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A ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSION WITH DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS ON THE

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AFRICAN PLATFORM FOR ACTION:

AFRICAN COMMON POSITION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

SEPTEMBER 1995

BEIJING, CHINA

I.   RATIONALE

It has now become a dictum, at least at the theoretical level, that investment in people is a prerequisite to the achievement of the highly coveted goal of sustainable development.   Such investment must integrate the gender dimension in all political, social, economic and cultural activities in order to safeguard the three thematic issues of the Fourth World Conference on Women, namely **equality, development and peace.**

The convening of this Conference around these issues, however, bears witness to the large gap that exists between the current situation and the desired level of investment in people to ensure their full participation in determining their welfare.   The gap is even bigger in the case of women and girls who must be empowered as full and equal actors and beneficiaries of development.   Although many governments globally have adopted strategies for the advancement of women and their mainstreaming, lack of adequate political commitment and allocation of the necessary resources persist as roadblocks to the realization of these aspirations.   And yet, in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent and globalized, the achievement of these aspirations should be viewed with a sense of collective responsibility and the potential for mutual benefits in the attainment of sustainable development.

II.   PURPOSE OF THE ROUND-TABLE

This Round-Table is convened on the basis of the ethic of collective responsibility in fostering the advancement of women and mainstreaming the gender dimension in all societal development activities; and the mutual sharing of the benefits that are derived thereof. It is further based on the strength of the commitment that was made by the central actors in development in Dakar, Senegal, at the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women when they adopted the **African Platform for Action: African Common Position for the advancement of women** (APA) in November 1994.

At this regional conference preparatory to the current global one, Africa and its development partners recognized their responsibility in adopting criteria for the allocation of resources for the implementation of the APA. Specific targets were suggested for bilateral partners in allocating the Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the gross national product (GNP) of the industrialized nations. Similarly, the setting up of special windows was recommended to multilateral financial institutions for accessing women entrepreneurs to credit.

The Round-Table is therefore organized in this context with the following specific objectives:

- Developing a common understanding of issues of concern to African women as   contained in the African Platform for Action (APA);
- Highlighting key priority issues drawn from the African Platform for Action on which to focus for the coming five years;

- Building partnerships for accelerating the achievement of African women's priority goals;
- sharing experiences with development partners.

Thus, the main purpose of this Round-Table is to initiate an on-going dialogue between various actors involved in the implementation of the African Platform for Action at all levels in order to ensure a coordinated and concerted action. This approach will minimize dissipation of efforts and resources. It will also ensure respect of commitments made and targets set by all the principal actors in development at the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women.

III. PRIORITY AREAS FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AFRICAN PLATFORM FOR ACTION FOR THE PERIOD 1990-2000

The Fifth African Regional Conference on Women identified eleven critical areas of concern and related corrective measures in pursuit of the advancement of women. It also prescribed actions that must be taken in order to remedy the situation and to put women in the mainstream of societal activities. Further consultations with member States and their partners have identified the following five critical areas of concern as the most urgent in the short-run:

(i) Poverty eradication and economic empowerment

More than one third of Africa's population is estimated to be living in abject poverty, thus being unable to meet their most basic needs. Women bear a disproportionate share of this poverty as more women than men become poorer every day due to their low ability to generate income. Feminization of poverty has also become a reality as female headed households continue to grow. To date, they are estimated to represent at least 35 per cent of all households in Africa. While women constitute more than 50 per cent of the population and produce 60-80 per cent of the food supply, they have access to less than 10 per cent of the region's income, and own less than 1 per cent of the production resources such as land, farming equipment etc. This is mostly due to various traditional, religious and legal impediments. Besides, despite the role that they play in environmental management, conservation and protection, they suffer the first effects of environmental changes which curtail the sources of firewood, energy, water, food and other resources for household and economic activities.

Proposed actions

(1) Towards the empowerment of rural women

Rural women are the backbone of subsistence farming and yet are denied the tools for sustainability. It is therefore imperative to provide them with such **support mechanisms** as:

- Access to production resources;
- Saving and credit schemes similar to the Gameen Bank;
- Storage facilities;
- Marketing outlets and adequate transportation;
- Networking systems including inter- and intra- community cooperatives;
- Child care and health facilities;
- Extension services including skills training, functional literacy and civic education to facilitate their participation in community decision-making for their empowerment.

(2)   Towards economic empowerment through entrepreneurship

The majority of women are still concentrated at micro and informal level activities. Women's productive capacity should be enhanced through:

- Strengthening of women entrepreneurs' capacity for productivity as individuals and organizations at national, subregional and regional levels;
- Strengthening of national, subregional and regional networks of women in business and women entrepreneurs;
- Upgrading of women's small industries with production and marketing complementarity;
- Developing innovative programmes to generate income for the poor;
- Extending credit programmes to low income women and women in small businesses to facilitate expansion of their economic activities.

(ii)   Improving the health of women and girls

One of the major outcomes of excessive poverty is poor health which is associated with high levels of malnutrition, poor sanitation, illiteracy and limited participation in socio-economic activities. The consequences of these conditions include an infant mortality rate of 103 per 1000 as compared to 70 per 1000 for all developing countries; and under-five mortality rate of 160 per 1000 live births in sub-Saharan Africa (1993). Between 1985 and 1990, 49 per cent of the urban population and 84 per cent of the rural population in Africa did not have access to sanitation facilities while only 68 per cent on the urban and 26 per cent of the rural population had access to safe water. For all Africa, daily calorie and protein consumption was 2,100 and 53 grams, respectively, per capita as opposed to the world average of 2,600 calories and 71 grams. In this deplorable situation, women and girls suffer greater incidence of morbidity and mortality than men due to a number of factors: various cultural and traditional taboos and practices that dictate unequal household resource allocation and restricted dietary intake; high fertility rates; unavailability of adequate health services; inaccessibility of relevant health information; chronic diseases such as malaria and malnutrition; such practices as abortion and female circumcision under unsterile conditions etc.

Proposed actions

- Establishment of health programmes and/or increased access to improved family health care facilities;
- Sensitization campaigns and wide information dissemination in targeted communities to increase the level of awareness with regard to dangers of early marriage, high fertility and nutritional taboos to reproductive health;
- Provision of low cost and/or subsidized day-care centres in order to release mothers of young children to engage in economic activities and at the same time ease their work load thereby safeguarding their health status;
- Organization of subregional seminars for policy-makers on the harmful effects of some cultural practices on reproductive health and the advantages of improving the status of women's health.

(iii) Education and training

Most African countries are going through serious crises in the education sector as evidenced by the decline in enrolment ratios, increase in the drop-out rates and the slide in the quality of education. There is a continued drop of the enrolment ratios of girls compared to boys, at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Only 23 per cent of primary school graduates enter secondary institutions while less than 3 per cent of those who leave secondary school continue to tertiary levels of education. Additionally, they are often steered out of the science and technology fields and encouraged to stay with the "soft" service fields that are traditionally associated with women. In 1990 the adult literacy rate of males was 61 per cent as compared to 39 per cent for females in sub-Sahara Africa.

Proposed actions

Provision of wider educational, training and employment opportunities to female school leavers is required through:

- Organization of effective non-formal training programmes to equip female school leavers with practical, marketable skills that will allow them to be productive and independent members of their community;
- Provision of advisory services to member States on non-formal programmes for out of school girls;
- Provision of active counselling and guidance services in schools around career choice;
- Provision of scholarship to girl/women who are interested and/or pursuing studies in science and technology

(iv)   Women's human and legal rights

Although most African countries have introduced measures in their constitutions to provide fundamental rights and freedoms to both men and women, their implementation has been piecemeal and uncoordinated. This has resulted in the curtailment of the overall net gain.   In some instances, constitutional rights are being abrogated by negative customary and/or religious laws and practices.   There are countries, for example, where women have the status of minors despite their age, level of education, employment status etc. The World Conference on Human Rights in its Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action declared that violation of women's and girls' rights is violation of human rights which are inalienable, integral and indivisible parts of the universal human rights.   This included gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment.

Proposed actions

An analysis of the existing situation in Africa with regard to the legal and human rights of women should be undertaken in order to:

- Assess implications of certain civil and penal codes on women;
- Identify mechanisms through which the legal and human rights of women can be integrated into the mainstream of governments' legislative, judicial and administrative bodies;
- Suggest ways of resolving conflicts and contradictions that exist between legal and human rights of women and certain traditional and customary practices that are harmful to women;
- Identify a core of specialists to undertake advisory services to member States and NGOs in this area;
- Develop guidelines and training manuals for the promotion of legal literacy to women;
- Train a core of para-legal trainers;
- Develop a set of indicators to evaluate impact of violation of legal and human rights on women.

(v)   Participation of women in the peace process

Several African countries are embroiled in war, civil strife and conflict caused by a combination of factors that involve ethnic violence and violation of human rights.   The resulting displacement and flight from the country of origin often impact on women disproportionately.   Africa constitutes about 35 per cent of the world's 20 million refugees; women and children make up 80 per cent of this population, located mostly in the least developed countries that can barely afford to absorb them.   Women have to cope with the consequences of disrupted family structures, scarcity of food and shelter, inadequate basic social and health services etc.   The fundamental human rights of women and girls are violated in torture, rape, murder, disappearance and maltreatment.   Female headed

households, abandoned and orphaned children also have to be contended with. Yet, women are rarely included in decision-making processes related to conflict prevention, resolution and management, or in peace-building initiatives. Women can be agents of peace and conflict prevention by identifying root causes and opportunities for reconciliation. When communities collapse, they continue to pass on culture, traditions and values to the next generation. Lack of adequate education can be a constraint to empowering women to participate effectively in the peace process.

Proposed action

- Train women in positions of leadership in national, regional and community life in methods of conflict prevention and resolution; and to act as conciliators in family and community life;
- Develop and strengthen existing mechanisms and networks for peace in the region
- Ensure that education for peace is an integral part of the formal and non-formal education system;
- Train a cadre of women para-professionals to provide psychological counselling to victims of war, particularly to girls/women who have suffered gender-related violence;
- Strengthen networks among peace organizations;
- Develop manuals on conflict prevention, peacemaking and peace building;
- Develop programmes on TV, video and radio on peace issues;
- Advocate for the integration of peace education in formal and non-formal education; and for development of projects in peace building between contentious groups in the region.

In conformity with the commitment made by member states, bilateral and multilateral partners in Dakar, extra efforts will be needed to facilitate the achievement of the goals set for the advancement of African women. The implementation of the above of the agenda will require substantial technical and financial support. The agenda also provides an opportunity for those partners who have decided to target women in their work programmes to ensure that African women are among the beneficiaries of their policies.