AMUJAE INITIATIVE

Amujae High Level Leadership Forum Report

2024

Executive summary

Africa's rich history showcases both the achievements and challenges faced by women in leadership. Today, women are playing a vital role in the continent's rapidly changing political, economic, and social landscapes. Four African nations – Rwanda, Namibia, South Africa, and Senegal – rank among the top 15 globally for female parliamentary representation, highlighting ongoing efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment. Data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union reveals Rwanda's exceptional achievement, boasting the highest percentage of female parliamentarians (61.3%) compared to the sub-Saharan African average of 23.6%. Legal reforms and a growing recognition of women's contributions to development and leadership are driving these positive developments.

The Amujae Initiative, a flagship program of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development (EJS Center), serves as an exemplary case. Founded by former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first democratically elected female Head of State in Africa, the EJS Center aims to propel women into leadership positions, dismantle systemic barriers, and champion the rights of girls and women. President Sirleaf envisioned the EJS Center as a platform to amplify women's voices, maximize their talents, and cultivate leaders who prioritize women's aspirations. Ultimately, the Center empowers women to reach their full potential.

Through the Amujae Initiative, the EJS Center has equipped 42 women leaders from 19 African countries across three cohorts with the tools and resources necessary to transform their communities and nations over the past four years. The Initiative fosters a platform and environment that promotes sisterhood, collaboration, personal growth, and inspires collective action for female leaders to showcase their work and advance their public leadership careers.

To solidify its impact, the EJS Center, with support from the Rwandan government, hosted the inaugural Amujae High-Level Forum in Kigali, Rwanda, on April 18-19, 2024. This event convened Amujae Leaders from all three cohorts.

Introduction

The Amujae High-Level Leadership Forum, served as a platform for Amujae Leaders to strengthen their bonds of sisterhood and strategize how to leverage their collective strength. The forum provided an opportunity for Amujae Leaders to inspire one another, share experiences and stories, and engage with African and global leaders from the political and public sectors, as well as multilateral institutions.

Attendees included Amujae Coaches and Mentors, including H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, H.E. Catherine Samba-Panza, Madam Zainab Bangura, Dr. Jendayi Frazer, Madam Bineta Diop, and Dr. Christopher Fomunyoh,. In addition, key partner representatives of the EJS Center, including Ms. Binaifer Nowrojee was among distinguished invited guests and partners, as well as staff were in attendance. The key takeaways from the forum included self-awareness, integrity, humility, and the importance of learning from past experiences.

Objectives

The forum marked a significant milestone as the inaugural event under the Amujae Initiative, designed to bring together the 42 Amujae Leaders from all three cohorts. The primary goals of this gathering were as follows:

1. Foster stronger connections and relationship-building within and across cohorts to enhance the Amujae sisterhood.
2. Offer a platform for Amujae Leaders to engage in thoughtfully curated sessions that inspire and provide tools for both individual and collective leadership pathways.

Amujae High Level Forum

The two-day forum commenced with a session titled «The Story of Us: A Leader›s Journey.» Ms. Zainab Bangura, Director-General of the United Nations Office at Nairobi (UNON), shared her leadership path and strategies for overcoming contemporary challenges. She emphasized the importance of mentors, self-belief, understanding strengths and limitations, building complementary teams, leveraging influence for positive impact, authenticity, cultivating networks, representing all women in leadership, advocating for women›s rights, fostering a results-oriented mindset, grounding leadership in core values, and promoting solidarity among female leaders. These themes served as the foundation for subsequent discussions.

Amujae Leaders explored the collective power of sisterhood through experience sharing and trust building. They honed their ability to navigate the complexities of public affairs, prioritize self-care, and uphold their values. Additionally, they delved into driving transformation by challenging existing systems and norms to create space for more women in leadership.

Guided paired conversations facilitated the identification and confrontation of limiting beliefs. Through mutual support and encouragement, participants co-created empowering narratives that uplift and inspire. The session aimed to foster awareness regarding the stories told about other women, particularly when facing challenges. The group grappled with the choice between joining negative narratives or offering constructive support and accountability. Ultimately, they recognized the power of reshaped narratives to empower themselves and others on their leadership journeys.

Amujae Leaders further deliberated on fostering solidarity among women leaders, even across political divides. While some advocated for avoiding public criticism and promoting collective narratives, others emphasized

competence-based evaluations. The concept of sisterhood and its ongoing reflection were highlighted. The importance of integrity during campaigning was stressed, given the prevalence of negative narratives targeting female candidates. To counter these narratives, the creation of inclusive spaces for showcasing women›s capabilities and supporting young female leaders were proposed.

The participants also addressed the need for women to re-author their public narratives in the face of online threats, harassment, and sexual abuse. They shared insights on maintaining alignment between public persona and desired leadership brand, including strategies for managing intentional distortion, utilizing effective crisis management, developing a thick skin, and pursuing legal recourse. Additionally, they acknowledged the possibility of misunderstandings and emphasized the importance of managing perception while remaining authentic. Developing an effective communication strategy, dropping inauthentic personas, monitoring public perception, and demonstrating consistency in actions were identified as key strategies.

Drawing from Rwanda›s global leadership in gender equality, with a female-majority parliament, Amujae Leaders had the opportunity to interact with Dr. Valentine Uwamariya, Rwanda›s Minister of Gender and Family Promotion. Dr. Uwamariya emphasized the importance of education, dedication, hard work, and accountability in empowering women to take on leadership roles. She also highlighted the value of community service and mentorship from experienced politicians.

Closing Ceremony

Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf concluded the forum by urging and emphasising to the Amujae Leaders the significance of authenticity, courage, and compassion in leadership, as well as gender equality and mutual support. Subsequently, mementos were presented to Amujae Leaders in recognition of their steadfastness and devotion to excellence.

In Conversation with H.E. President Paul Kagame

On the second day, the forum was honored by the participation of His Excellency Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda. President Kagame's attendance underscored his longstanding commitment to advancing gender equality in Rwanda. He emphasized that societal progress hinges on ethical principles, prioritizing moral rectitude, and acknowledging the equal potential of all individuals, regardless of gender. To sustain the progress achieved under his leadership, he pledged to ensure equitable opportunities for all to develop and reach their full potential.

During the question and answer session with the Amujae Leaders, President Kagame addressed the challenge of holding African leaders accountable for gender commitments and good governance. He attributed these challenges to a variety of factors, including diverse leadership styles, varying influence within the African Union (AU), external pressures, and the need for a fundamental shift in perspective and approach. Rwanda's active engagement in peacekeeping operations and bilateral dialogues serves as a testament to the nation's dedication to global stability and security.

In summary, President Kagame identified three core principles: a transformed mindset, robust accountability and inclusion, and a relentless pursuit of excellence. He firmly believes that advocating for gender equality and human rights is synonymous with championing justice, recognizing the equal capabilities and talents of women.

Conclusion

The Amujae High-Level Leadership Forum provided critical insights into the challenges faced by women in Africa and underscored the necessity of promoting gender equality in decision-making processes. The forum highlighted the importance of empowering women and bolstering their self-confidence to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for female leaders across the continent.

One of the key takeaways from the forum was the understanding that establishing a strong leadership brand requires proactive communication, authenticity, and a steadfast commitment to aligning actions with values. By maintaining their authenticity while effectively managing public perception, women can develop a robust and genuine leadership presence. This approach is vital for cultivating a new generation of women leaders capable of navigating and transforming leadership landscapes in Africa and beyond.

About the EJS Center

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development (EJS Center) was founded in 2018 to be a catalyst for change across Africa by helping unleash its most abundant, yet minimally tapped power — its women.

Through a unique blend of programming, advocacy, research, and exhibitions, the EJS Center works to advance women's public leadership and development on the continent. Through its work, it envisions more voices heard, talents unleashed, and leaders launched that prioritize the aspirations of women.

The EJS Center was founded by former President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. As the first democratically elected woman president in Africa, Madam Sirleaf is passionate about supporting the next generation of women in public life. By helping women in public leadership to raise their profiles and advance their careers, the EJS Center seeks to amplify the voices of all women and girls across the continent.

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