Report:
Inaugural Amujae Leadership Forum
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The inaugural class of Amujae Leaders, class of 2020 with distinguished guests at the launch of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development, 8 March 2020, Liberia.

“My biggest takeaway or “aha moment” … was the moment I realized I was surrounded by the future leaders of my continent. And that we have a chance to build friendships that can change how things are done.”

— Amujae Leader
1. Executive Summary

Although four (4) of the top fifteen (15) countries in the world on women’s representation in parliament are in Africa¹, women are still grossly under-represented in public leadership. At present, there is only one woman President in Africa and a handful of deputies. Ministerial cabinets, legislative committees, and political parties largely reflect the same lack of women in influential positions in public affairs. While the continent is awash with much-needed women’s empowerment programs with a range of focus areas including women’s access to health, education, capital, legal rights, and women’s leadership development, there is scant evidence of nuanced initiatives that seek to break the proverbial ‘glass ceiling’ in public leadership. There is commendable work being done to improve women’s representation and participation in public life in general, but there are limited direct efforts to bring capable African women leaders out of the shadows and to catapult them into the highest offices in public leadership.

On International Women’s Day, the 8th of March 2020, the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development (EJS Center) formally launched its flagship program, the Amujae Initiative, in collaboration with Big Win Philanthropy. Led by the continent’s first democratically elected woman president, this pan-African initiative is designed to inspire and prepare women to unapologetically take up roles and excel in the highest echelons of public leadership, and to bring other women along. Amujae (ɑ mọ攻打) is derived from a phrase in Kru, a Liberian local language, which means ‘we are going up’.

In the lead up to the launch, the EJS Center convened fourteen (14) trailblazing African women leaders in public leadership for a two-day Forum that was designed to prepare them for ascendance in their chosen paths. This cohort of distinguished women leaders included:

- The first woman mayor of Sierra Leone’s capital city, Freetown, in over 35 years – a formidable leader who played a central role in managing her country’s response to the Ebola outbreak in 2014, positioning her to win the position of Mayor with nearly 60% of the vote;
- The first woman managing director of the Nigerian Ports Authority – a fiery strategist who co-initiated the Bring Back Our Girls global campaign after the abduction of 279 secondary school students, and current Vice President of the African Region for the International Association of Ports and Harbors (IAPH), and
- The first woman (now former) economy and finance minister of Guinea – an astute economist who reached record macroeconomic results during her tenure and was instrumental in key strategic negotiations to secure more than USD$20 billion for an ambitious infrastructure program.

With the support of luminary African women leaders like President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (former President of the Republic of Liberia), President Joyce Banda (former President of the Republic of Malawi), President

¹ United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women); Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020
Catherine Samba-Panza (former President of Central African Republic) and Dr Thelma Awori (Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Liberia to Uganda), the Amujae Leaders were taken through a carefully curated program that facilitated meaningful engagement, as they interchanged ideas on the rigors of ascendance in public leadership.

The Forum, which was hosted in Monrovia under the theme ‘Intentional Leadership’, provided space for reflection, strategic planning and the establishment of a strong network focused on increasing women’s representation in the highest levels of public leadership in Africa.

The EJS Center aims to provide targeted support to each of these Leaders as they actively pursue their respective ambitions in public leadership. Two other Forums were scheduled to be held this year with this same cohort of Amujae Leaders. However, due to the global developments related to the outbreak of COVID-19, the program’s roll-out plan is under revision to ensure that the momentum generated at the Amujae Leadership Forum is maintained through guided, virtual activities.

“…when you’ve got the fire in your belly, you can’t stop…”

– President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
2. Introduction

The Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development (EJS Center) was founded in 2018 to be a catalyst for political and social change across Africa by helping unleash its most abundant latent power — its women. The Center aims to amplify the voice of women and girls in all spheres of life by increasing the representation of women in public service leadership roles in Africa. Through a unique blend of programming, advocacy, archival research and museum exhibitions, the EJS Center seeks to become a premier institution dedicated to advancing and sustaining women’s political and social development on the continent. As the first democratically elected woman president in Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf led Liberia from 2006-2018. Having been recognized internationally for her leadership, she is passionate about supporting the next generation of women in public life across the continent.

3. The Amujae Initiative

The Amujae Initiative is the flagship undertaking of the EJS Center. Amujae is derived from the phrase ã mõõ jãëë which means ‘we are going up’ in Kru, a Liberian local language.

The initiative addresses the underrepresentation of women in public leadership in Africa by ensuring that women become equal partners in setting national priorities and direction of their respective countries. It identifies and challenges African women who have demonstrable potential, bolstering their ambitions and simultaneously providing them with practical support so that they can successfully pursue and take up the highest positions in public leadership. Together with other African women leaders who pried open the doors before them, it is expected that these women will tear down structural barriers to unleash a wave of women public leaders in Africa.

The vision for the Amujae Initiative is to shift the landscape for women in public leadership in Africa, moving from a culture of tokenism to a culture that values women’s leadership. Its mission is to inspire and prepare women to unapologetically take up roles and excel in the highest echelons of public leadership, and to bring other women along.

The initiative’s primary goals are to:

- enhance the capacity of women in public leadership to increase their effectiveness in the roles they currently hold;
- embolden women as they navigate different career paths in public leadership, spurring them to aspire to and position themselves for the highest positions;
- ensure these women have a cadre of experienced talent upon whom they can rely for ongoing, personal mentorship throughout their respective leadership journeys;
- strengthen ties among a growing and reliable network of female public leaders in Africa, &
- positively influence public perception on female public leadership in Africa.
To achieve these goals, the Amujae Initiative conducts a set of integrated activities that include advocacy and movement building, research and thought leadership, documenting and storytelling, and leadership development. The first of these leadership development activities, the inaugural Amujae Leadership Forum, was held on March 6-7, 2020 at The Farmington Hotel in Monrovia, Liberia, ahead of the Center’s launch ceremony which was held on March 8, 2020.

4. The Amujae Leadership Forum

The EJS Center has committed to hosting a yearly cycle of Amujae Leadership Forums facilitating personal and professional development, as well as ongoing coaching and mentoring of identified women leaders. Participants in the leadership forums, known as Amujae Leaders, are African women of proven talent who are already on a public leadership journey, with a track record of excellence and of supporting their fellow women. The inaugural Amujae Leadership Forum was hosted on March 6-7, 2020 in Liberia bringing together a stellar class of accomplished women leaders.

4.1 Amujae Leaders, Class of 2020²

The inaugural cohort of Amujae Leaders is made up of dynamic African women leaders who have a public leadership track record with demonstrable achievements. These women are committed to serving their communities and countries, and they share a common drive to uplift African women and girls. This cohort set the benchmark for the caliber of candidates that will be considered for future cohorts of Amujae Leaders. Together they represent:

- Eight (8) countries and four (4) regions of the continent.
- A balanced mix of current occupations in the public sphere including both elected and appointed officials, as well as civil society leaders.
- A diverse range of personal and professional backgrounds in fields that include law, academia, banking, activism, etc.
- An intergenerational cohort.
- A wealth of varied experiences and perspectives on serving in public leadership as a woman.

The EJS Center gathered these women together to stoke their ambition for the highest levels of influence in public leadership, to establish a strong and reliable pan African network of women public leaders, to ensure that their efforts to empower women and girls are coordinated and sustainable, and to provide meaningful support to these leaders as they navigate the arduous journey of ascendance.

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² Refer to Appendix: List of Amujae Leaders, Class of 2020
4.2 Coaches and Resource Persons

One of the ways in which the EJS Center provides meaningful support to Amujae Leaders is by connecting Amujae Leaders to African luminaries who have pioneered and excelled in public leadership. At the inaugural Amujae Leadership Forum, the Center drew on the experiences of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (former president of the Republic of Liberia), Joyce Banda (former president of the Republic of Malawi), Catherine Samba-Panza (former president of Central African Republic) and Dr Thelma Awori (Honorary Consul General of the Republic of Liberia to Uganda).

The Coaches participated in every activity of the Forum, for the Forum’s duration. In their exchanges with Amujae Leaders, the Coaches took the lead in sharing openly, drawing lessons from their own experiences. They were also frank with the Amujae Leaders, empathetically pointing out perceived encumbrances while generously encouraging and affirming the Amujae Leaders.

The Coaches were supported in these efforts by other distinguished women leaders including Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield (former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs in the United States State Department Bureau of African Affairs and Board Chair of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Foundation), Jamie Cooper (Chair and President of Big Win Philanthropy, and Board Member, EJS Center), Molly Cashin (Policy Analyst, Development Specialist and Board Member, EJS Center), Vivian Lowery Derryck (Founder and President Emerita of The Bridges Institute) and Susan Edwards (Interim Executive Director, EJS Center).

Under the direction of Rumbidzai Chisenga (Director of Leadership Programs, EJS Center) and Ama Van Dantzig (Lead Facilitator), reputable subject matter experts provided sound input and skillfully steered conversations during the Forum. These experts included Professor Angela Ofori-Atta (Chairperson of the Psychology Council in Ghana and Board Member, EJS Center), Professor Leonard Wantchekon (Professor of Politics and International Affairs and Associated Faculty in the Economics Department at Princeton University), Eva Barboni (Founder and CEO, Atalanta) and Mayowa Kuyoro (Management Consultant, McKinsey & Company).

4.3 Forum Objectives

With the theme ‘Intentional Leadership’, the Forum’s main objective was to prepare Amujae Leaders to unabashedly seek the highest levels of public leadership and empower the next generation of leaders to rise with them. Forum activities were designed to encourage Amujae Leaders to 1) reflect on their values and aspirations, 2) acknowledge the barriers that may hold them back, 3) develop strategies to ascend in public leadership and 4) build networks for their own advancement and the advancement of other women. Careful consideration was also given to cultivating a safe space for both Coaches and Amujae Leaders to share openly and vulnerably, with the goal of engendering a sense of purposeful sisterhood.

Participants were thus taken through a set of activities that helped them to explore what it takes to be an effective leader especially in times of crisis; the need to be intentional about leadership ascension; vying for senior leadership positions with eyes wide open about how tough it can get; developing specific strategies for pre-emptively managing some of the risks; and the importance of crafting strategies for bringing other women along.
4.4 Summary of Activities

4.4.1 Forum Day One - Activities

On the first day of the Forum, President Sirleaf conveyed to the Amujae Leaders the weighty responsibility they have to advance the cause for African women in the face of ongoing pushback against gender equality. In her opening remarks, she emphatically noted that there was no time to be bashful and apologetic in this quest, challenging Amujae Leaders to commit to ‘claim their positions’ of influence.

In light of the global developments with the outbreak of COVID-19, a revision to the program was made to open the forum with a panel discussion called ‘Leading in the dark’. The panel included President Sirleaf who shared some of her experiences and reflections on leadership during the Ebola outbreak, Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, the Mayor of Freetown who relocated to Sierra Leone at the height of the Ebola outbreak and ended up as the Director of Planning at the National Ebola response Centre (NERC) and Dr Zanetor Agyeman-Rawlings, a Ghanaian general practitioner and legislator who has previously led disaster relief efforts and sanitation projects. Moderated by Rumbidzai Chisenga (Director of Leadership Programs, EJS Center) the discussion enabled participants to understand how to serve during times of crisis, asserting leadership with or without formal authority. The ensuing Q&A session resulted in shared insights on how to draw courage and make decisions in unchartered territory, practical tips on how to mobilize resources, contextual strategies for raising awareness about COVID-19 to minimize infections and the balance of relying on yourself and others at a time of uncertainty.

Professor Angela Ofori-Atta, Chairperson of the Psychology Council in Ghana and a member of the EJS Center’s Board then took the Amujae Leaders through a process of reflecting on the personal/leadership stumbling blocks in a session entitled, ‘Developing courage and credibility in the face of perceived and real limitations’. Using Ben Okri’s poem, “Will you be at the harvest?”, Professor Ofori-Atta expertly guided the group into a discussion on what holds them back from leading with courage and staying the course. This discussion was concluded by a rich exchange between Amujae Leaders on how to face yourself and face challenges when you are tempted to shrink back.

In a pre-recorded video presentation addressing ‘The outsider’s way in’, Professor Leonard Wantchekon a Professor of Politics and International Affairs and Associated Faculty in the Economics Department at Princeton University, shared some strategies that can be employed by women candidates running for election, considering that women usually find themselves outside of traditional power structures.

In the late afternoon, the three former presidents took the floor to share accounts of their journeys to the highest office. In what was dubbed the ‘Presidential Panel’, Presidents Sirleaf, Banda and Samba-Panza recounted key moments in their ascendance journeys, observing the push and pull factors that shaped their decisions about the leadership platforms they pursued. During this discussion which was moderated by Malado Kaba (former Economy and Finance Minister, and Amujae Leader, Guinea), President Sirleaf set the tone of intentionality with the electrifying comment, “Let’s be clear, I was the soul of my party and the master of my campaign...”, underscoring the importance of taking charge. All three Presidents shared openly how the ‘fire in the belly’ and ‘need to make things right for their people, especially the women
and children’, ultimately overrode the terrifying situations they confronted along their journeys (e.g. ostracization, bullying, arrests and death threats). The openness with which the presidents shared their reflections set the stage for a bolder, deeper and more intimate dialogue which carried the discussion well past dinner into the late night.

“Leadership is a love affair. You must fall in love with the people and the people will fall in love with you.”

- President Joyce Banda

Presidents Samba-Panza (Left), Sirleaf (Center), Banda (Right)
4.4.2 Forum Day Two - Activities

Following a reflection on the previous day’s discussions, the day began with a workshop titled ‘Managing your public profile’ which was facilitated by Eva Barboni, a Communications and Public Relations Specialist. They were advised to define themselves before someone else does, know their vulnerabilities, and ensure they have a crisis protocol well in advance of an expected crisis.

A presentation on McKinsey & Company’s Power of Parity report by Mayowa Kuyoro (Management Consultant, McKinsey & Company), highlighted the imperative for having more women in decision-making positions in Africa. The participants subsequently engaged in a discussion on what they can do to bring more women into public leadership. Several eminent women leaders who had joined the Forum used this opportunity to share some remarks, inspiring the Amuja Leadership and volunteering some advice. These eminent leaders included Antoinette Sayeh (former Finance Minister in Liberia, Deputy Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund and former Board Member, EJS Center), Dr Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala (former Finance Minister in Nigeria, former Managing Director of the World Bank and Board Member, EJS Center), Olubanke King Akerere (former Foreign Affairs Minister in Liberia) and Counsellor Dr Yvette Chesson-Wureh (Establishment Coordinator, Angie Brooks International Centre for Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace and Security, Liberia).

To wrap up the Forum, the four Coaches shared closing remarks affirming the Amuja Leadership. They urged the Leaders to nurture the space the Amuja Initiative provides, and the relationships formed. “We made ourselves—be proud of that, build on that,” they were advised. The Leaders were also encouraged to seek out existing women’s networks to collaborate with, and to familiarize themselves with women’s movements, especially African women’s movements, that have been working towards the empowerment of women. In her closing remarks, President Sirleaf acknowledged all stakeholders and re-cast the vision to have a regenerating wave of African women in the highest positions of public leadership.

4.5 Key takeaways

The Amuja Leaders were interviewed about their experiences during the Forum. You can watch some highlights from their interviews at the links below:

- Blen A. Sahilu (Ethiopia)
- Dr. Jumoke Oduwole (Nigeria)
The Amujae Leaders also shared some of the biggest takeaways or “aha moments” that emerged from the two days in their evaluations of the forum. Here is what some of them had to say:

“This is the real deal! The selection process really yielded good fruit. EJS is genuinely committed to supporting women to achieve their highest ambitions.”

“Sharing the journey with the presidents was exceptional.”

“Sharing the obstacles that we are each facing and collectively giving advice to each other - seeing this was special.”

“All of the sessions were absolutely amazing, inspirational, and awakening.”

“My ‘aha moment’ was really the session on ‘leading in the dark’ particularly knowing and understanding the power of local resources.”
5. The Center’s Launch Ceremony

On the 8th of March 2020, over 200 guests gathered at The Farmington Hotel to celebrate the launch of the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center for Women and Development. Distinguished guests from the diplomatic, business, religious, political, medical, and other communities joined the festivities in support of the Center’s mission.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf called on guests to join in the mission and uplift emerging women public leaders. She acknowledged the inaugural cohort of Amujae Leaders and encouraged guests to be advocates for such women leaders across the continent stating that, “Even with storytelling, one can be an advocate.” Addressing women leaders, President Sirleaf advised them to work with men in achieving parity. President Olusegun Obasanjo (former President of Nigeria) echoed this sentiment, encouraging women to identify men who are ready to work with them. He, however, charged women to be bold and take power saying, “Men are already sitting there. You must push them to take your space. They won’t give it to you”.

Liberia’s President and Vice President, President George Weah and Vice President Jewel Howard-Taylor both commended President Sirleaf’s vision and pledged to support the Center in empowering African women. Pre-recorded messages of support from President Sahle-Work Zewde (President of Ethiopia), Mr. Tony Blair (former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom) and Mrs. Hillary Clinton (former United States Secretary of State) were shared in addition to addresses from various dignitaries. Messages of support were also shared on behalf of President Nana Akufo-Addo (President of Ghana), President Alassane Ouattara (President of Côte d’Ivoire), and Mr. Aliko Dangote, GCON (Chairman of the Dangote Group).

In her remarks, the EJS Center’s incoming Executive Director, Dr Ophelia Inez Weeks made a public call, urging individuals and organizations to contribute time, expertise, ideas and other resources in support of the EJS Center’s bold vision. Dr Weeks said, “This is a call to people of all walks of life, in every possible way, to get aboard this women empowerment and development train... This very complex undertaking will present many challenges, but the anticipated outcomes should be worth it. So, join us on this adventurous journey.”

The festivities culminated in the announcement of the Amujae Leaders 2020. There was palpable excitement in the room as each of the Amujae Leaders introduced themselves, sharing some of their accomplishments to date. This moment served as a reminder of the need for support as they seek to make room for themselves and other women in the highest levels of public leadership.

6. Conclusion

The inaugural Amujae Leadership Forum brought together accomplished women from across the African continent, who have already made significant contributions to their countries, and who have the vision and ambition to reach the highest levels of public service. Over the course of the Forum, these women built strong and enduring relationships and developed additional skills and strategies to amplify their impact and bring other women along.
The launch event showcased the momentum behind the EJS Center’s work to advance women’s public leadership, and the tremendous support it has mobilized from public leaders and dignitaries around the world. It served as a fitting kick-off for the Center’s programming, acknowledging the progress that has been made, highlighting the challenges ahead, and serving as a rallying cry for action.

Since the conclusion of the Forum, the COVID-19 crisis has escalated in countries around the world—including in Africa. The Amujae Leaders have answered the call to service in their countries, emboldened and enriched by their experiences during the Forum. As we support their efforts during this challenging time, we continue to plan ahead for the months and years to come.

“I have always known I want to have an impact… and die empty.”

- Amujae Leader
Appendix 1: List of Amujae Leaders, Class of 2020

Dr. Zanetor Agyeman-Rawlings
Ghana

Clare Akamanzi
Rwanda

Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, OBE
Sierra Leone

Hadiza Bala Usman
Nigeria

Oley Dibba-Wadda
The Gambia

Kula Fofana
Uliberia

Yawa Hansen-Quao
Ghana

Malado Kaba
Republic of Guinea

Cornelia Kruah-Togba
Liberia

Adv. Fadzayi Mahere
Zimbabwe

Alda Alassane N’Diaye-Riddick
Côte d’Ivoire

Angela Nwaka
Nigeria

Dr. Jumoke Oduwole
Nigeria

Upendo Furaha Peneza
Tanzania

Blen A. Sahilu
Ethiopia

Full biographies can be found here: https://www.ejscenter.org/programs/amujae-initiative/participants
Appendix 2: Photos from the Forum & Launch Event

Presidents Catherine Samba-Panza, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Joyce Banda with Amujaee Leader Malado Kaba (top left), President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and three young girls who performed during the launch event (top right), President George Weah (second row left), Vice President Jewel Howard-Taylor (second row right), Amujaee Leaders Angela Nwaka, Dr. Jumoke Oduwole, and Hadiza Bala Usman with Amujaee Coach Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Madam Fatima Wali-Abdurrahman (third row left), President Olusegun Obasanjo (third row right), Amujaee Leader Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, OBE and EJS Center Executive Director Dr. Ophelia I. Weeks (bottom left), Amujaee Coach Dr. Thelma Awori (bottom right)
Amujae Leader Adv. Fadzayi Mahere (top left), Amujae Leader Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, OBE and Big Win Philanthropy Chair and President Jamie Cooper (top right), Amujae Leader Yawa Hansen-Quao, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and Amujae Leader Aïda Allassane N’Diaye-Riddick (second row left), EJS Center Board Member Linda Thomas Greenfield (second row right), Amujae Leaders Cornelia Kruah-Togba, Angela Nwaka, Dr. Zanetor Agyeman-Rawlings, and Kula Fofana (third row left), Amujae Leader Blen A. Sahilu (third row right), Amujae Leader Upendo Furaha Peneza (bottom left), Amujae Leader Oley Dibba-Wadda (bottom right)