

UNITED NATIONS



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**Regional Forum of Women Leaders to consider the
Global Platform for Action in preparation for
the Fourth World Conference on Women**

Statement

by

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**24 July
Addis Ababa**

Madam Chairperson,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to address this august gathering as it sits on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women. Your deliberations over the next four days will help set the direction that Africa, in partnership with the rest of the world, should take in the next ten years and beyond in the perpetual endeavour to promote the advancement of women.

On behalf of the Economic Commission for Africa, allow me to welcome you to Addis Ababa, a capital city and home of the Commission. Permit me also to welcome you into this historic Africa Hall, where many decisions have been made that affected the fate of several African States. I take this opportunity to express our heartfelt gratitude to His Excellency Mr. Meles Zenawi, the President of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, the Transitional Government, and the people of Ethiopia, for their continuous hospitality.

Madam Chairperson,

Since the adoption of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies ten years ago, most African countries, like the rest of the world, have attempted to elevate women and to integrate them fully into the socioeconomic development process. Unfortunately, much remains to be done. An assessment of the implementation of the Nairobi strategies during the Fifth African Regional Conference on Women in Dakar, Senegal, in November 1994, clearly revealed this fact: Much remains to be done to bring the advancement of women to the utmost heights.

There is need, therefore, to formulate policies, plans, and programmes that ensure gender sensitivity and responsiveness at all levels. There is need to take special corrective measures to ensure women's inputs in decision making at various levels and sectors and to have built-in strategies for the regular participation of women in all aspects of societal activities. Additionally, there is a need to address the growing numbers of women living in poverty and the tendency of various African cultures and traditions to marginalize the female gender.

The importance of taking measures to accelerate the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies was clear to the African women at the Dakar Conference. In an unprecedented move, women from all walks of life, old and young alike, unanimously adopted the African Platform for Action: the African Common Position for the Advancement of Women. This is the blueprint for action toward gender equality. It is the strategy for mainstreaming the gender approach to development for the next ten years and beyond.

The African Platform for Action is an action-oriented document that prescribes corrective measures and actions to be taken in each of the 11 critical areas of concern identified. It is a commitment that we have all made: governments; NGOs; national and international organizations alike. It was a commitment to play our role in its implementation from the moment the Platform for Action was adopted in Dakar. This obligation was also underscored by the African Heads of State and governments at their thirty-first Ordinary Session of the OAU Assembly in Addis Ababa in June 1995. In their declaration, the Heads of States and Governments endorsed the African Platform for Action and "affirmed that it constitutes the ideal framework for the effective promotion and advancement of African Women."

But, as experience has shown, the real challenge for us and our development partners is not so much in the adoption of policy frameworks but in their actual implementation. The recent assessment of the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies glaringly brought this point home. When stock was taken, a large gap existed between expectations and reality. Much remains to be done to realize the objectives set at the last world conference on women. Substantial improvements in female education, women's health, access to financial services and the removal of discriminatory legal codes are needed to boost African women's productivity and social standing. From this disappointing reality, we must learn our lesson and ensure that no efforts are spared to translate the African Platform for Action into tangible results.

To assist in the implementation of the Platform, the sixteenth meeting of the African Regional Coordinating Committee for the Integration of Women in Development (ARCC) reviewed and approved "Guidelines for the Implementation of the African Platform for Action." The immediate objectives of the Guidelines are to assist governments and other development partners in forming gender-sensitive policies and programmes. The Guidelines also suggest practices to follow in resource allocation and institutional arrangements. The Guidelines should be used as a yardstick for measuring the effectiveness of the implementation process. You will recall that in the context of the institutional arrangements for the implementation of the platform, ARCC was designated as the regional mechanism for monitoring and evaluating its implementation.

Once the Global Platform for Action is made final, it should reflect the concerns of women from all corners of the world. Many of you here have participated in the Preparatory Committee meetings for the formulation of the current Draft Global Platform. You are, therefore, aware of the progress made in the process of consensus building. You

are also aware of the strategic importance of having Africa's concerns adequately articulated in the global document. Indeed your experience with the implementation of prior strategies for the advancement of women has demonstrated the singular importance of a universal policy framework document in the interest of women and gender equity.

In your meeting here this week, therefore, you face the dual challenge of (1) deliberating on strategies for incorporating Africa's concerns into the Global Platform, and (2) devising tactics that will allow Africa to contribute toward a consensus around the document.

One effective way to confront these challenges is, of course, to examine the status of the Draft Global Platform in light of the two issues. With regard to Africa's critical areas of concern, most of them are incorporated among the 12 critical areas that are in the global document. Thanks to many of you who attended the last Preparatory Committee meeting, the issue of the status of the girl-child was added as the twelfth critical area, even though it still remains bracketed. Indeed, there is not enough awareness of the marginalization that our girl children suffer at home, in school, in the workplace, and in the community. Not only is their physical and mental health compromised but also their opportunities for development as full-fledged members of society. Retention of this critical area of concern in the Global Platform must be ensured to the very end.

While all the other critical areas of concern adopted in Dakar appear in the Draft Global Platform for Action, it is important to study the draft carefully to ensure that some of the parts that are still in brackets do not dilute or distort the issues in the African Platform. Particular attention should be given to the issue of poverty; it touches the majority of African women. Once impoverished, women find it particularly hard to escape poverty. Since African women are most active in the informal sectors of the economy, their ability to generate

the steady flow of income that is necessary for poverty alleviation is hamstrung. The implementation of effective poverty reduction strategies must be our overriding objective.

Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the search for consensus around the Global Platform, it is helpful to understand what the concerns of other regions and interest groups are. Some of those articulated by a number of developing countries out of Africa and the countries in transition are not unlike our own realities. Understanding others could often lead to possible areas for collaboration and cooperation. For example, the case of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh illustrates how short-term, low interest loans to women can generate not only positive private returns but also high social benefits as well. A recent study has revealed that this programme has resulted in increased schooling for girls, lower fertility, higher agricultural productivity and reduced poverty. Clearly, there is much Africa can learn from other nations' attempts to raise the status of women. And considering that the advancement of women is a concern of all women and men around the world, and that the marginalization of some threatens all, it is advisable to forge meaningful alliances with other constituents and demonstrate solidarity with the global sorority.

Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, the composition of your delegations to Beijing is going to be critical in terms of the effectiveness of your participation at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Preparatory activities have been numerous and at different levels since the conference was announced. Some of you have participated regularly and are, therefore, quite familiar with the process that has brought preparatory activities up to the current level. For

continuity and effective use of the final opportunity in Beijing to push the interests of Africa into focus, it is crucial that delegations comprise people who have been involved all along. In selecting delegates, let concern for productivity and tangible results be your overriding guide. Let us also coordinate our strategies to ensure that our energies and resources are not spread too thin and that our efforts are consolidating and reinforcing.

Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let all participants at this important forum dedicate themselves to ensuring that Africa will have a stake in the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995. Let this forum ensure that the principles, objectives, and priorities enshrined in the African Platform for Action become the heart and fiber of the Global Platform for Action. And furthermore let us ensure that Africa will support the platform with one voice.

Thank you for your kind attention. I wish you fruitful deliberations.