

Speech Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen

Opening Statement

by Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen
at the 8th Africa Partnership Forum in Berlin 22-23 May 2007

A call for gender equality in Africa

Federal Chancellor Ms. Merkel,
Federal Minister Ms. Wierczorek-Zeul,
Foreign Affairs Minister Mr. Akufo-Addo,
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address this 8th Africa Partnership Forum. I appreciate the opportunity to engage with today's generation of progressive African leaders committed to take on the challenges presented by the four themes of this meeting: investments, peace and security, climate change and gender. There is no doubt that the forward looking African leadership that we witness today is fundamental to making a difference to the continent. And I know for sure that we have a solid platform for strengthening our partnership to promote economic growth and inclusive development in Africa.

On this occasion, I want to place the issue of gender equality at the centre stage. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, gender discrimination is simply unjust. Mostly to women and girls, but also to society at large. We all share international legal obligations to the fundamental human rights principle of non-discrimination. That is clearly reflected in the progressive regional and national African commitments on women's rights and gender equality.

Secondly, gender equality and the empowerment of women is to my mind one of the most important drivers of economic growth and poverty reduction. Gender equality and women's economic empowerment benefit both the individual woman, but also her family, community and country. Indeed, that is the indisputable experience from the Scandinavian countries, including Denmark.

Equality between men and women is a core value and one of the founding pillars of the Danish welfare state. We have come a long way in providing equal opportunities through a combination of strong legal protection and enforcement of the right to equal treatment and public services such as free education for all.

The current situation has not come about overnight – but the main transformation has happened in only a few generations. Let me mention a couple of examples. In 1960 Danish women only represented one out of four of the total workforce. Today women and men are almost equally represented in the labour market. During the same period we have seen a considerable increase in women's education. And today the number of highly educated young women even slightly exceeds that of young men in Denmark. There is no doubt that this development has been an important factor for the economic growth in Denmark.

So one of my key messages today is that much can be achieved in a relatively short time span. But it takes strong political leadership and responsibility to ensure that gender equality is recognised as the way forward for society at large. And as important as leadership is a change in attitudes and value systems. Not least amongst men. As Heads of Governments, employers, teachers, fathers, husbands, brothers and sons, men – in partnership with women – need to actively promote gender equality. Both in politics, in the public and private sector as well as in the family sphere. In Denmark, looking back a few generations, it was still a prevailing attitude, that young women were not in need of education because they were to get married. That is no longer the case. Attitudes have changed.

Each country is different. But I do believe, that the elements, which I have mentioned as important building-bricks for gender equality in Denmark, are central in most contexts.

From my visits to Africa I know that there are many impressive women leaders, politicians and entrepreneurs. I have been encouraged by talks with women bankers in Tanzania, with women ministers and heads of governments like Prime Minister Louisa Diogo of Mozambique. They all serve as important role models for the many African women with lots of potential in all walks of life. This potential should be put to better use.

Gender gaps exist in all countries, including Denmark. But in the African context the gap is considerable. Although African women participate in all sectors of the economy, the majority operate in the informal sector related to agriculture. It is estimated that women account for 60 – 80 percent of the agricultural labour force. And that they are responsible for 70 – 80 percent of all food production. In fact, they work to the extent, that time-poverty is a real issue. Still, they do not enjoy equal rights. They own but a tiny fraction of the land and have limited access to financial services and productive resources. It is estimated that limited education and employment opportunities for women in Africa has reduced annual per capita growth by 0.8 percent. That is immense and would have doubled economic growth over the last 30 years. So, investing in education and job opportunities – especially for women and girls - is really smart economics.

We have benefited from this in Denmark. A well-educated population is our strongest asset. And highly skilled human capital is of immense importance for attracting foreign investments. President Kikwete of Tanzania strongly underlined the need for broad based support to education at all levels, when he visited Denmark earlier this year. Educating women and girls is an investment in human capital. It has well-known positive impact on children's schooling, child mortality, as well as the health and nutrition of the family. It reduces fertility rates and the risk of HIV/AIDS. And it improves women's job opportunities and thus the income of families. Investing in women is therefore also an investment in all the Millennium Development Goals.

I want Denmark to remain in the forefront of putting gender equality and the empowerment of women at the heart of our partnership with Africa. We share obligations and joint commitments. We all know the potential gains and what it takes to ensure effective implementation of gender equality. What we need to provide now is strong joint political leadership. The African Partnership Forum is important for consolidating and further developing our partnership in this regard. I do encourage you to seize the opportunity and

ensure that strong messages on gender equality and economic empowerment of women are sent to the up-coming G8 and AU Summits as well as the EU-Africa Summit in December this year.

It is time to act. We owe it to the African women and men and to the development of the continent. Denmark's cooperation is at hand.

Thank you very much.