I would like to thank UN Women and the United Nations Global Compact for putting this conference together on the one year anniversary of the Women’s Empowerment Principles. Thank you for inviting me to speak on this important topic on the role of the private sector in the lives of women affected by conflict.

INTRODUCTION

I am the Founder and Executive Director of Femmes Africa Solidarité, an organization founded in 1996 to address the challenges that women in Africa face as a result of armed conflict. Femmes Africa Solidarité has worked extensively in countries that have experienced conflict such as Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Sudan, Liberia, Rwanda and Burundi. We operate out of our offices in Geneva, New York, Senegal, Sudan and the DRC.

WOMEN, THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND CONFLICT

The private sector in Africa can be a force for good to address conflict in Africa. However, the private sector can also be part of the problem. The presence of natural resources in countries such as the DRC, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Liberia have helped to escalate conflicts leaving women caught in the middle with destroyed livelihoods and at grave risk of sexual violence and exploitation. Every business or entrepreneur has the moral
responsibility to ask, how will my business operations affect women? Will my operations put women at risk?

On the other hand, post-conflict, the private sector can play a pivotal role in reconstructing countries and as a result, foster long-term security and stability. However, with many women unable to access the economic mainstream due to discriminatory policies, it becomes even more critical that civil society, governments and the private sector partner to create laws and policies that protect women and make it easier for women to join and thrive in the economic workforce.

If we do not take advantage of the opportunity to fully include 50% of the population in economic activity, we risk exacerbating/worsening the inequalities that often lead to conflict. In the spirit of the Women’s Empowerment Principles, we should offer training to women in business practices and computer skills, serve as mentors, and make loans accessible to women with fair terms and interest rates.

We have a social and moral responsibility to empower women economically. We also have the responsibility to prevent business practices that are harmful to women and ultimately to society. Studies have shown that when one woman benefits, the positive ripple effect to the community and to society is substantial.

Thank you.