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THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The role of women in national development is a strategic subject exercising the minds of national planners, policy makers and administrators. It has also been a theme of serious consideration by international policy-making bodies and commissions whose members give priority to women in the development and utilization of human resources.

Five meetings have been held in Africa on topics directly related to this subject. The first on the Participation of Women in Public Life which was held in 1960 in Addis Ababa at the request of the Ethiopian Government, the second on the Status of Women in Family Law, organized in 1964 in Lomé at the request of the Government of Togo, the third on the Role of Women in Urban Development was held in Lagos, Nigeria, in the same year, organized by the Economic Commission for Africa; the fourth on Civic and Political Education of Women took place in Accra in November 1968, at the request of the Government of Ghana; and the fifth, and most recent one on the Role of Women in National Development, was held here last March. All these have been devoted to the progress of women.

Judging by the discussions and conclusions arrived at at these conferences, it is clear that developing countries in Africa are undergoing a period of profound changes in their economic and social structures. This development process has imposed manifold changes in the status and role of women. In their respective societies, African women are facing new demands in their social and economic life. Many women have not yet been able to

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adjust themselves to play their full role in the new situation of national development. Encouragement, training and guidance are urgently needed to enable them to play their full part. Career guidance, at both primary and secondary schools, is also very important, especially for girls to enable them to prepare their minds for their future careers.

By development is meant not only the development of material resources, but obviously the development and utilization of human resources as well. The full and complete development of a country and the welfare of its people require the maximum participation of women as well as men in all fields. Women as a significant part of human resources have an important part to play in the development of their countries. This naturally implies the participation of women in public and economic life and their contribution in every field.

In considering the participation of women in economic and social development, as well as in public life, we should not concern ourselves solely with the question of the rights of women, which are now well recognized almost the world over (though not so well universally practised); nor even with matters of family or pathological aspects of the situation of women, but rather more broadly with the positive aspects of the role of women in influencing development. In this context, understanding of the dynamism of social change, and the motivations and urges which provide the impulse to action are essential. With this it is recognized that the improvement in the status of women is an essential pre-requisite to their full participation both in public affairs and in development programmes as well as in public life.

No development can be implemented unless the entire population is fully integrated and prepared to accept and understand the needs of their country. In this consideration, the predominant role to be played by education is highlighted by the immense responsibility of African women towards their families, their society and their country.

Women play a predominant role in determining the state of health of the family and the nation. Without doubt, health is one of the most important aspects of national development. Women as wives, mothers, aunts and

grandmothers, have a big role in promoting health and happiness, preventing illness and injuries and treating disease. They, therefore, play a key role in determining the standard and level of health of a country.

The special areas of activity in which women can make particular significant contribution include environmental hygiene, nutrition, medical and child care. It is, therefore, necessary that women should have not only good education but also access to adequate advice and tuition in order to teach them new practices and cause them to change from old customs and traditions and adopt new attitudes.

The traditional position of African women was a difficult one. Custom and tradition made women, except in few matrilineal societies, to be treated as minors whose primary concern was that of a wife and a mother and had practically no say in public affairs or matters of state.

Unlike the past generations the African woman today has duties and obligations in the development of her country. She enjoys constitutional and legislative measures to assist her in playing an important role and exercising her rights in public and political fields. Notwithstanding, the results have not always been tangible. There are psychological, biological, sociological and economic obstacles to overcome. Employment possibilities for women, their conditions of work, levels of income and willingness to shoulder responsibilities in commerce, public and government sectors, are matters requiring closer attention.

Customs and traditions still play a big part in the civic and social status of women, especially in countries where these are still strong. Some of these traditions and customs tend to reduce women to second-class citizens, and even though most rights have been granted to women by law, these customs and traditions prevent their being exercised effectively.

It is important that special attention be paid to the education of women, especially to those components of the education and training which will equip them to function more effectively in the public life, and commerce and industry. Such education and training would best be carried out with the co-operation of available community services.

Measures are also required to stimulate professional conscience, general and civic education to contribute to increased employment facilities for women in industry, commerce and handicrafts and to help them to participate more effectively in civic and political activities.

In addition to emphasizing the training of women to fulfil their home and family responsibilities and training them to assume their civic responsibilities in the community, there is a need for programmes for the advancement of women not only to make them aware of their social contribution, but the contribution they can make to economic development.

There seem to be a need to review the educational systems with a view to including social, civic and economic studies to prepare women and girls for various responsibilities in society. Education of women for civic responsibilities, especially in rural areas, deserves serious attention by the authorities.

The educational policy in many African countries needs to be integrated with the general development policy of the country. A decision should be taken as to which field should have priority in a necessarily limited budget. The order of priorities has to be defined by scientific research, which would reveal the real needs and resources of the country.

The intellectual and material attainments of a society reflect the average level of education of the entire population, including women. Societies neglecting the education and welfare of women are threatened with social disequilibrium, which is prejudicial to harmonious development.

It is important to see that women's programmes are integrated in National Development Plans and do not take the form of isolated schemes. Planners, administrators and policy-makers should recognize the role and contribution of women in development. Co-ordinated planning in the field of women's programmes of various technical ministries such as health, education, agriculture, social welfare and industry is very important.

In drawing out National Development Plans consideration needs to be given to whether such plans take into account the contribution of women and how such contribution can be achieved. They should also determine

the training levels of women and whether such training answers local and national needs and whether the training is practical or just theoretical.

There are various national programmes for women in many African countries. These include programmes covering the role of women in public life, education and training programmes, employment opportunities and contribution of women to economic and social development. However, there are a number of problems and difficulties encountered in providing development programmes for women. The participation of women in public life is often impeded by family commitments, traditions, conventions, etc. It is upon the women themselves to try and overcome these difficulties.

Women should realise that if the problems of development in their countries are to be solved, they themselves must take an active part in solving them. The time when women looked to men for almost everything is long past. Better educational facilities for women and working closely with men, whose co-operation is essential, is the only way of ensuring women's participation in national development.

Many women are still content to play their traditional role as wives and mothers without realizing that they could play this role even better if they took part in public affairs. Women need to take the initiative to unite into a force that can command respect and influence in their society. There is regrettably still a wide-spread feeling of inferiority complex among many African women and lack of confidence in other women. This needs to be overcome if they are to serve their countries to the limit of their capacity.

Women's organizations, such as those which joined forces to organize this Seminar, can strive to achieve representation for African women on national planning and policy-making bodies in the fields of social and economic affairs. Besides joining political parties and seeking election to parliaments, women can be encouraged to aspire to leadership and to form intelligent and forceful pressure groups to cater for their special needs.

It should be borne in mind that most of those in a position of authority who bring about the advancement of women have hitherto been men. The time has come to think seriously of the partnership which should exist

between men and women and their joint responsibility to bring about national development.

Women as human resources are contributing not only to social development but also to economic development. Women in Africa already contribute economically through their activities in commerce, business and agriculture. By tradition they are also the main producers of local handicrafts. In this respect it is important that the expansion of cottage industries should be given priority and that the authorities together with women leaders, should study such matters as market potential, supply of raw material, quality of production, provision of transportation and the local and extended demand for cottage industry products.

The establishment of co-operative societies for women, whereby loans and credits could be provided, is a matter requiring urgent attention. The education of women for participation in local and national co-operatives need to be stressed particularly in communities where women are reluctant to accept the risk of investing in co-operative societies. Efforts are necessary to see that where possible women should work in conjunction with existing men's co-operative societies and not necessarily on isolated programmes.

If good results are to be achieved, the inducements to women in order to facilitate their acceptance of change and their new role in the community will have to be considered. The question here is that if the African woman is to be encouraged to work, how could she be drawn into and enabled to succeed in commerce and industry? Industries and commercial houses should be encouraged to employ women in those fields in which the natural aptitudes of women have made them excel. There is a need for educated women to go into business to give an example and encouragement to their less fortunate sisters. Help should also be given to successful business women to invest in areas calculated to advance national economic development. Men equally need to be educated not to fear the competition of women, both on the political and economic level.

As female workers often lack training, there is a great need for professional training for women in a wide field of professions and training

to prepare them for a new kind of work in a new economic set-up. Here governments can help by encouragement of handicrafts and provision of tools and raw materials with a view to instructions in new techniques and reducing costs and sales prices. There is also a need to provide credit facilities for establishing of small businesses. The role of handicrafts in Africa needs emphasizing with a view to obtaining greater participation of women in economic development. In all these and more, national women's organization, in co-operation with international non-governmental organizations, can play a most useful role.

United Nations Contribution

The Economic Commission for Africa has indicated its interest in and concern for the advancement of African women through its programme of work over the past years. The Commission has also given consideration to women's programmes as an integral part of national, social and economic development plans. The research programme of the Commission has also emphasized the important role of women in national development. Current efforts within the Social Development Section of the Human Resources Development Division of ECA, are directed towards strengthening of the programmes for women.

The fundamental role of women in National Development has been stressed time and again in the United Nations. Resolution 1086G, adopted by the Economic and Social Council in 1965, recommended that priority consideration be given to groups whose potential contribution to development is essential, including women and girls, particularly in those societies where their role and status were undergoing a profound change.

This subject is also one which the United Nations Commission on the status of women has considerable interest. Established by the Economic and Social Council in 1946, the Commission's mandate includes preparing recommendations and reports to the Council "on promoting women's rights in the political, economic, civil, social and educational field", and to make recommendations "on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the fields of women's rights, with the object of implementing the principle that men and women should have equal rights".

Much of the Commission's work has been aimed at setting international standards and at encouraging their application at the national level. This remains a very important feature of its programme.

The Commission seeks to achieve its aims in this field through research and study, leading to the elaboration of international conventions and declarations, and to the adoption of resolutions addressing recommendations to governments covering all the fields mentioned in its terms of reference.

An essential aim of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women is to improve the status of women. The Section of the United Nations which is responsible for this Commission's work, is involved in projects designed to promote the advancement of women in Africa. They have, in recent years, sought to increase the number of technical assistance programmes in this field.

Besides technical assistance, the Commission on the Status of Women have adopted various declarations and conventions in favour of women. The most recent achievement and perhaps the most important of which was adopted in 1967 called the "Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women". It contained articles on political rights, nationality, public and private law, traffic in women, education and economic and social rights. It is in fact the only international instrument setting specific standards in all these fields, which have for long been the concern of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Governments of member States of the United Nations have been invited to submit to the Commission each year reports on the measures they have taken to implement its provisions. The implementation of this Declaration is, therefore, under annual consideration by the United Nations.

The United Nations furnishes governments, which request them, services primarily in the form of experts to advise member Governments on matters relating to the status of women.

The United Nations activities to advance the status of women currently follow two main and closely related trends: the elimination of discrimination against women wherever it exists, and the promotion and encouragement

of programmes aimed at increasing the contribution of women to national development.

The specialized agencies of the United Nations family are also engaged in different programmes aimed at promoting women's participation in National Development.

In concluding my talk, I would say that considering that all the African States are involved in a development effort and that Africa is in too difficult an economic situation to be able to afford not to use to the maximum all the human resources and talent of the continent capable of contributing to its development, and knowing therefore, that it is necessary to mobilise women as well as men and to enable them to participate actively in this common task, it is necessary that:

- (i) Due recognition be given to the active and positive aspects of the role of women in the country's development;
- (ii) Participation of women in commerce and industry should be everywhere assured to a degree compatible with their other duties and that this participation should give rise to no discrimination;
- (iii) Women should be encouraged in every way, including by means of adult education, to enter professions, commerce and industry. If necessary through credit facilities.

It is very important that governments should initiate studies in the means for facilitating the participation of women in public life, commerce and industry.