

ECOWAS Urged to do more in Women's and Youth Empowerment

The Executive Director of the Goodluck Jonathan Foundation in Nigeria, Ann Iyonu, has urged ECOWAS countries to prioritize and increase women's and youth representation in governance as a way of improving the appalling percentage of women's and youth participation in politics. Ann was speaking during the ECOWAS Female Parliamentarians Association (ECOFEPA) Town Hall meeting at the ECOWAS Commission in Abuja, Nigeria. The two days Town Hall meeting which ended on the 6 May, 2023 drew over 350 women and young people across the subregion to participate and build network as a way of rejuvenating democracy by giving voice to women and youth on the theme: "Stimulating a Regional Dynamics for Mentoring the Next Generation of Decision Makers." She empathized that democracy cannot thrive and

function well if it is not inclusive thus, stating that women and youth are the major components of the society who should play critical roles in leadership and governance. She pointed out that women and youth representatives, especially in the parliaments of the West Africa region is very low compared to other regions in Africa where the gap has increasingly and progressively narrowed. She explained that, "In West Africa, only 15.7 percent of the average proportion of seats are held by women in the national parliaments which means the region is lacking behind compare to other parliaments in Africa like East Africa with 30.8 percent, Central Africa 21.7 percent and North Africa with 20.3 percent." She added that there should be a conscious deliberate effort in changing the status quo of women and young people through educational programmes that will boost their knowledge and skills in the civic engagement, politics, leadership and public speaking through mentorship and networking opportunities.



She stressed that special seats should be dedicated to women and youth in West Africa parliaments to increase the number of representation of women and young people. She ended up stating that the adoption of technologies in politics will attract more women and youths to participate in politics which will change the narrative.

Earlier, giving her welcome address, the President of ECOFEPA, Hon. Woraye Sarr, said their activities are strategically tied to the ECOWAS vision 2050 shared value, an objective that can be realized only if women are given the space. She said that with over 350 women and youth gathered across the subregion, they are hoping to increase the number to 10,000 by 2030. Re-echoing the increase of women participation in politics, Hon. Sarr recommended that various governments and MPs in the region should proactively and progressively implement the 30% quota in their respective parliaments and delegations. Making a case for young people, the Regional Chairman of West Africa Youth Assembly, Emmanuel Chea, appealed for the establishment of the ECOWAS Youth parliament, incorporate West Africa Youth Assembly as part of ECOWAS parliament and ECOWAS Commission elections monitoring team and also establish the ECOWAS Youth envoy. He lauded the Speaker of ECOWAS parliament Hon. Sidie Mohamed Tunis for being a man of the youth and women.

Giving her goodwill message, the country representative of UN Women in Nigeria, Beatrice Eyong started off by thanking the Speaker for approving the budget for the activities of ECOFEPA. Like Ann Iyonu, Beatrice also noted the low representation of women in politics, maintaining that the domination of the political space by one gender cannot continue to be encouraged especially with the increase number of women and youth in the region.

Reading the keynote address on behalf of His Excellency, Senator Oriji Uzo Kalu, the former Governor of Abia State and Current Chief Whip of Nigeria Senate, Emeka Nowala, explained the difference between mentorship and "godfatherhood"; the latter which he says is

dangerous and does not create an enabling environment for the growth and development of young people compared to the former which helps impact positively on the mentee. He therefore urged that there should be more mentorship programmes to develop the next generation.

Officially opening the ceremony, the Speaker of ECOWAS Parliament Hon. Sidie Mohamed Tunis, maintained that ECOWAS parliament considers women and youth empowerment as key in ensuring smooth democracy in the subregion. He said the meeting provided an opportunity for constituents to have face to face interaction with their representatives which, according to him is the first time since the formation of the parliament to bring over three hundred and fifth women and young people for the purpose of sharing experiences and ideas that are geared towards complementing regional integration, women and youth development and progress in West Africa.

Dr. Tunis said that under his leadership the parliament has recognized women and youths as actors, agents and also beneficiaries of development which has led the Fifth Parliament to make commitments and took tangible actions to ensure that they integrate the gender dimensions in all planned actions and activities of the parliament including policies and programmes. The Right Hon. Speaker Tunis said allocation of budget line to ECOFEPA and gender programs in the Parliament's annual budget, has facilitated the empowerment of women and strengthened the fight against gender-based discrimination, all designed to address inequalities between men and women and to promote gender equality. Hon. Tunis commended the steps taken by member states to address gender issues. He made allusion to the president of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Dr. Julius Maada Bio who recently signed into law the landmark Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment bill 2022, that guarantees the inclusion, participation and more responsive posture on women gender. He expressed hope that similar action will be replicated in all member states.