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African Centre for Gender and Development

REPORT
On Mission to the UN Headquarters
(From 6 - 17 March 2001)

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BACKGROUND

At the invitation of the Secretary General's Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, a mission was undertaken at the UN headquarters, to represent ECA at the 45th Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). The discussions for the CSW were a follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first Century". The CSW is the main forum for proposing strategies for the advancement of women within the UN system. This year's Session was the first since the mid-decade review of the Beijing World Conference on Women otherwise known as Beijing + 5. The Session was also taking place after the Millennium Declaration, which has placed gender issues at the centre of development discourse.

The Major Issues Before the 45th Commission on the Status of Women

The CSW focused on the following two thematic issues:

1. Women, the girl-child and human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and;
2. Gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Women, the girl-child and HIV/AIDS

A panel discussion, followed by a dialogue on the effects of HIV/AIDS on women and the girl-child, covered a wide spectrum of issues on how this pandemic has affected women and girl-children around the globe. The panelists and many participants argued that the vulnerability to and impact of HIV/AIDS on women and girl-children could not be prevented, or in deed contained, unless fundamental factors underlying gender inequalities were addressed. Thus, the imbalance of power between men and women was identified as being at the centre of women being exposed to HIV/AIDS pandemic. Socio-cultural factors, compounded by poverty are some of the other main causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS. In this respect, the HIV/AIDS scourge is a factor in deepening poverty, reversing achievements attained in the social sector, especially in health and education, all of which coalesce to impact negatively on economic growth and social development. The pandemic is also an obstacle to achieving international development targets including the ideals of the Millennium Summit Declaration.

What statistics tell us about HIV/AIDS

The statistics on the pandemic, especially for sub-Saharan African, are truly frightening. Increasingly, it is being reported that women and girls are, for reasons of their special anatomy and relative powerlessness, being infected at a faster rate than men and boys. According to a

document before the 45th Session of the Commission, the spread of HIV/AIDS has continued unabated and with an alarming speed. By December 2000, 36.1 million people were infected with the virus compared to 10 million people a decade earlier. Of the 36.1 million, 24.2 million are in sub-Saharan Africa. Currently, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of adult death in many African Countries. The gender dimensions of the scourge are indicated by the fact that by the end of 2000, "an estimated 10.9 million men and 13.3 million women in Africa were living with HIV". There are over 12 million children in Africa who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. The burden of care for the sick is putting enormous psychological and financial pressure on women, whose responsibility it is traditionally to care for the family. Several contributors pointed out that in sub-Saharan African, the pandemic has profoundly affected the workforce.

During the lengthy discussions that followed, Several participants argued that because of biological and socio-cultural factors, women are becoming infected at a far younger age than men and boys. Some statistics point to the fact that in Africa, for example, girls aged between 15-19 may be five to six times more likely to be HIV positive than boys of similar age. Some of the factors that make women and girls more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS include women's and girls' inability to negotiate safer sex including the use of condoms or refusal to have sexual intercourse where women/girls suspect their husbands or boyfriends of in multiple sex partners. The widespread practice of widow inheritance and genital mutilations, make women and girls more susceptible to HIV/STI. Ostracising and labeling women as sexually loose because they ask husband or boy friends, to use condoms

The fact that women and girl children continued to experience relative discrimination in access to education and health facilities was said to have securely impeded the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document and had made them more likely to contract HIV/AIDS. Women needed more access to treatment and greater empowerment to prevent the infection. A major strategy for fighting the pandemic must include strategies and effective response to the pandemic, such as, increasing access to anti-retroviral therapy as currently practiced in Brazil. The strategy has reduced the death rate by 50 per cent and hospitalisation by 75 per cent. Participants pointed out that providing anti-retroviral therapy had been shown to effectively reduce the rate of infection in many countries. International partnership to reduce the risk of HIV/AIDS must include governments, civil society, international institutions and the private sector.

Some African delegates pointed to the futility of pointing accusing fingers to either men or women in apportioning the blame for the spread of the pandemic. They argued that what is currently needed is a true partnership between men and women in efforts to contain the scourge. However, participants emphasized that anti-retroviral therapy are not a panacea for HIV/AIDS, per se, and neither should access to other preventive technologies supplant the central role of information and education in containing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Mortality from AIDS and HIV related complications depletes skilled labour and affects food security, culminating in malnutrition and starvation. The pandemic is keeping children away from school thereby contributing to increased illiteracy rates especially of the girl-children who are taken out of school to care for the sick, and in some cases, to head households affected by HIV/AIDS. Participants pointed out the ramifications of the pandemic on development were therefore enormous. Increased poverty, labour migration, civil wars and conflict, etc. affect women and girls disproportionately and have

the effect of making them more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. To protect women and girls, and to contain the pandemic, agreed conclusions collect for, among others:

- Governments providing affordable treatment to HIV/AIDS patients;
- Stigmatisation of people living with HIV/AIDS to be contained;
- Gender-sensitive strategies to be devised in order to address women's and girls' vulnerability to the scourge;
- Greater access of women to information, education and health care.
- Preventing the transmission of TB and STIs and reduction in poverty especially reduction in debt burden.
- Immediate implementation of Beijing Platform For Action and the outcome document and all other international commitments pertaining to women and the girl child including programme of Action of International Conference on Population and Development, the Copenhagen Programme of Action and the United Nations Millennium Declaration, among others; and
- Ensure the sexual health and reproductive rights of women.

Developing and integrating a gender perspective into all HIV/AIDS programmes and strategies taking cognisance of, inter alia, sex and age disaggregated statistics, with particular focus and Emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment many participants pointed out that HIV/AIDS was an important security issue requiring serious attention not only by affected countries but also by the international community as a whole.

Countries were called upon to foster an enabling environment on which true partnerships, respect for human rights, and equal opportunities between men and women could thrive. At the centre of women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is women's lack of empowerment which can only be addressed by gender mainstreaming, especially in relation to human rights, safety and all other factors related to human welfare and security.

General Issues considered by the Commission

A. Proposed Multi-year ECSOC to the Commission

After the Beijing Conference in 1995 and at the request of the General Assembly, the CSW adopted a multi-year programme of work designed to be more focused and with a thematic approach to issues contained in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). During the 45th Session, the CSW considered its multi-year programme of work for the period 2002-2006. This approach provides the framework for assessing the progress achieved in the implementation of BPFA. As in the past years, the 45th Commission had two thematic issues before it, namely: Women, the girl-child and human immunodeficiency virus and immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) and Gender and all forms of discrimination, in particular racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. The 2002-2006 multi-year programme for work has, in addition to implementation of the Beijing Commitments, the recommendations emanating from the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly – "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century". Discussions on the CSW's work programme were guided by recommendations emanating from the Economic and Social Council and contained in document E/CN.6/2001/8: entitled "Recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the working methods of the Commission on the Status of Women".

Since its inception in 1946, the Commission mandate has been periodically expanded to include extra functions and to more effectively address the issue of equality between men and women. For example, by a 1987 ECOSOC's resolution, CSW was requested to include in its mandate, the "functions of promoting the objectives of equality, development and peace, monitoring the implementation of measures for the advancement of women, and reviewing and appraising progress made at the sub-regional, regional and global levels". Within this framework, the council presented several recommendations to the 45th Session of the CSW for consideration and for inclusion into its multi-year programme of work. For example, there was a proposal for **general debate** to input into policy proposals by the Commission. In this connection, it was proposed that the Commission endeavour to solicit the participation of ministers other than gender/women ministers, as is now the case. Ministerial participation should be dictated by the issues being discussed and should be attended by both men and women with expertise in the particular subject being addressed. Thus, the ministerial participation for the 46th CSW should include ministers of economic development and planning and ministers of environment- these would be the issues before the Commission for consideration. Another recommendation pertained to the participation of Regional Commissions. It was proposed that reporting by Regional Commissions "progress on gender mainstreaming activities as part of an up date national plans and emerging regional trends. Relevant statements from regional commissions might be submitted to CSW and distributed prior to the general debate". In this connection, the Office of Special Adviser on Gender Issues, in collaboration with regional commissions, shall organise expert group meetings on gender mainstreaming.

In sum, member States argued for increased efficiency and productivity in policy formulation and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action and Beijing +5 outcome document. Regarding the Commission's methods of work discussed above, the Commission called for greater flexibility. Member States urged the Commission to set out practical and action-oriented strategies that would bring concrete results.

Highlights on Proposed System-wide Medium-Term Plan (SWMTP) for the Advancement of Women

In addition, CSW considered and adopted the system-wide medium-term plan and the proposed programme of work of the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender and Issues and Advancement of women and the Division for the Advancement of women for the biennium 2002-2003 (E/EN.6/2001/CRP.2).

The system-wide medium term plan for the advancement of women serves as a coordinating and monitoring tool, especially of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Among other things, the Plan outlines the individual actions of the other UN organisations designed to achieve the objectives of the Platform for Action and the outcome document. The SWMTP is structured around how the system mainstreams a gender perspective in all its activities relating to the twelve critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action. The plan also presents the "collaborative efforts through standing inter-agency bodies, such as Inter-Agency Committee on Women and gender Equality and other informal collaborative efforts between the various organisations".

Statement by the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women

In her introductory remarks, Ms. King, Assistant Secretary General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, reflected on the outcome of the June 2000 Special Session highlighting on the progress achieved and the obstacles lying ahead. She stated that one of the primary challenges facing the Commission post Beijing+5 was "the need to manage the globalisation process to ensure that women do not bear the brunt of any negative effects". She referred to the adoption by the General Assembly of the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action on Mainstreaming a Gender Perspective on Multidimensional Peace Support Operations as one of the most important breakthroughs since the 45th Session of the Commission. Consequent to these developments, the Security Council held its first-ever session on women, peace and security; adopting a far reaching resolution stressing the importance of women's equal participation with men and total involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.

Ms. King also brought to the attention of the CSW the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan pointing to the grave and persistent violations of women basic human rights despite repeated plea by the international community to the authorities in that country. The issue will remain on the agenda until fundamental changes occurred.

Statement of the Concerns of the African Women's Caucus on Racism

Below is a statement by African NGOs on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. It states:

We, the NGO representatives from Africa attending the 45th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women would like to note and express our concerns that arise from the intersection between gender and racial, ethnicity, xenophobia and related intolerance.

The intersection between gender and racial discrimination requires that comparisons are made not only between women and men, but among women from different racial, ethnic and religious groupings.

The majority of women in Africa suffer from the consequences of the intersection of gender and racial and ethnic and related discrimination. For example, the majority of women from populations that are targeted by racial discrimination are relegated to lowest paid jobs in the formal economy or the informal and rural sectors where the rewards are low and unpredictable, with no access to productive resources and credit. The racism in such practices may not be obvious, but an analysis of which women are in the lowly paid jobs and the informal sector would reveal that they are all from subordinated groups.

Most documents analyzing intersection between race and gender at this Session have not taken into account the colonial legacy and view racial discrimination as a problem mainly affecting minorities, migrants and small sections of populations. We would like to note that, in Africa and even in other parts of the developing world, it is the majority of the population that experiences racial and ethnic discrimination as a result of the colonial legacy. This is not a phenomenon arising from the feminization of migration.

Traditional practices that are harmful to women are mainly practiced on women from racially or ethnically subordinated groups. Both governments and the international community are often slow to take action under the excuse that they respect the culture of the people. The racial and ethnic discriminatory implications of such lack of action often escape analysis.

When the racism that is inherent in liberalization and globalization intersects with gender and patriarchy, the result is the multiple subordination of women from populations targeted by racial discrimination. They end up being without education, without information and without a voice. Female face of poverty is that of the woman from subordinated groups.

Actions to deal with these situations of multiple discrimination require strategies that are sensitive to all forms of discrimination. The forth-coming World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance presents an opportunity to confront issues of the intersection between gender and racial and ethnic discrimination.

We, therefore, recommend that the international community develops analytic tools that expose the multiple forms of discrimination against women as well as the intersectional issues that make some groups of women suffer more discrimination than others.

We also strongly urge our Governments to recognize the problem of intersectionality, and to develop gender-sensitive policies and programmes to promote and protect the human rights of women who are targeted by other multiple forms of discrimination as a result of gender, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs.



INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

MEMORANDUM INTERIEUR

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Date 16 August 2001
Ref: COES/ACW/794

To: Mr. Samba Jack, Chief,
OPRM

From: Wambui Karanja, OIC *Karanja*
African Centre for Women

Subject: **Mission Report**

Attached please find my mission report to UN Headquarters, New York.

Thank you.