

## Opening Remarks

**Presented by Dr. Nkiru Balonwu at the Launch of the Safety in the [Legal] Workplace Project**

Good morning, it's a real honour to have you all here today. Thank you for joining us. I am Dr Nkiru Balonwu, Founder and Co-Chair of African Women on Board – AWB.

As I will be speaking to you for only a few minutes, I wanted to focus on the meaning behind the words **African Women on Board** before we open the floor to our line-up of expert speakers. So, let me jump right in...

### Foundation

I began African Women on Board from a place of frustration... I was tired of being chased around tables (boardroom or otherwise) and even in slightly less immediately intimidating situations, simply being treated as an object to adorn those tables... In 2016, tired of all the toxicity in trying to raise capital, I decided to invest my energy in starting my own company, RDF Strategies... And things got even worse...

### Responsibility

I started asking myself: was it something that I was doing? Was it something I was saying? Did my appearance make me a target?... Was I responsible?

I began to question how other people were managing, and coping, and luckily – for me – I began asking questions.

After speaking to quite a lot of women about these issues, I realised that they had the same experiences as me... and sometimes even worse. However - and this is key – they had not spoken up about it. The culture of silence reinforces gender inequality, harmful practices & social norms which make excuses for gender-based violence. This can result in personal harm, sub-optimal productivity and in extreme cases, death.

So, this was why we initially set up African Women on Board. We realised that these issues were not going to be tackled by some far-away court in some mythological land.

We started asking better questions: How can women engage as leaders in the workplace whether formal or informal? How can our voices be heard and responded to as valued members of our communities? How do we exercise our agency? How do we engage in our homes to bring up our children – our girls and our boys – to become a better generation of men and women, who can in-turn better shape the future of our world?

I believe that we can and will create a culture that not only empowers women, but brings men on board as allies as well, and reinforces the point - that we really, really are stronger together.

### Safety in the Workplace

To achieve this objective, the world of work is extremely important. Not least because most adults spend most of their waking lives at work but also because it is where we can be vulnerable: away from our families and friends, away from our support networks, thrust into competitive environments and eager to please if only to be assured of financial security.

We know that women, for example are often treated poorly in the financial and banking sector but we were shocked to learn, through our own research, that women in the legal sector are often in the same situation or even worse off. Professionals are degraded and treated as 'Conference Materials'.

It is important to note that this is not exclusively a Nigeria or Africa problem, it is a universal problem that remains throughout global society today. According to the International Bar Association, one in three women will be sexually harassed in the course of their career and one in two will be bullied.

In the future, we intend to expand the African Women on Board Safety in the Workplace initiative to other specific industries, but as a starting point, the legal and private sector generally could not be more fitting.

Fundamentally and in particular, the legal sector represents both a significant challenge, and a wonderful opportunity...

### **Thank you**

And so, to that end when I look around the room... For us all to be in in this room together, asking questions and sharing experiences, means that we are already winning by starting on the right trajectory.

I want to specially thank the Chair, African Women on Board- Professor Agomo who has been a staunch supporter and mentor.

To all our keynote speakers and panellists who have committed themselves, their valuable time and insights, thank you.

To our sponsors, RDF Strategies, Udo Udoma & Belo Osagie, Oando PLC, Templars, Aluko & Oyebode, Guinness Nigeria, First Bank, your support has been instrumental in making this event a reality. In addition, we thank all our partners – Prof. Atsenuwa and Prof. Bolodeku at University of Lagos, the Assoc of Company Secretaries & Legal Advisers (ACSLA) and all others who have aligned with our vision.

To our AWB legal experts Yinka Edu, Rotimi Odusola, Tola Jagun, Dr. George Nwangwu, Dr. Myma Belo Osagie, Prof. Chioma Agomo, thank you.

We are grateful to the Kool kids at UUBO's U-LAW and I must say a huge thank you to our very own AWB and RDF Teams for their spectacular work on this project

Thank you to all our media partners and special thanks to everyone who helped. I'm on my knees if I missed you.

Finally, I will end my speech by acknowledging Mr. Innocent Chukwuma of blessed memory. As Director, West Africa, at Ford Foundation, Innocent validated our ideas and supported us with some of the funds we needed to start the work that has brought us to this moment. May God be with his wife Josephine and his family. Innocent was a true ally! A **He for She**. Please let us rise for a minute's silence.

Please take your seats!. Thank you for listening, I'm excited for us to begin!