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***The TOPIC-al Purpose-Driven Woman in Leadership***

**Keynote Speech**

**by H.E. Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa**

**Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the occasion of the 12<sup>th</sup> edition of the Business Day Inspiring Woman Series Conference**

**Lagos, Nigeria**

**13 December 2023**

## ***Protocol and Salutations***

It is a great honor to be with you this morning and I am especially pleased to be a part of a gathering whose focus is to celebrate the achievements of African women while additionally creating an environment to cultivate their further growth and development through networking, knowledge sharing and capacity building.

Let me start with a special recognition and gratitude to few inspirational women in this room:

- Kemi Ajumobi, Associate Editor at Business Day and the mastermind behind The Inspiring Woman Series Conference;
- Daphne Mashile-Nkosi, Founder/CEO and Executive Chairman at Kalagadi Manganese and Conference Chairperson;
- Last, but not least, my very dear sister and friend, Cecilia Olubukola Akintomide, who inspired me to join the 12<sup>th</sup> Conference.

I am particularly thrilled to deliver a keynote speech at this event, which is not only a celebration of empowerment, inspiration, and progress, but also a powerful networking platform, not just for us women but for men as well. For, behind every successful woman there is a caring and supporting man.

## ***He for She***

In my case, my father in whose loving memory we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, was a force that shaped the belief system that underpins a purpose-driven ME. “La droiture” (Uprightness) was his motto. Since our young age, my siblings and I learned from him the importance of living a values-based life; values of hard work and professionalism; respect and inclusion of everyone without minding their social status; peace maker at home, family and the village at large; community and church servanthood; to name a few.

My father was not the only one, though. There is also; my mentor President Paul Kagame who has trusted me with higher and higher roles, from the time he

appointed me a Cabinet Minister of State at a fresh Masters graduate age 32 - the youngest at that time and believe me, today there is even younger Ministers- and now, to my current role at the African Union Commission. Then comes my husband who continues to support me with caring love and emotional support while allowing me the space to perform my duties as a woman leader.

This gives me the opportunity to celebrate all men who make it possible for women to progress. A couple of weeks ago, we concluded the Third African Union Conference on Positive Masculinity held in Pretoria, South Africa. These conference series on Positive Masculinity are an African Union innovation masterminded by AWLN, the African Women Leaders Network, and endorsed by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government as a platform to highlight and encourage men's leadership in advancing GEWE- Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. The Conferences offer a moment to state that it is high time the GEWE agenda ceased to be a women's alone business. Allow me to recognize men who are in this room today. They are a testimony to the idea of positive masculinity.

### ***The TOPIC-al Framework***

Dear friends,

You tasked me to talk about The Purpose-Driven Woman in Leadership. I am glad to offer some thoughts as I look forward to hearing yours on this important topic. In so doing, I will use a simple framework I call "TOPIC-al". The Purpose-Driven Woman in Leadership is TOPIC-al, meaning, she is of interest and relevance at the present time. Looked at it from inner self, TOPIC-al translates into five inputs comprising her moral compass, namely **TOPIC-al: Trust/Trustworthiness, Opportunity, Passion, Integrity, and Confidence**. The output is equally **TOPIC-al: Transform, Organize, Persist, Impact, and Connect**.

**T- Trust** is perhaps the most precious asset there is in our lives. Bankers know it very well, for instance, that a default of trust in a currency can crash an economy. Trust is earned, and self-reinforcing. Trust is maintained through a track record of doing the right things and doing them right. It does not matter if it is big or small things. What matters is the attitude to bring about change, the urge to **transform**. There is a lot around us that needs transformation. From individual to community to national, regional, continental and global level. Close your eyes and think about it for a second. You will have seen misery: hunger, disease, climate disasters, school drop-outs, early pregnancies and marriages, poor infrastructure, unemployment, wars; amidst largely untapped opportunities: natural resources, fertile lands, bumper harvest rotting in the gardens due to lack of feeder roads to take it to markets. Maybe you saw images of an Africa poor yet rich, youthful yet unable to harness the dividend, aid-recipient yet its stolen assets and illicit financial flows by far outnumber the official aid it gets, an Africa that exports raw material just to import the finished product for many folds the price. Probably to get here your fellow African colleague had to get out of the continent then come back because our skies are not integrated, without mentioning visa requirements that hinder the free cross-border movement. Our Africa is crying for purpose-driven leadership. I envision the Purpose-Driven Woman in leadership identifying the challenge of her time and space. As women are known for our ability to handle it in details, so much the better. For, like the saying goes, the devil always is in the details. For the purpose-driven woman in leadership it does not matter how it hurts or seems difficult; like the Legend Nelson Mandela, she trusts that “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” I remember once in my previous life in government, while in a retreat of the leadership, President Paul Kagame urging us to “Work hard until it pains because poverty hurts much more.”

**O- Opportunity** is what you are entrusted when you are trusted. The purpose-driven woman in leadership always remembers that it is not because she is the smartest that she holds that position of leadership and influence. Her purpose is to use the opportunity to serve and not for self-service. The Word of God speaks to us in Matthew Chapter 10, that because you have received freely, you must give freely.

The purpose-driven woman in leadership will use the opportunity she has to create opportunities for others. Mrs. Graca Machel often tells the women in her networks to learn how to strategize and **organize**. Change will never happen by itself. It requires skills and method. The purpose-driven woman in leadership invests in organizing: her home; her resources, mainly time and team; partners; and stakeholders. In a context of development transformation of Africa characterized by considerable gaps between needs and means, the purpose-driven woman in leadership ought to organize. Sometimes, we women shy away from admitting our limitations, especially our time poverty, and we end up in burnout. Or else, we miss to optimize our opportunities. There is a lot that we could gain through smart delegation. Let me share a personal experience in this regard. There was a time where I struggled for years to take my African Leadership Initiative-Aspen Fellow project off the ground until I swallowed my pride and joined hands with the founder of a local women's association in my village, who was also struggling to secure financial resources and connections to implement a similar passion. That is how we co-founded Friend Indeed Organization; she brought to the table the time I did not have, and I brought financial resources and my networks she was lacking, and we put them together to achieve our dream. She had to quit her school-teaching job and I had to pay her what she was earning a month plus a mark-up to incentivize her to take the risk. We had to do that for more than a year, until we stabilized our young NGO that now can raise funding by itself.

**P- Passion** is a key ingredient in living a purpose-driven life. A leader, and woman leader for that matter, needs a decent dose of passion to keep going. Especially when challenges strike. What motivates you in life? What feeds your soul and fulfills you? Back in February 2016, a motivational speaker and a sister, Victoria Trabosh accepted our invitation as New Faces New Voices Rwanda Chapter, to come and talk to our members. (NFNV Rwanda, which I co-founded and chaired until I stepped down in February 2021 to move to the African Union Commission). Victoria taught us Three Secrets to Never Losing Your Voice. The third secret was around "what do all people who accomplish the extraordinary have in common?" We speculated on it and failed, until she revealed it to us: **Persistence!** Was the right answer. She went

on to define it as not stubbornness but “the desire to create something, no matter what it takes.” It has stuck in my mind ever since. This short word keeps me going in moments of challenges. You need to persist, because transformation, like reform, is a long-haul business.

**I-Integrity** is another composite of the moral compass a purpose-driven woman in leadership goes by, and any leader for that matter. It is very easy to get lost in the forest of fame and social status that come with positions of leadership and forget the responsibility we have to lead with integrity, transparency and accountability. The corruption thus started in the minds easily catches the hands that no longer mind about thousands, and even millions, of people deprived of some positive outcomes by our omissions and commissions. It is very difficult to **impact** situations, beneficiaries or clients with lasting outcomes without integrity.

**C-** My TOPIC-al framework would not be complete without a C. **Confidence** has me covered. The lack of self-confidence counts among factors that limit the participation of women and girls in decision-making positions and in the economy. Which is why initiatives such as mentorship and coaching and other forms of exposure are critical to nurture talent in current and future women leaders. The efforts to overcome fear, biases and social norms have to be deliberate and intentional. The Purpose-Driven Woman in Leadership creates conditions to **connect** with the reality around her and her fellow sisters to overcome the challenges together. I take this opportunity to commend and congratulate my dear sisters on 12 years of successfully hosting the Inspiring Women Series Conference. The culture, evolution and history of African women have advanced tremendously over the past decade and continue to do so through the deliberate effort and influence of platforms such as these that encourage women and societies to reimagine their purpose, reengineer their roles and develop their status.

***African Union’s GEWE initiatives***

The African Union recognizes the rightful place women hold in the attainment of the aspirations of the continent as enshrined in Agenda 2063. A number of frameworks have been adopted, including but not limited to;

- the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights which celebrates its 20 years this year;
- Mandating of gender parity in AU organ's leadership positions (The AU Commission is now 50-50) and urging member states to do the same;
- the first African Women's Decade (AWD) 2010-2020 that focused on a grassroots approach to gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) ensuring that women understand their rights and agency;
- the creation of a permanent office of the Envoy of the Chairperson of the Commission on issues of Women, Peace and Security and establishment of structures such as Femwise and the Panel of the Wise so that women lead on matters of building peace and resolving conflicts on our continent; and
- the second AWD 2020-2030 that focuses on the financial and economic empowerment of African women.

It is with the aim to embark on the second AWD with purpose and a sense of accountability that I envisioned, and am spearheading, the Women and Youth Financial and Economic Inclusion (WYFEI 2030) Initiative. WYFEI 2030 seeks to unlock \$100 Billion USD for at least 10 million African SMES owned by women and youth by 2030 through partnerships and communities of practice. Other deliverables of this initiative include the participation of women and youth in public procurement where we are advocating for the 40% quota; access to digital technologies and other burden-easing solutions to address time poverty; access to markets including the AfCFTA; and employment.

These are but a few of the examples of the deliberate actions taken by the African Union towards the empowerment of our African women. As the old adage goes, "if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together". We at the African Union Commission believe in the power of shared-values partnerships. I therefore

invite all interested impactful organizations present here today who would like to contribute to the empowerment of our African women to partner with us on this cause.

### ***Conclusion***

In closing, I would like to congratulate Business Day for your achievements and efforts in shaping the future of African women and encourage you to continue this practice of demonstration and sharing of best practices. I further encourage you to cultivate spaces of practical learning through training and masterclasses towards ensuring that our women are armed with both the knowledge and the skills they need to dismantle the social and economic barriers that stand against them and their purpose. Your effort is contributing to nurturing and creating a community of practice of TOPIC-al Purpose-Driven Women in Leadership, for which the African Union in general and myself in particular owe you gratitude.

**I thank you!**