On behalf of my colleagues and the government of the Federation of Nigeria I extend my sincere thanks to the organizers of this conference holding here in Addis Ababa. In this world of strife and turmoil, both social and political, it is expedient that we meet as we are doing today to discuss and exchange views with a view to finding solutions to our multitudinous problems. Indeed our historical background and cultures are different; so are the stages reached by our respective countries in economic development. Some are well-advanced while others are just taking off. But the goal is the same: whatever level of economic development that is reached the main preoccupation of any nation is to promote the happiness of its people - men and women - and to build a contented society and a robust economy. We are here, big and small, to exchange opinion and share one another's experience in order to learn from and help each other in this period of transition.

The emphasis of this conference, as we all know, is on the Role of Women in National Development. In most developing countries, great changes are taking place in every field of endeavour. These changes are most manifest in politics and education. But in regard to women, they take considerable time to gather momentum. Invariably, however, when these changes occur, they take the form of a revolution. Women desire to be freed from the chains of repression.

This pattern is no less true as regards Nigerian women. Many years ago the role of women began and ended with being a wife and the mother of the family. Women were regarded as inferior to her male colleagues and therefore money spend on them was money wasted - they would end up in the kitchen anyway, and rear children.
In those days the premium put on girls was so low that in the Nigerian society the greatest calamity that could befall a young wife was to have a baby girl, particularly as her first born. It is, however, interesting to recollect that these same women, particularly in the villages and on the farms, were regarded as economic assets to their husbands. It was the women who did the manual labour — tilled the ground, farmed and harvested the crops. They manufactured the local flour and the local oil. They wove cloth. In short, they dominated all forms of commerce. They displayed a tremendous business acumen and bargaining power in the market, selling their wares. In addition, most women were economically independent of their husbands, especially in Southern Nigeria. In some cases they were the bread winners of the family; a situation that Nigerian men at times succumb to but will never admit to openly.

The majority of Nigerian women are self-employed, and it is in this regard that they display their skill, ingenuity and resourcefulness both in the urban and rural areas. It is just right and proper that such important human resources should not be allowed to lie waste but be encouraged and nourished in every possible way to participate fully in the development of the country both at the local and national levels.

The Nigerian government, both at State and Federal levels, has always accorded women's education a high priority, and I am glad that, even now, it has not relaxed its effort in this regard.

Opportunities for education of Nigerian girls have been on the increase since 1955, when universal primary education was introduced in the country. The public was fully aware of the economic value and status of education and was determined to take the fullest advantage of this great opportunity.

Such was their enthusiasm and their belief in the power of education. If there is now a tendency to slow down in their rush for education in the rural area, particularly at the primary education level, it would perhaps be that education through its present system has failed them. One of the problems, however, is how to retain girls at school and arrest the alarming rate of drop-outs.

The problem of drop-out affects the number of girls gaining admission into secondary schools. Their number at each succeeding stage of the educational pyramid is lower than that of the boys. The result is that the number of girls seeking employment prematurely is very high. Governments and various voluntary organizations are fully aware of the dangers moral and social inherent in such a situation, hence the increased effort to provide vocational education for girls who could not complete their formal education, although the facilities are still most inadequate.
Various programmes are being provided for girls to make them professionally employable. Many girls enter into teacher training institutions in order to become school teachers. More girls are being trainees as secretaries, journalists, librarians, radiographers, social workers, nurses, telephone operators, lawyers, policewomen, scientists, doctors and dentists.

In adult education, special efforts are made by illiterate women under the direction of the Local Authority and Community Development officers to become literate, and this degree of literacy is kept up by providing adequate reading materials and follow-up refresher courses.

In the field of higher education there is a long way to go, although the number of Nigerian undergraduate women increases every year. But in the face of our needs of higher-level manpower in this age of technology, the number represents an acute shortage.

It is gratifying to note that in Nigeria the work of women's emancipation is not left entirely to the government. Women are applying the principle of self-help. Many programmes aimed at promoting the economic and social status of women are being initiated by women societies: there are day nurseries and day-care centres for working and market mothers. Other facilities established by women organizations are homes and schools for handicapped children, homes for motherless babies and training programmes for house maids.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

Today in Nigeria women work side by side with their male counterparts in almost all occupations particularly in professional, teaching and clerical fields. Women are now found in the administrative, executive and managerial positions. Nigerian women have also entered the fields that were formerly regarded as exclusive reserves for men: there are women-permanent secretaries, under-secretaries, and head of departments. On the whole, there are equality of opportunities for the employment for women. Happily, the attitude of the society, especially the attitude of men, towards professional women is becoming more favourable, but more opportunities for women in training and for promotion should be encouraged.

It is pleasing to note that a good number of the United Nation Organization conventions regarding the interests and status of women have been ratified here in Nigeria. Some of them include maternity protection and underground work. There are statutory provisions in Nigeria which forbid an employer for terminating the employment of a woman purely and solely on the ground of marriage or maternity. There are also provisions in the Nigerian Labour Code Act to safeguard the rights of working women. Chapter 9, part 2 of the Code states that:

(1) A woman employed in any public, private, industrial or commercial undertaking is entitled to six weeks maternity leave before and after confinement on producing a medical certificate given by a qualified medical practitioner.
(ii) If the woman is nursing a child she shall be allowed half an hour twice a day during her working hours for this purpose;

(iii) Where a woman remains absent from her work for a longer period as a result of an illness which is certified by a medical practitioner as arising out of pregnancy or confinement, no employer has the right to give her a notice of dismissal unless she spends more time than the maximum time limit (six months) prescribed by an order made by the Commissioner of Labour.

CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF NIGERIAN WOMEN

In the olden days, only women who were singularly honoured with chiefships participated in the political affairs of the government. Even this practice was restricted to Southern Nigeria; in Northern Nigeria Muslim women were in Purdah. But since the establishment of representative government in Nigeria, women have been participating in increasing numbers in local government, and state and national legislatures. It is pleasing to note that it is in the Muslim North, where progress towards the emancipation of women has been comparatively slow, that we have the only woman civil commissioner.

Since independence, the international involvement of Nigerian women has been enlarged. Various conferences of certain United Nation Special Agencies like UNESCO, the ILO, WHO, and FAO are attended by Nigerian women. It has been refreshing to find that most national problems are identical and common solutions can be formulated which may enable the countries of Africa to progress more rapidly. The Nigerian woman of today is no longer isolated, as she was ten or twenty years ago. She is finding congenial company among the women of other countries and finding assistance in the solution of many of the problems with which she is faced.

CONCLUSION

It would be wrong, however, to assume that all is well in Nigeria and that the total emancipation of women has been achieved. Women still have to fight for their rights. Although there may be no discrimination in employment there exists some in practice.

There is still a great need for a movement to produce a social revolution both in the urban and rural areas in order that equality between men and women may be established.

There must be a general mobilization towards the complete emancipation of women. Efforts must be radically increased to bring happiness and satisfaction to our toiling sisters in the less privileged areas. Their aspirations must be raised and met. This is a crusade which must demand the total commitment of us all. Efforts towards this end have, in the past, been fragmentary and ad hoc. It must no longer be so.
In order to bring about the social change so strongly desire, women leaders must go increasingly to the social battle front. This diversified leadership must be within the Federation of Women Associations already established. Facilities for health education nutrition, maternal and child health services must be doubled particularly in the villages.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to gain from your experiences just as you are here to gain from our own in order to help us all to reach our goal and thus contribute to the advancement and happiness of our people and the survival of Africa.