

**A KEYNOTE SPEECH BY THE GEVC, SIFAX GROUP, H.E. DR. TAIWO AFOLABI, MON, ON THE OCCASION OF STAR CHILDREN INITIATIVE FOUNDATION, UK DIALOGUE ON ENDING ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS LIVING WITH DISABILITIES IN NIGERIA ON THURSDAY, 5<sup>TH</sup> APRIL AT LCCI CONFERENCE HALL, IKEJA, LAGOS**

Your Excellencies,  
Honourable Commissioners,  
The Founder of Star Children Initiative Foundation and Convener, Vulnerable to Abuse: Ending Abuse Against Women and Girls Living with Disabilities in Nigeria, Mrs. Grace Alexandar Abimbola  
Distinguished Participants,  
Media Representatives,  
Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to be here today, and be a part of ongoing dialogue on empowering women and girls irrespective of their status and condition. More so, on the heel of the 2018 International Women's Day Commemoration themed; Press for Progress.

As we assess the opportunities and challenges of the women movement and celebrate women who have shattered glass ceilings and broken down barriers, it is with a great satisfaction that I describe today's meeting as a crucial step to propelling collective effort to further press for progress and 'leave no one behind!' On a personal note, I feel elated about the timing of the meeting because the month of April is my birth month and annually, I use this period to engage as widely as I could, particularly with organizations tending to the needs of vulnerable and hard-to-reach persons.

I am here to engage in this dialogue, partly, because Sifax Group's corporate conscience is fully activated and self-regulated. Our social footprints are evidenced in a range of education, health and entrepreneurial programmes we have embarked on to engage our community broadly and make tremendous impacts in the field of education and youth development. To this extent, Sifax Group's reputation transcends the borders of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to making social impacts. We are not just passionate about developing a great future for Nigeria; we are doing something about it by actively engaging the youth and the custodians of the future; male and female in at least 10 Nigerian public universities, including the donation of a 1,000-capacity lecture theatre at the Ladoke Akintola University, Ogbomosho, Oyo State, an 18-seater hiace bus to medical students of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife as well as annual sponsorship of various socially-impactful programmes at the University of Lagos and University of Ibadan.

SIFAX Group is also active in the support of individuals with physically disabilities. In the last few years, we have provided support for Moyinoluwa Rainbow Learning Centre established to take

care for down syndrome children in Lagos. Other beneficiaries include Save Hearing Impaired Foundation and Ajeromi Ifelodun Deaf & Dumb Association. The company has supported their empowerment initiatives for their members.

On the other hand, we didn't get here by chance. It was a choice and we continued to be inspired by the pedigree of a philanthropic tradition that has consistently responded to the need of vulnerable persons, mostly women and children. It is on the strength of this tradition that Ajoke Ayisat Afolabi Foundation (AAAF) was established 10 years ago in honour of my mother, specifically to empower widows, orphans, and persons with disabilities by strengthening their capability to roll back the effect of structural defects that hinder the empowerment of women and girls. As a business man, I recognize the importance of turning opportunities to assets through investments, and understand no business allows a significant part of its assets to be fallowed. I found this entrepreneurial approach to generating value viable and I recommend its adoption as a response to the gender question in Nigeria. I believe inclusion and equal opportunities are best served when potentials of everyone irrespective of gender and status is accorded the right value and harvested appropriately as a national asset,

I recognize that cynics whose attention are fully concentrated on the political architecture have their doubts about the progress made so far on the subjects of inclusion and equal opportunities but a quick assessment of our demographics landscape speak to the contrary. Highlights of the gender report cards indicate the following:

1. Ongoing legislative process on "A bill to Ensure Full Integration of Persons with Disabilities into the Society and to Establish a National Commission for Persons with Disabilities and Vest it with the Responsibilities for their Education, Healthcare, Social, Economic and Civil Rights (Establishment, etc.)"
2. Increased rate of female enrollment in primary school by 2.9 percent as rate increased to 48.6 percent in 2015 from 45.7 percent in 2010.<sup>1</sup>
3. With 41% of women in Nigeria as entrepreneurs, Nigeria is described as the country with the highest number of female entrepreneurs<sup>2</sup>
4. Nigeria recognized as a nation that has mainstreamed gender diversity into its principles of corporate governance<sup>3</sup>
5. 2016 Supreme Court's landmark judgment on inheritance forbids the age-long subjugation and discrimination suffered by women in Igboland, South East Nigeria

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<sup>1</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, November 2016

<sup>2</sup> 2015 No Ceilings Initiative Study, The Bill, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton Foundation

<sup>3</sup> Africa Development Bank (AfDB), 2015

6. The enactment of the Lagos State Special People Law in June 2011 to uphold the rights of all persons living with any form of disability (PWDs) and establish under the law an office for Disability affairs in Lagos state

With these and the many more changes observe in different professional sectors, there has been considerable progress in mainstreaming gender. However, there is need to press further and shift to the next phase of discussions as outlined by the choice of the theme, which I consider appropriate.

For too long we have considered 'women' as a homogeneous group and our reaction based on this perception has generated avalanche of programmes and policies erroneously, targeting women as one homogeneous indivisible unit. However, this meeting is a reminder on the need to unpack and respond to the peculiarities of the subsets of the women's group to tackle discriminations and inequalities, effectively.

Once again, I congratulate the Convener for leading the dialogue on inclusion and equal opportunities to the next phase, which is beyond sex and socio-cultural difference. There is no doubt that it is time for the discourse to recognize and address multiple identity factors that may include such considerations such as mental or physical disability and household headship status that intersect to define the priority for an individual living with disability. Doing this will help press policy makers to identify the varying ways women and girls can be impacted by government policies and programmes.

Please note that to raise the tide for every woman and girl living with disabilities, each one must self-embrace their status, focus on strengthening their competencies and commit to overcoming inflicted barriers. The first step towards this is that women and girls living with disabilities must strive to overcome every form of self-pity and sense of entitlements. If they keep at it, they would have been able to overturn the discrimination and stigmas encountered daily as a result of physical disability and get defined by the positive results they achieved.

To bridge the gender gaps, therefore, it is the responsibility of non-profits working on the subject of inclusion, to empower and equip vulnerable women and girls with requisite skills and education that enable positive representation of the women empowerment brand as they engage decision makers and potential partners from the point of strength. Women and Girls living with disabilities must be able to clearly articulate and communicate their issues in order to influence legislative and executive priority through existing spaces relating to women empowerment and equal opportunities

In conclusion, I urge collaboration on the process of profiling, documenting and sharing the success stories of persons living with disabilities, wherever they abound, to inspire vulnerable

women and girls and help them deploy their innate abilities as mechanisms for restraining self and systemic abuse.

Thank you all for listening.