

# Opening Remarks by Mr. Carlos Lopes

REGIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE BEIJING+20 REVIEW

MINISTERIAL MEETING

Opening Remarks by Mr. Carlos Lopes, UN Under-Secretary-General and Executive Secretary of ECA

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Addis Ababa

Your Excellency Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, *in absentia* represented by Ambassador Febe Potgieter-Gqubule,

Ms. Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi, Special Envoy on Gender, for the African Development Bank,

Ms. Lakshmi Puri, Deputy Executive Director of UN Women,

Ministers, Excellencies,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

The room is full of emotions! Welcome to the Ministerial Segment of the Africa Regional Conference on the Beijing plus 20 review. Your presence here today is a clear indication of the collective commitment we share towards the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment in Africa. It also provides an opportunity to build an African position for the global review of the Beijing Platform for Action.

I wish to acknowledge the partnership with the African Union Commission in organizing this conference as well as the collaboration of UN Women, co-partners in the Beijing plus 20 Review and all other UN Funds, agencies and programmes for their contributions. I also wish to

recognize the presence of my sister Gertrude Mongella, who steered the consultations at the regional and international levels, on the path to Beijing.

Considered as one of the most bold and progressive normative frameworks ever adopted to hasten the advancement of women and achieve gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action builds on contributions from many, including some from Africa such as the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women or the Dakar Platform for Action. We must not lose sight of the fact that gender equality is not a choice, it is a fundamental human right that we must uphold; this in turn demands that we be courageous in this review. As economists at ECA, allow me to point out some facts.

Ladies and gentlemen

Africa is on an encouraging pathway; translating some of Beijing's promises into actions. Today more African women are literate than ever before and more girls are attending school. Bold implementation of policies, in some countries, have gone a long way in increasing overall school enrolments and reducing gender differences. For instance, in the first year of eliminating school fees for primary education, enrolment in Malawi rose by 68 per cent and contributed to bringing in more girls than boys to school. Secondary education gender parity is being achieved in most southern African countries. The greatest improvements are taking place in West Africa though.

We have seen school life parity grow. However, only 12 out of 43 countries for which data is available had achieved gender parity in secondary education enrolment. The gender parity index is higher amongst high income groups. To address this inequality, there is an urgent need to deal with early marriages, the high cost and poor quality of the education, as well as increase the chances and opportunities for women to attain tertiary and higher levels of education. It is only by nurturing the skills of young people, particularly girls, and investing in their education, that the continent will be in a position to take advantage of a demographic dividend, a prelude to vastly improve livelihoods.

With regards to voice and agency, Africa has witnessed a gradual increase in the proportion of women in decision making processes, particularly in national parliaments. Rwanda's 64 percent rate of women participation is a historical achievement. The country is ranked first in the world for this indicator. The example has been set for others to follow and marked improvements are taking place. Since 2012, 7 African countries have at least 40 percent representation of female ministers, while 24 countries have between 10 and 20 percent of their parliamentary seats held by women. Cape Verde has more women ministers than men. Africa is proud of its prominent female leaders such as Presidents Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Catherine Samba-Panza, as well as former president Joyce Banda. Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma is also an inspiration to women everywhere.

In the area of health, we have seen the rate of maternal mortality reduce by 47 percent from 1990 to 2013. Whilst we have cause to celebrate this significant reduction, the mortality rate remains high. The bottom line is that it is morally unacceptable in this day and age, with the advancement of science and medicine, to lose lives from preventable conditions. Reproductive and sexual health remains a cause for concern. We need to do more in this front as well.

Women still own as little as 25 percent of the land, despite being the backbone of the agricultural sector. We know too well that ownership of agricultural assets such as land increases agricultural outputs which have a critical impact on food security and self-sufficiency. This is essential in the rural areas where women represent half of the agricultural workforce. FAO have found that closing the gender gap in agricultural inputs alone could lift up to 150 million people out of hunger.

Wage disparities between women and men remain extremely high. In some African countries women earn less than 60 percent of what men earn for similar jobs. Disparities also exist when it comes to employment opportunities. For instance, in non-agricultural sector employment, the share of women's employment remains as low as 22 percent compared to 37 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean, or 36 percent in East Asia. Despite their pivotal role in the economy, women are still not fully integrated in some of the most productive sectors, such as agri-business or extractive industries. Our 2014 MDG report highlights that a 1 percent increase in the gender gap in effective labour reduces the output per worker up to 0.49 percent in African countries. This translates to an annual economic loss exceeding USD 60 billion.

When it comes to the incidence of violence against women, we can not afford to be defensive. It is a tragedy. And it points to a worrying trend. According to an ECA study of 2011 the incidence of violence against women in some African countries may be up to five times that of some developed economies. Equally disturbing is the mounting evidence that violence against women where reported, may actually be increasing. It is estimated that reported acts of violence cost between 1 percent and 12 per cent of GDP. The monthly cost of violence against women is 20 times that of average medical expenditure for a household.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Over the 20 years since the inception of the Beijing Action Platform, the global development context has changed. Africa is emerging as a pivotal region for global economic growth. This had been evidenced by the continent's robust growth performance despite subdued global performance. Our continental growth has averaged about 5 per cent over the last decade.

Africa has not been capable of propelling strong transformation of its economic realities. Without jobs, inclusion, and social distribution the good news are limited. We cannot build dynamic African countries, if women and girls, who form the majority of the population, remain marginalized or excluded. Despite some of the strides made with regards to gender equality and the empowerment of women, we still have a long way to go. Africa can and must do better.

In this vein, ECA is implementing a Continent-Wide Initiative for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, as endorsed by the AUC-ECA Joint Conference of Ministers of Finance and Economic Development in Abuja this year. It builds on three interlinked components, namely, economic empowerment; women's human rights and the social sector. The focus of interventions will support Africa's structural agenda particularly women's socio-economic bargaining power and their participation in structural transformation, informed by in-depth research, data and analysis.

It is clear that we have unfinished business that requires us to build on the gains registered over the last 20 years. We have to come up with a more transformative framework that will accelerate the desired change in the lives of women and girls. Investing in women's education, health, property rights, access to and control over financial resources, knowledge and information is fundamental. The African Common Position on the Post 2015 goals places gender equality squarely as one of the priority goals for the continent.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Time for token references on women empowerment and gender equality is over. Nobody should have been given the chance to get away with it in the first place. But, unfortunately it was tolerated for quite a long time. We have a chance to make a real difference. Building on the lot that has been achieved, let us recharge our batteries to continue the fight.

Thank you. Merci, obrigado, shukran.