



African Women's Sports Summit 2020 – Shifting Mindsets First Keynote Speech: FIFA Secretary General Fatma Samoura Leadership: Shifting Mindsets and Climbing to the top

Good afternoon everyone,

Juliet thank you for inviting me to take part in the second edition of the African Women's Sports Summit.

I'm delighted to see so many strong and talented ladies taking part as well as of course, my brother Kurt from the Ghana Football Association, a strong supporter of women in football and my sister Isha from the Sierra Leone FA and my little sister from Nigeria Aisha.

If we rewind back four years ago, to May 2016, I was offered the ultimate opportunity to shift mindsets – to become the Secretary General of FIFA.

Some of you watching today might not be aware of this, but up until 2016, no woman, let alone an African woman, had ever held a senior management role in the FIFA administration. So, when FIFA's President Gianni Infantino officially announced me as FIFA's new Secretary General at the 66th FIFA Congress in Mexico City, I think that some people were a little sceptical but I hope that I have changed their minds since then!

I wasn't present at the Congress and when the news broke I was in Aisha's homeland of Nigeria. I got so many calls and texts that it took my eldest son over two hours to get through to me.

Sounds crazy right? Even crazier, or so people thought, was me! Why would I give up my position as UN's Resident Humanitarian Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Nigeria to take on the problems of FIFA, a scandal-hit organization with a serious reputation problem?

Well my answer was simple, having been married to a former footballer for twenty-eight years at that time, and having many friends among the top African players in Europe and Africa, I was a football fan. I also knew about the positive power of football and I had seen first-hand its ability to shift mindsets and change lives. During one of my missions with the World Food Programme I had been sent to Liberia where I saw how the fighting stopped for two things, rain and football, and I realized the power of this seemingly simple game. Long before my FIFA days this remained ingrained in my mind.

So when the opportunity arose to take on the role as Secretary General, I wanted, along with Gianni Infantino, to improve football governance so that FIFA could once again use football as a tool to bring positivity to people's lives around the world. I wanted to test the UN values by using football as a powerful tool for long-term changes.

In my 21 years as a development and humanitarian actor, I met people from different backgrounds, religions, ethnic groups and genders. I saw how they were reacting under stressful and rapidly changing situations. I had negotiated with warlords and child soldiers to allow safe passage of food for people in dire need of food aid and had seen people lose their minds when confronted with news of imminent attack from military militias.

I had seen the worst and the best in humanity following my postings to Italy, the Republic of Djibouti, Cameroon, Chad, Guinea, Niger, Madagascar, Nigeria, Central America and Central West Asia. This gave me great perspective, which in global football and the politics that come with it is very useful. When I first took up my role, everything I did was questioned.

However, I had seen life and death situations, so being gossiped and speculated about didn't bother me too much. I had bigger things to think about, like turning FIFA around and making it a more transparent and accountable institution and I am proud to say that is what we have done.

Now the involvement of women in FIFA has completely changed when compared to what it was before. Not only does FIFA have a female Secretary General, its Council has six female members. There are thirty-nine female members of FIFA Committees and 16 female Secretary Generals in Member Associations around the world. In terms of female Member Association Presidents like my dear sister Isha of the Sierra Leone FA, she is joined by two strong and competent ladies, Sonia Bien Aime, President of the Turks and Caicos FA and Johanna Wood, President of the New Zealand FA. There is still a long way to go in this regard but I'm encouraged by great ladies like Bestine Kazadi, who's recent appointment as President of AS Vita was great news from a big footballing country such as DRC. I hope to see more capable ladies follow the path of these three strong female MA Presidents.

A key goal of this administration has been supporting and empowering women at all levels in football – so we established FIFA's first-ever Women's Football Division and appointed its first-ever Chief Women's Football Officer. In addition, we now have two other female Chief Officers at FIFA, one for Human Resources and Services and one for Education and Human Rights. FIFA has invested USD 1 billion into women's football for the current 2019-2022 cycle, which goes to develop a range of programmes and grow the women's game on and off the pitch. Last year we began to see the fruits of shifting FIFA's mindset to investing in women's football with the most successful FIFA Women's World Cup ever. Over 1.12 billion people around the world tuned in to watch it on TV and close to 500 million viewed it on digital platforms.

Another area where shifting mindsets was of paramount importance was reform. Thankfully, our MAs recognized that this was the only way to turn things around for the institution and in 2016; they approved a package of landmark reforms that paved the way for significant improvements to the governance of global football.

The crisis at FIFA provided a massive opportunity for the new FIFA leadership to turn things around and talk about issues seldom talked about in global football governance before. In the time of #MeToo sexual violence and gender-based assault are now taken very seriously by FIFA. In the summer of 2019, we launched a major initiative, to help Member Associations and Confederations around the world introduce stronger child safeguarding measures in football.

If any of you follow me on social media, you will see that I have also been using my position to shift mindsets in relation to diversity. I champion not only diversity for women but for people of colour.

I am proud to have been able to use my platform to highlight the injustices suffered by many of our black brothers and sisters in America, following the shooting of George Floyd. Let me take the opportunity on this occasion to say that Black Lives Matter everywhere. I strongly believe that as Africans we must use our voices to support the African diaspora around the world.

It is unfortunate that racism is still present today particularly in sport and with the support of the FIFA President, I picked up this fight. A sport as diverse as football should never see anyone suffering on the pitch because of skin colour, so in 2017 FIFA introduced a three-step procedure to combat discrimination at our competitions to pursue a zero-tolerance policy towards racist and discriminatory incidents in football, and to severely punish such behaviour. Racism should be nowhere in society, especially in a sport as globally loved as football.

I believe that the next major shift in mindset that is needed is connected with the perception of African football. Africa is bursting with football talent and my six-month mission as FIFA General Delegate for Africa allowed me the opportunity to see first-hand some of the amazingly talented individuals our continent has, many of whom are women.

I want to see Africa at the top of world football and my dream is to see an African team reach the final of the FIFA World Cup. However, we as Africans must work together to do more to harness this talent and develop it. I believe that we have to shift our own mindsets about the potential of the African game, and aim to raise football to the highest international levels in Africa.

FIFA is passionate about developing African football and I am proud as its African Secretary General to play my part in supporting Africa and encouraging the bright and talented youth of our continent to show the world what African football has to offer.

In conclusion, I call on the panel present here today and to all of you following at home to shift your mindsets, to believe in the greatness of Africa, of African football and African women so that I am not the first and last African Secretary General of FIFA, but the one who inspired the many that I hope will follow me, to show the world what can happen when one continent shifts its mindset and awakens its greatness.