great global leaders that are here to celebrate President Mandela's 100th birthday provide me with such an insight just sitting and talking to them. So there's always education, there's a continuing process of learning, of broadening your perspective, of being able to cope even more with the situations of life.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Yes it is absolutely enabling. I wanted to ask you; we've spoken a little about some of the gender gaps and how you've managed to close them from a Liberian point of view; every year the World Economic Forum publishes a global gender gap report which looks at gender inequality gaps across four key dimensions. One concerns economic participation opportunity; the second is on educational attainment; the third on health and survival; the fourth on political empowerment and although they estimate that the education gap is expected to reach parity in thirteen years from now, the overall gap is still increasing and the notable areas of weakness they said are in the economic component and the</p>

	<p>political component, which, at this rate they anticipate only being closed in 217 years and 99 years respectively, which you know I know there's been advances in longevity but I don't think either of us will be around in those kind of time frames. Legislation and quotas are a couple of interventions to accelerate progress; what are your views with respect to closing gender gaps more rapidly?</p>
<p>PRESIDENT SIRLEAF</p>	<p>I'm one that believes in affirmative action for women if that takes place in terms of quotas for women, quotas for political position; quotas even for educational opportunities. In many places boys are given preference particular in our areas where there's poverty in the family, the boys get the opportunity because there's not enough to...enough resources to support all of them and so one needs to do that but you know we still face formidable obstacles as women. There's still disparity in income....in income with jobs, disparity in the selection of people for high office even when there's equal or even more competence demonstrated by women and so legislation has been taken in so many places but we've got to go beyond the laws because the laws have to be enforced to really achieve the results and that means that we have to work more on men. We have to work more to convince men that women's participation, women's leadership add more to the economic prospects and the economic successes of a nation. It's beginning to happen, but the numbers you've just cited and the years it will take to achieve it tells us that we have to double our efforts, I mean we have to look at where countries have been able to achieve this parity, you know, where, what methods have been used by those countries. There are some countries that do stand out. We...and sometimes there are slippages. In Liberia we had made quite a bit advances in terms of the number of women in our legislature in parliament but there was fierce resistance on the part of men and just note this; the resistance was because I was a woman and president, therefore we had all that we needed, therefore you know; no we shouldn't allow them to get too much power because...because if they have the legislature and have the presidency then the women will be controlling things. So it's those type of men perspectives that we have to counter by standing to or by continuing to push hard to be able to change it, so now that I'm not president I must work harder or making sure that we get more women in our legislature so they can be able to promote those laws that affect women, that provide women equal opportunity, more access and on the economic side, this is a major constraint for women who want to seek political office. Most times they don't have the resources to compete effectively in an environment where resources is a key factor in whether you win or not, That's why we must strengthen women's financial...we must promote more women entrepreneurs; the ones who are going to build the resources that will enable them to help other women to achieve their goals in political office and so that's a challenge to all women, wherever we are, whatever we do, that we have to work harder to seek this gender balance that we talk about all the time.</p>
<p>DR. MALKA</p>	<p>And in your opinion what do you think are the strengths and limitations of gender equality in Africa as a continent?</p>
<p>PRESIDENT SIRLEAF</p>	<p>Oh there's no doubt the statistics are there that women's full participation adds so much more to the economic life of the nation. As a matter of fact, women do, right now, provide great contribution in the work they do, whether its housework, you know, whether it's taking care of children, by doing this they enable the safety of the nation, the welfare of the nation to be protected. Those are not quantified perhaps, but it's very clear and more and more women who are actually in the economic sphere of the nation make great contribution; look at the women in...that do marketing</p>

	<p>in our small poor countries. I mean they are the buoyancy of the economy. If they were not there crossing borders to be able to move goods and services; taking great risk, bringing produce from one country with surplus to another country with deficit, you know, whether you're dealing with fruits or vegetables or other things that are essential for life; those women are the ones that hold up our nations; don't get the credit and that's why again we have to bring the forefront of consciousness of everyone the value that women bring to economic life, to political life, to security, safety of nation, peace of nation. It's the women who hold - what do we say - half the sky?</p>
DR. MALKA	...yes...
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	...no doubt about it.
DR. MALKA	Women are certainly an integral part of society's fabric. President one of the questions that I ask all my guests on this programme who've made tremendous achievements in their respective disciplines is about some of the factors that they consider have contributed to their success. So some people speak about perseverance, tenacity, hard work; could you share with us what have been some of the key areas or success factors that you consider have contributed to your development?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	For me it was taking risks. Taking risk in my early childhood to do things that little girls were not supposed to do, like playing football. Taking risks in the classroom by speaking out and as I progress taking risks to challenge things if I felt, you know, that situation did not provide...did not provide a satisfaction to people, did not promote welfare, did not promote humankind, did not promote the individuality of people. So for me it was taking risk, but that risk also means courage, you have to have the courage to take those risks and be prepared to fail. I say success is failure upside down because if you don't know failure you will not appreciate success and so I will say to all for me the strength to stand out, the strength to be different, the strength to stand by what you believe in.
DR. MALKA	Can you share with us a few of the pivotal moments in your life growing up?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	I married very young and I had four children before going back to school and I believe if I had not had the determination to go back to school I would not be where I am today. So that pivotal moment was when I made a decision, along with my husband, to leave our children and fortunately we had a system in our country where grandmother's help out so we were able to leave our young children with our two mothers and to go back to school. That for me turned my whole life around.
DR. MALKA	And that really is definitive because people try and do the education before the children and you having taken that journey set you up.
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	Yes, yes and I think that also made me strong. I always felt guilty by the fact that I left my children so young but I think it made them strong also because they also had to fend for themselves a little bit while I pursued an education and so today we're good friends.
DR. MALKA	I think there's nothing wrong with instilling independence. And President who would you say have been some of the strong women in your life?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	From my own country the first woman who was the president of the United Nations General Assembly, she stood out, another judge in our country who decided when the young people were protesting and challenging the status quo she actually, in her robe, marched on the streets with them. Another one who was the president of the university who challenged the political order that wanted to appoint political appointees to the university and she stood out against that. And in your country Winnie. Winnie

	Mandela; she was an icon for all of us as women, for what she stood for, what she suffered, what she did. There are others but you know those ones certainly stand out for me.
DR. MALKA	President you've had a remarkable career, life, journey so far where you've made tremendous inroads in the various aspects of life that you've touched; can you please share with us what's next for you? What's on the agenda of the future?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	When I gave a speech at the Mo Ibrahim Forum when I accepted the prize I said to them I'm only a few months away from my 80th birthday and many people say you've been at this for 40 years, you need to quit, you need to rest. I cannot rest. I have to go on. I have to do more for women, within my means and so I'm going to be promoting a centre for women where my life's journey can be an example of motivation for young women who aspire to leadership. I want to be able to help a few women, particularly those in the economic sphere, in small and medium sized businesses; see if we can provide them with the kind of training for their acceleration for them to be able to move their business to scale by being able to access better technology, capital. So I'm promoting this, I'm trying to structure it properly and see what we can do so I can continue to be the inspiration, the propeller for women who aspire to leadership and as I look around, as I meet young girls, young women, even the last few days and all of those who have just expressed a desire, it's a motivating factor for me that I'm not going to go crawl around and you know, go to sleep because they must also see me as continuing to be that motivator, that aspirator for others and so by setting up a centre where I can encourage them to come and sit, talk to me; talk to other women leaders, you know, who have excelled in across spheres of opportunities, spheres of profession. I think that's what I'd like to do.
DR. MALKA	It's a great way of being able to pay forward all of the work that you've done and I see this you know in the academic space where you're almost standing and advancing by lifting off of the people shoulders that have gone before you.
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	I stood on many others shoulders. All the great women that I've mentioned have provided me with a lift and with that lift I could reach out and provide a little bit of a lift for other women and I hope I can continue to do that in a small way until I'm not able to do so and I just...I thank God for the long life that and the health that I've had to enable me to continue to inspire others.
DR. MALKA	It will be a wonderful contribution. And lastly President, as we close out this discussion where you've spoken about the tremendous work concerning women's development that you've done and continue to do; could you please use this platform to send a message of hope to all those women in Africa that due to circumstances gender equality might not be first on their agenda, but rather that daily struggle of putting food on the table, making sure that their children are catered for, raising their family is more of a pressurising reality?
PRESIDENT SIRLEAF	I encourage all women; young women, not so young women, to set their goals, whatever those goals may be. To do all you can. Hard work, the qualification to get you there, the education that will provide you with the means of doing what you want to do and once you've set that, stay the course. Stay focused, whatever it, is be the best at it. Seek to excel to the highest level that you can in your area of choice. Do not be deterred by obstacles because you will face them but you can always overcome the obstacles with perseverance, determination and courage. That's what's happening all over the world for women. Women will continue to progress as they seek what they want, determine to be the leaders that they wish to

	be and that should be; they'll get there.
DR. MALKA	Thank you so much.
	PROGRAMME END