

## ***Speech at the Launch of African Women's Studies Center***

**Our socialization as we grow up informs us on gender assigned roles for women and men. Stereotypes are reinforced. It therefore takes a conscious effort to be aware of gender discrimination and conviction to champion the fight against it. Like, many of us I was influenced by stereotypes to the extent that when approached to join a women's organization when I started working I declined. My reason was the perception that women's organization will lead one nowhere other than facilitate gossip! I had not been to any women's organization but that's what I had heard mainly from the males around me. I was later to join FIDA and grow from it. My baptism of fire came when I attended a FIDA conference in Uganda in 1990! I became aware of myself and of my lot as woman. I committed to spreading the awareness and to becoming a chamois for equality. I have never looked back. I swarm against the current to win the Gichugu seat in 1992 and on three subsequent occasions. My twenty years on the seat was made possible by support of both women and men. The highlights of fight for gender equality in my twenty years in politics:**

- 1. 1997 IPPG constitutional amendment to remove discrimination on bias of sex and a further amendment that ordered gender parity in allocating nominated seats , a clause that before the constitutional review raised numbers of women in parliament and thorough out the local authorities in the country.**
- 2. Getting women as stakeholders in the constitutional review process through the relevant statute in 1998**
- 3. Proposing the fifty women seats in 2007 sabotage by some women parliamentarians and majority of the men**
- 4. Fighting for gender inclusivity in naiveté to pave way for better representation for women**

**We are women! African women this sets us apart by virtue of our geographical location, the assumption is our location, our surrounding confers on us some unique characteristic that defines us! This is indeed true because our socialization does to a large extent define us.**

**In Kenya we have had a strong women's movement which picked momentum at the dawn of the second liberation so to speak. The advent of the return to plural politics in Kenya. We began in earnest seeking for holistic empowerment social, economic and political empowerment. I remember in 1992 when we founded the league of Kenya women voters as a women's political lobby, some women's organizations were quick to declare they were not political as if to disown our "wayward" move. It was then not politically correct for women's organizations to go that far. By the end of the same year majority of women's organizations had embraced political empowerment as a legitimate subject. Clearly awareness is created by raising issues for public consideration and debate. That is how great liberation movements have succeeded from the fight against slavery, liberation struggles across Africa seeking to free our countries and continent from colonial domination, our very own second liberation, the successful search for a new constitutional dispensation, and the search for gender equality!**

**It is self evident that the struggle for women's empowerment nay women's emancipation is not yet over. We have made great gains, in the constitution and our laws and indeed in appointments not just in Kenya but in Africa. However a lot needs to be done to change the national, the African psyche and to dismantle tolerance to gender, read women's discrimination! We live in an era where slavery or allegations of the same are met with outrage, same for racism or violation of "human rights". Yet discrimination against women does not meet with same outrage except where it may result in grievous harm or death. Discrimination at the social, economic and political levels is not "noticed" or is brushed aside or accepted as the norm! When I say accepted mean by both men and women! Yes we do acquiesce to overt and covert discrimination when we turn a blind eye and fail to stand up for our rights. I said "our" because what happens to one woman reinforces attitudes towards others and reinforces stereotypes. Cite the case of first DCJ vis a vis the way we have handled male leaders on issues of integrity from economic crimes to other serious crimes! Where were our voices? Not to affirm any alleged wrong**

doing but to call for sobriety in handling the issue, for equal treatment? Even within the same institution males have gotten off lightly for allegations crime and integrity issues. The judiciary vetting board was primarily to consider suitability to weed out corrupt judicial officers. It has repeatedly found women of integrity unsuitable on grounds of temperament! Is it that men are not temperamental or if some are its excusable! We need a study of these and other trends both positive and negative in order to inform ourselves, to avoid pitfalls and replicate success stories.

The launch of the African women studies center will provide an opportunity to look at our history, our culture and in my expectation begin to find answers to the issues, to our daily challenges. My hope is that we raise not just scholars but champions of transformation, men and women prepared to interrogate the status quo, ready to leave their comfort zones in order to transform. A majority irrespective of gender choose the comfort zone we preach water and drink wine- appear to champion women's empowerment because it is politically correct to do so but act the opposite when the opportunity in our day to day lives . It is generally accepted that bringing women to the decision making table is a necessary step towards women's empowerment yet with over two decades of concerted efforts by the women's movement and its allies the progress is painfully slow! This calls for all those of us women and men who proclaim to champion the cause to examine ourselves and see if our actions match our words for if we are guilty of occasionally faltering and retreating to our comfort zones, then we are part of the problem! We need consistency in this struggle, a consistency of words and deeds in order to transform. Our children are watching and replicating our actions, those we lead, those we mentor, indeed society is watching. Let this center not be a soft landing for those seeking to live in their comfort zones.

I sincerely hope that The African Women's Studies Center will become the source of great awareness among women and men and indeed our society, continent and the world and that you the founders will. Be unfaltering champions of the course in word and in action.