

29632



UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



Distr.: GENERAL

E/ECA/CM.14/17/Summary
12 February 1988

Original: ENGLISH

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Ninth meeting of the Technical
Preparatory Committee of the
Whole

Niamey, Niger
5-12 April 1988

Item 6 of the provisional agenda*

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

Twenty-third session of the Commission/
fourteenth meeting of the Conference
of Ministers

Niamey, Niger
14-18 April 1988

Item 6 of the provisional agenda**

CHANGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF WOMEN IN AFRICA
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NAIROBI FORWARD-LOOKING
STRATEGIES FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Executive Summary

* E/ECA/TPCW.9/1/Rev.1.

** E/ECA/CM.14/1.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, adopted in 1985, made concrete recommendations as to which policy and programme measures are needed to promote women's self-reliance and full integration in the development effort. The document (Forward-Looking Strategies) which outlines the Strategies is therefore intended to provide a blueprint for action to advance the status of women in national and international economic, social, cultural and legal development to the year 2000 and it stresses the full participation and integration of women in all areas of development.

2. Since its adoption, there has been significant progress achieved by the organizations of the United Nations system and Governments of the African region to implement the Strategies. Action taken has included strengthening their respective focal points and machineries for the advancement of women. However, a greater effort has to be made to involve such focal points and machineries more fully in the promotion, monitoring and implementation of the Strategies.

3. This report reviews efforts that have been made since the World Conference as they relate to the changing socio-economic conditions of women in Africa. In this respect, and in an attempt to address this issue, several factors and indicators are considered in order to assess whether the socio-economic conditions of women in Africa have changed and/or is changing. These factors and/or indicators include: economic trends; structural adjustment; agriculture; employment; education and training; law and legislation; health and nutrition; as well as the participation of women in decision-making. Obstacles hampering the implementation of the Strategies as well as achievements made since the World Conference are also outlined.

II. CHANGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF WOMEN IN AFRICA

4. In the context of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, "changing" may refer to the creation of conditions under which women can be involved in social and economic transformation on better terms. It also means concerted efforts to achieve reforms at every level and in every sound sector (education, law, economic reforms, employment, health, etc.). Having defined "changing", the following areas are examined in relation to the changing socio-economic conditions of women in Africa.

(a) Economic trends in Africa

5. It is well known that the current economic crisis in the region has had significant implications for social classes and social categories in terms of income. Women and men, especially among the poor have and are suffering from dwindling or lowering real incomes and rising prices. One aspect of the recent recession whose effects on women need to be pointed out is budget retrenchment. Budget retrenchment has generally meant a freeze in the salaries of public employees, a freeze on public employment and reduction in public expenditures for social services. These measures have had greater effect on women than on men. For instance, reduction in male wage employment has led to increased dependence on women's earnings in poor rural households.

(b) Structural adjustment

6. Structural adjustment programmes in many countries of Africa have focused on agricultural development, including agricultural research, extension services strategies, marketing and others. In respect of women's participation in agricultural development, despite the acknowledged predominance of women in agriculture in many parts of the world and in Africa in particular, women continue to be left out of agricultural strategies. In this regard, women's special needs and concerns are left out. This has led to women's inequitable access to means and services of production as well as to opportunities, hence their productivity has remained low.

(c) Agriculture

7. Women play important roles in worldwide agricultural production, a situation which community or district level studies tend to reflect more accurately than do available data from national population censuses or labour surveys.

8. In an effort to implement the Forward-Looking Strategies pertaining to agriculture, African Governments have embarked on measures to improve and increase women's role in agriculture. These measures include the intensification of the role of women in food production, preserving and marketing; extension services have been extended to cover women actively involved in agriculture; setting up of advanced technical training centres and offering training opportunities. Appropriate labour and time-saving devices are underway in some countries such as the United Republic of Tanzania to cater for all agricultural activities such as ploughing; weeding; harvesting; transporting; preserving and processing of agricultural products.

9. To improve the input/output ratio, efforts are being made which are geared towards the provision of farms implements, fertilizers and high quality seeds. Despite these measures, women's productivity in agriculture is still low and since they provide most of labour force in subsistence agriculture, food self-sufficiency remain difficult to achieve in most African countries.

(d) Employment

10. In the formal sector, a recent global statistical survey (1950-2000) on women in economic activity showed that within the services sector, in almost all African countries, more and more women were employed in the services sector in countries for which data was available. While the proportion of women has more than tripled in some countries and doubled in others, while women's participation in decision-making at top level is still unsatisfactory. Recently, some countries have appointed and involved women in responsible positions such as ministers, advisors, top government civil servants and high-placed government and parastatal officials, even then, the critical mass does not exist.

11. With regard to the informal sector, women are better represented and their participation has increased particularly at this time of economic recession when employment situation in the formal sector has more or less stagnated. In the urban areas, faced with the combined pressures of rising prices, falling wages and high male unemployment rates, more women are entering into informal sector income-generating activities.

12. In general, it is perceived that there has been a great increase of women engaged in the informal sector due to the current economic recession and to the fact that far-reaching transformations in economic structure increasingly leave women to carry out the burden of satisfying the full spectrum of the family's basic survival needs.

(e) Industry

13. Women's participation in industrial employment in Africa has slightly increased mainly in areas such as food-processing, textiles and garment-making activities. Due to an increasing number of women migrating into the cities, many are being employed in the newly implanted industries particularly of textiles, clothing and pharmaceuticals. The growth of the newly implanted industries has been due, to a large extent, to the availability of abundant, cheap female labour. Women in this respect have in a way contributed a great deal to the industrial take-off in Africa.

14. Despite this slow progress, women's participation in the industrial sector, including small-scale industries, is equally low, and therefore the inequitable distribution of resources among sexes.

(f) Education and training

15. Education and training are among the major factors that promote national development and thus bring about positive change in the lives of the population. Within the education system and with respect to women's enrolment, there has been an increase in enrolment at the primary, secondary and university levels.

16. In the area of science and technology, women are least represented and their enrolment in science subjects at secondary, university and technical college levels is still very low. This low representation of women in science and technology has hampered their contribution in the productive sectors such as agriculture and industry. As part of human resources development, strategies aimed at increasing women and girls for entry into scientific and technical fields should be developed. In the urban areas where high technologies are being introduced, awareness should be created and appropriate training planned for women. This will enable women to plan their careers in a more progressive manner and guidance and counselling programmes should be introduced.

17. Literacy classes have observed a high number of women in many countries of Africa. The United Republic of Tanzania, for instance, has 85 per cent

rate of literacy which is among the highest in Africa. Since most of the rural women are either illiterate or semi-illiterate, non-formal education has played a significant role to widen their skills and ability to use new knowledge and techniques which are so vital to the development process.

(g) Law and legislation

18. Since the World Conference, African Governments have redressed legal disabilities that hamper women's participation in national development. Some countries have established legal committees to study areas such as legislation laws and customary laws which affect the progress and development of women.

19. In many countries, it has been observed that most women in Africa have neither the knowledge of law nor the ability to appeal to the law when it comes to their rights. This has necessitated in some countries the establishment of legal aid committees which offer legal advice to women. Through these legal aid committees, information is disseminated to inform women of their rights and to encourage them to participate more actively in the affairs of the country. In order to change the socio-economic conditions of women in Africa, a concerted effort is required to achieve reforms at every level and in every sound sector (e.g., education, employment, economic reforms, etc.).

(h) Health and nutrition

20. The question of women's health is one that is intricately linked to women's role and status in the community and to the level of socio-cultural and economic development of the society. Healthy people constitute (in economic terms) the productive labour force. Women play a dominant role in the labour force at the local level (district, community, village, etc.).

21. In Africa as in most developing regions, women's health has been given cursory attention, with emphasis on women's reproductive roles and with insufficient attention to women's other health needs.

22. During the United Nations Decade for Women and beyond, African Governments have made efforts to implement and strengthen programmes in areas such as immunization, primary health care (PHC), maternal child health (MCH) and family planning programmes. These programmes have improved women and children's health and women's participation in the programmes have also increased.

(i) Women at the decision-making level and legislation

23. Political participation is a key issue for women because it is an indicator of their status as well as a tool to improve their conditions in society. Though a few women in some countries of Africa are now actively involved in politics, the situation is still unsatisfactory. To increase women's participation in politics and in high public and private offices, access to training opportunities, employment and resources should be provided. This will essentially increase and put women at the centre of power to voice their concern for their advancement.

III. OBSTACLES

24. Several obstacles hampering the implementation process of the Arusha and Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies are observed. They include among others:

(a) Financial constraints both at the national and international levels. At the national level, for instance, most governments are not able to adequately budget and support women's programmes. Governments ought to give high priority to women's issues in allocation of resources;

(b) Information and data on the contribution of women in socio-economic development and their status in society is lacking. Consequently, women's concerns in the development process are and have been overlooked by development planners. Information and data bank is a prerequisite for adequate planning, development and programming. Hence an improved system nation-wide of collection and dissemination of information on women in the region should be developed;

(c) Inadequate education and technological skills on the part of women at the high level have limited women's participation at the decision-making level and inequitable access to opportunities and hence their ineffective participation in the development process;

(d) Weaknesses of machineries at national, subregional and regional levels to influence national policies, plans and programmes. Effective structures are needed to monitor and ensure that the socio-economic conditions of women are changing for the better within the context of the Arusha and Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies.

IV. CONCLUSION

25. Despite the above-mentioned obstacles and other factors hampering the implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, it is noticeable that significant changes have occurred.

26. In the formal sector (employment services), the public, civil service and the professions, there have been an increase of women employees. There have been some notable examples too of women making inroads into what have traditionally been considered men's domains. In education, considerable progress has been made in improving female access to educational opportunities through an increase in the female share in total enrolment at the primary, secondary and university/college levels. This progress, however, must essentially be seen as a means of the attainment of higher goals, namely the extent to which improvement in educational opportunity leads to improved opportunities in the labour force.

27. In the areas of health, nutrition, water and sanitation, there have been increased efforts following the World Conference. These efforts include strengthening the maternal child health, primary health care, family planning programmes, immunisation programmes, provision of food aid and/or food-for-work programmes as well as programmes designed to bring water within women's reach.

Though it is difficult to measure the impact this progress has had on women's socio-economic conditions, however, these programmes must essentially be seen as significant measures towards the changing socio-economic conditions of women.

28. In summary, it is noted that though commendable, most of the efforts made towards changing the socio-economic conditions of women in Africa in the context of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies fall short of the required resources, structural and policy changes that could ensure a more effective way towards the changing socio-economic conditions of women in Africa.