

WAFIRA – West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Benin & Togo) 2016

Keynote Speech by Dr. Elizabeth Rasekoala, President: African Gong – The Pan-African Network for the Popularization of Science & Technology and Science Communication

Title of Keynote Presentation:

‘Reflections on WAFIRA: Innovative paradigms in the conceptualisation and leadership of the gender equality transformation agenda by African women’

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted and honoured to be here today to contribute to the auspicious delivery of the WAFIRA Forum.

I wish to start by commending the DAAD and the German government for funding the WAFIRA initiative, as a unique programme for advancing gender equality within their African Strategy and Framework. The WAFIRA programme has come about as a result of the 2013 DAAD-Nigeria Alumni event, where the profound under-representation of women was starkly visible and engendered critical discussions. In response, a small group of us got together to work up the concept, scope and framework of the WAFIRA programme...to which the DAAD responded very positively, by funding the first pilot WAFIRA workshop which was held at the University of Ibadan, in Nigeria, in 2014. Following the success of this pilot event which was hugely over-subscribed, the DAAD in 2016, is funding the programme in Nigeria (two events to meet the huge demand), Benin, Ghana, and Togo, with Ivory Coast planning on holding its first WAFIRA workshop in the early half of next year.

The WAFIRA initiative has been conceptualised as a radically game-changing framework in seeking to transform the discourses, narratives, advocacy and platform for the advancement of women in academia and research, from that of continually '*problematizing our victimhood*' to that of innovative leadership as agents of self-empowered, self-enhanced, and self-driven individual and collective leadership. It is about finding answers to the questions... how do I?... how do we?... it is not about over-stating our problems. Thus, WAFIRA is not a Conference... it is not a talk-shop... we have all been to enough of those!!! It is about interactively engaging in working out individual and collective solutions to the challenges of delivering gender equality for women in academia and research. It is also worth noting that the WAFIRA programme is very uniquely, '**Made in Africa**'...by us!!! It has not been designed elsewhere and simply handed down to us to take-up! It has been created by us, for *us*!!! Therefore, it is very much ours to own and sustain!!!

WAFIRA is also profoundly about reflection... it is about providing a conducive and safe space... hence 'women-only' for us to reflect and interrogate the ways and means that we have been conditioned by societal and patriarchal norms to conform...in our personal, professional and working lives... the classic example and analogy here is that of the Pavlovian experiment...the dog... the bell ringing.... and the piece of meat appearing... so that in time the dog drools every time the bell rings in anticipation of getting a piece of meat... to the point that even when the piece of meat does not appear.... It still salivates...How many of us are in that space of conditioning?... so that we lose sight of what the real gender inequities are... and where the real enemy and the battles are located....and should be challenged... instead our conditioning leads us to rail

ineffectually at misguided notions of gender equality... just as the dog if it could speak would rail at the non-appearance of meat when the bell rings, without stopping to ask itself... how it could conceive such a related expectation as being reasonable...that is because it is not aware that it has been mind-conditioned... and so WAFIRA is about reflection... but, reflection is hard.. And that is why we don't do it... it is very difficult for us to look really hard and honestly at ourselves and thus, to identify, understand, and even begin to unpick the societal and patriarchal conditioning that we have been subjected to since girlhood... but do so we must!!!... if we are to achieve long-lasting and impactful solutions that will radically transform our place in society in general and academia and research in particular...

The time is now folks!!! And thus, over these three days we will be engaging in profound paradigm shifts in terms of how we 'lift our game' as women in academia and research, enhance our skills, knowledge, networks, and information systems, through mentoring programmes, international exchange programmes, successful research funding applications techniques and methodologies, strategic career planning, and a whole other plethora of evidence-based good practice tools and instruments for our advancement in academia and research.

And why do I say that the time is now.... Because we are uniquely in a global scenario where a profound change in the nature and dynamics of knowledge generation, value acquisition and economic development have transformed the landscape and provide uniquely advantageous opportunities for our advancement as women in general and women in academia and research in particular... but we need to harness our capabilities in all realms to ensure that we truly deliver enhanced gender equality in this new landscape.... And we

really must not allow these new global platforms to pass us by as African women!!! I will elaborate on **three key elements** of this transformed global platform here....

The **first transformative platform** is that of the 21st Century global economic development shift from resource-based heavy industrial development models to that of knowledge-based economies and societies... The global development game is changing rapidly, and the 'game changers' have been dwindling natural resources and the impact of Climate Change. In the 21st Century, there is a new game afoot in the global development arena, that of Knowledge-based economies and societies, and we must harness the leadership of women to ensure that this time around, Africans are winners and not losers, yet again!

What this shift means in profound terms of gender equality is that we are really in the radical era of **'brains rather than brawn' driving the global economic development agenda...** so that the old notions of masculine superior physical strength as a means of undermining women in the economic development arena, is now very much a busted flush....This transformation is so glaringly obvious when we look at international indicators such as the Forbes List of the world's richest people...look at the domination of the top ten men (and they are men!!!) who have all made their fortunes in knowledge-based industries... and compare that to the same list at the end of the 20th Century... when the same top ten was dominated by men who had made their fortunes in heavy industries such as Steel-making, Oil & Gas, Mining, etc.

The key take home lesson from this change, for women, is that we can no longer be fobbed-off by the 'brawn versus brain' argument...in this era of knowledge-based development, knowledge generation, acquisition and transfer paradigms... we

can compete effectively with the brain-power that we have always had to the same extent as men...we just need to realise that this transformation in the global development arena truly empowers us to compete on a level-playing field.

The **second transformative platform** is that of trans-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary research, collaboration and sustainable global development. The critical hallmark of this platform is the UN's post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) framework which amply elucidates the complexity, range, breadth and depth of the global development challenges of the 21st century, much more so than the preceding Millennium Development Goals (MDG's), which were limited in their scope and application. The SDG's have elaborated in much more detail than the MDG's the complex interlinkages between the multi-level development challenges across the globe.

The SDGs acknowledge the complexity of our world and provide plenty of opportunity for cross-disciplinary work. For instance, **Goal 2** aims to end hunger and is at least as concerned with politics and economics as it is with climate change and farm yields. But the structural relations, incentives and training of researchers currently in place do not routinely support cross-disciplinary work. Better policy leadership could provide a boost to interdisciplinary collaboration... but the real opportunity of this new canvas of the complex interlinked world so well-articulated by the 17 SDG's, is that it works to the natural advantage of women researchers, whom surveys have shown to be more naturally inclined and receptive to undertake cross-disciplinary work. Through harnessing the leadership of African women academics and researchers, we can truly transform African Universities and research institutions to

become beacons and global centres of excellence for the delivery of cutting-edge cross-disciplinary research that will deliver substantial gains for sustainable development on our continent, where the challenges are so stark!

The **third transformative platform** is that of International Exchanges for Research, Study and Professional development. International Exchanges provide a unique opportunity for the transformation of women academics and researchers. These programmes, such as those offered by DAAD and other German programmes such as the AvH... Alexander von Humboldt... are very special indeed, and provide leverage for women's research output, publication outputs, teaching skills and their advancement in academia and research institutions. As someone who has participated in these programmes.... A short six-week course under the auspices of the German government – at the Nuclear Research Centre in Karlsruhe, and a longer year long programme in Spain, funded by the Spanish government, I can attest at first hand the life-long benefits of these programmes... confidence and aspiration boosting, inter-cultural strengths and experiences, and the finesse and polish that one gains... these programmes really round one out... and provide that globalised outlook and mind-set, that is so crucial in academia and research, which are sectors that are in themselves highly globalised.

Thus, in this regard, I would wish to exhort the ladies here present to really take note of the information on the programmes offered by the German government... which you will be hearing plenty about over the next three days, because all the surveys show that women applicants are very under-represented in the responses to Calls for these programmes... these surveys also highlight that one of the key reasons why

women applicants are under-represented is that they lack information on these programmes, compared to their male counterparts... yes, there are also the usual challenges of family responsibilities... holding women back... but actually what women indicate is that it is the lack of information, the lack of confidence to apply...the lack of support from their peers and colleagues, etc.... which hold them back from leveraging these international exchange opportunities.

And so I urge you ladies to please consider these programmes seriously as part of the advancement tool-kit that you will take away from this WAFIRA Forum... and am sure the folks in DAAD will not mind me saying that having gained knowledge of the German programmes from this workshop... please take the time to research the field of international exchange programmes and look into what other countries are also offering beyond just the German government programmes... there are so many countries offering these programmes now... the availability has never been better... and even some African governments are also offering these now.

WAFIRA is also about engaging our male colleagues in academia and research as partners for change... and in this regard, we have not left them out... as we do not want them to think that we consider them to be part of the problem and not part of the solution... we really do value their contributions... and have thus, provided a user-friendly male-only session...on this the first day of the Forum... as we begin this journey of engaging them in the advancement of gender equality in academia and research. We hope that by making this a male-only session... they will feel 'safe' enough to fully engage, articulate and interrogate their potential roles as agents of sustainable change and partner with us on this transformative

journey... taking the knowledge, commitment and enrolment that they have gained into their institutions to drive and embed this change in their working, personal and professional environments with gender-sensitive hallmarks at the core of their operations. We hope that a good number of our male colleagues here present will stay on for the rest of the day and participate in the male-only session.

In **summary** then, WAFIRA is a timely and highly innovative programme designed to meet the leadership needs, career aspirations and professional development agendas of African women in academia and research. This will enable them to fully harness the progressive opportunities encapsulated in the transformations in the global development agendas and scenarios of the 21st century.... in strategic platforms such as sustainable development and cross-disciplinary research and knowledge co-generation; knowledge-based economies and societies, where know-how is now more important than brawn, thereby providing a more level playing field for women; and the myriad career development and research advancement opportunities that can be leveraged through international exchanges, studies and research collaborations. I exhort you all to make the best of this unique platform over these three days... and to squeeze every ounce of benefit from your interactions with peers and senior colleagues and mentors.

I wish you all very fruitful, enriching, uplifting and career advancing discussions, deliberations, reflections and networking at this seminal WAFIRA Forum in 2016.

THANK YOU ALL!!!!