

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for your warm welcome to Ottawa, Canada today – although the weather is cold! My name is Malejone Thakanyane and I am very happy to be here with you today. I have travelled all the way to Canada from Lesotho, southern Africa. I am here as Deputy President of the Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs (FLWE), a position I have been privileged to hold since the Federation's establishment in 2012. I am also a committed farmer and businesswoman specialising in horticulture and related businesses. I obtained my Diploma in horticulture from the Lesotho Agriculture College in 1990.

The Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs has established a broad network of women entrepreneurs who support and nurture women-owned businesses, in particular, by providing mentorship and capacity building for young female entrepreneurs. May I extend on behalf of the President of the Federation, Mrs. Mamahlapane Rakuoane, and women in Lesotho our deep gratitude for being invited to participate in this important conference on *The African Union's Agenda 2063: Assessing the Development Vision for Africa*. I would very much like to thank the African Diplomatic Corps to Canada, the African Women Diplomatic Forum (AWDF), and the Institute of African Studies at Carleton for making it possible for me to be here with you today.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 that we are here today to discuss is a vital plan for African women's social, political and economic empowerment. The AU has declared this year to be the *Year of Women's Empowerment and Development in Africa*. The Agenda 2063 focuses on the importance of making sure all stakeholders

participate in creating, designing, implementing, and monitoring and evaluating the Agenda. Without the participation of all actors, this Agenda will not be successful. Real participation will give the people involved an interest in reaching these goals, and will increase their dedication to the process. Therefore, the African Union's focus will be on the full participation of all African stakeholders, especially women and young people, to work together to increase our welfare as a continent, strong and united. Each one of us across Africa can be a part of that effort. African women have an important role to play in improving their own lives and well-being, and in helping other African women reach their goals. One focus of Agenda 2063 is to contribute to the rapid expansion of the number of entrepreneurs, including Africa's many young people. African entrepreneurs will help promote more economic growth and better technology on the continent. Women are an essential part of this effort.

The Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs (FLWE) was created in December 2012, to improve women's participation and prosperity by creating a platform for businesswomen in Lesotho. Her Majesty Queen Masenate Bereng Seeiso of Lesotho officially launched the organisation in February 2013. The Federation is a national platform present in Lesotho's ten districts. Since its establishment its membership has grown from 6,550 to approximately 10,000. The organisation has attracted young women and professionals, which will help to increase the skills base among the membership and allow us to provide mentorship for potential future leaders. Among our members are women living with HIV/AIDS and disabilities. FLWE's main objective is to bridge the gender disparity gap and

cater to the needs of businesswomen and female leaders from many economic categories. FLWE is a results-focused organisation that advocates on women's issues and provides a voice for women in the public and private sectors.

The Federation aims to empower women through entrepreneurship; create jobs; and help eradicate poverty. FLWE allows women to share their experiences, successful practices, and information, and to interact with other women, with the goal of meeting challenges in the economy and in business. The Federation also has the objective of raising policymakers' awareness of gender issues in Lesotho's economy, particularly women's involvement in creating economic plans and in sustainable development. The Federation unites women owners of small, medium, and large businesses, and women who wish to become entrepreneurs.

FLWE has activities in several areas, including training, advocacy and lobbying; women's access to finance; business and investment opportunities; networks and partnerships; and social responsibility. The Federation works to build women's capacity. To address the skills deficit among women, we have been able to get 6000 women involved in training programs (some free, others offered at a discount) so they can focus on their businesses and accelerate growth. We plan to provide more space for members in our entrepreneurship training workshops, and skills development and leadership programmes, in the future.

Despite women's prominence in leadership positions in the public and private sectors in Lesotho, economic outcomes for women remain poor. FLWE lobbies women's representatives at all levels to ensure that they are aware of their roles and responsibilities, and of the women's empowerment agenda. Human capital

is vital for productivity and prosperity. In Lesotho, women and girls' human capital is negatively affected by inequality, gender discrimination, poverty, and disease. The Federation carries out advocacy on women's integration into government and private sector employment, including by examining government and private companies' measures to provide support and opportunities for women and women-owned businesses.

Due to their lack of management and financial skills, women in Lesotho have challenges accessing finance. They are often not able to meet the strict requirements of commercial banks. The government has a partial guarantee scheme, but this is difficult to access because it is administered through commercial banks, which use the same lending terms. The Federation has encouraged women to use existing communal saving strategies to allow them to start their own businesses. To date, members have been able to successfully raise a total of three million Maloti – the equivalent of \$ 290,000.00 – to finance their poultry and tunnel greenhouse farming initiatives. Banks are also engaging with FLWE's leadership to agree on appropriate funding models to help members. We also hope to provide business development training, coaching and advisory support to ensure that women's enterprises are ready to receive funding.

Business and investment opportunities are a vital part of the Federation's mission. FLWE has facilitated investment in agribusiness, small-scale textiles and manufacturing, and arts and crafts. We help women to carry out activities that include poultry and piggery, horticulture, the production of animal feed, beekeeping, knitting arts and handicrafts, and more. Among the FLWE's members are the

Basotho Poultry Farmers' Association and the Piggery Farmers' Association. The Federation has committees that manage each of the projects; each month, they receive reports on each project's performance. Our organisation has also started to make a shift into the international arena and has managed to attract an investor from the United Kingdom for these projects. Regional economic integration is also still a challenge, and members involved in cross-border trade still experience harassment. We are engaging with the customs authority for support in building women's capacity to understand customs procedures and requirements. Corporate social responsibility is also being explored to understand how we can partner with corporate actors to work for women's empowerment.

FLWE works with private and public sector actors in Lesotho's business world. The Foundation has been able to accomplish so much because it relies on volunteer committees at our branches all over the country, and partners with national, regional and international women's organisations with similar missions. We have a working relationship with business development service providers, investment institutions, and a commercial bank. We receive support from Lesotho diplomatic missions abroad and foreign missions in country. This support funds deserving projects proposed by members, capacity building on trade and business issues, and training on sector-specific skills. FLWE has recently become part of the Board of Directors of the Basotho Enterprise Development Corporation.

Our organisation has a strong emphasis on social responsibility. We have helped women in communities affected by natural disasters to reclaim their livelihoods. In the future we also intend to focus on education, health, food security

and nutrition. Finally, there are generally no business awards in Lesotho. One day FLWE would like to host the annual businesswoman of the year awards.

The Federation's journey has not been without obstacles. We are faced with many challenges. Lesotho lacks developed value chains and infrastructure. This makes it difficult for businesswomen to have a voice, get accredited, and access markets. Improving value chains and infrastructure can create economic linkages to increase women and youth's participation in domestic, regional or international markets. The organisation is still lacking in leadership skills, which are important for our sustainability and effectiveness in serving our members. Management and entrepreneurship skills remain a challenge for our membership and for businesswomen in general, which limits their access to finance. Our leadership and technical team also need to improve their ability to negotiate business agreements. In Lesotho, public and private institutions also lack information and data on issues relating to women and business. This information is vital for better programmes and fact-based advocacy on increasing women's participation in the economy. FLWE also does not yet have an online presence, which limits our ability to share information, advertise our work, and attract members.

The Foundation's sustainability is an important issue. The profile and characteristics of the majority of our membership makes it difficult to have subscription fees that would sustain our activities. We have also experienced a turnover of members who initially thought there was money to hand out to them. Lastly, we have not yet succeeded in acquiring strategic assets that can generate income for the organization. The cost of training sessions is another challenge.

Training is supposed to be carried out by workers who are already involved with our projects. However, due to the need to meet certain standards, it happens that we sometimes have to pay high fees for the proper training to be provided. Access to finance is a significant issue, which our bank and the Government of Lesotho are fortunately assisting us with.

In closing, we are making progress as a country and together as a continent. We should remain resolved, despite our many challenges, to push for women's meaningful participation in our economies and representation in decision-making structures. I would like to thank you so much for your attention today. I would be happy to answer any questions you have about the Federation of Lesotho Women Entrepreneurs, and I hope you will be interested in learning more about my organisation. Please do not hesitate to come and speak to me if you have any questions. Thank you very much.