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FIFTH AFRICAN REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN
EXPERTS MEETING

Statement

by

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Madam Chairperson,
Honourable Minister of Women Affairs, Children and the Family,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this historic meeting of experts preparatory to the Fifth Regional Conference on Women in this beautiful city of Dakar. On behalf of the staff of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, and on my own behalf, I must also express our heartfelt gratitude to the Government of Senegal for hosting this Conference, and for the overwhelming hospitality that we all have enjoyed since our arrival.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This is a historic meeting. It is historic because it will have a major bearing for the fostering of the cause of women and development. Fittingly, your meeting has been entrusted with the daunting task of determining the framework within which all activities geared towards women's advancement must be organized and steered for the next ten years and beyond. We are gathered here, therefore, for the next five days to examine how Africa had fared since the adoption of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women in 1985, and what needs to be done henceforth to put Africa on course in the 21st Century. This meeting will therefore review the contribution of the African women to the cause of development so far made in the various socio-cultural-economic-and political sectors as per the Nairobi Strategies, bearing in mind that they constitute over half of the regional population and reflect on the correlation between their numerical majority and their actual status in society.

As you are all aware, the examination of the situation of women in Africa in preparation for the Fourth World Conference on Women is a process that has been going on for the past year in the African countries. Indeed, most of our Member states constituted national committees to assess the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies. These Strategies were adopted as the guide for principles policies, plans, programmes and activities for the advancement of women for the period 1985 to 1995. The 1989 mid-decade review of the implementation process produced the Abuja

Declaration on Participatory Development: The role of Women in the 1990s which was adopted by the UNECA Conference of Ministers of Economic and Social Development which set targets to be achieved within a limited period of time in order to accelerate the implementation process of the Nairobi Strategies. To day, the 41 national reports that have been submitted to UNECA show that while some gains have been made in the area of the advancement of women, a great deal still remains to be done to meet the objectives of the Nairobi Strategies and the targets of the Abuja Declaration. Other broad consultations on the conditions of women at the national subregional and regional levels between UNECA and various governments, NGOs, United Nations agencies and other development partners reveal that women still lag behind and are marginalized in several critical areas. A few statistical illustrations will help to underscore the point.

Recent data published by the World Bank shows that primary school enrolment for girls in Africa rose from 24% in 1960 to 61% in 1990 as compared to a rise of from 46% to 83% for boys in the same period, and that the median literacy rate for women was 38% in 1990 as compared to 50% for all adults in Sub-Saharan Africa. Data reported by the UNDP in 1993 also shows that Maternal mortality rate is 690 per 100,000 almost double that of low and middle income developing countries, and more than 40 times greater than in the industrialized nations. Also, women earned only 10% of the income from formal employment and owned only 1% of the assets.

Despite these rather discouraging statistics, some progress has been made in a few areas. Most governments, for example have recognized the importance of setting up national machineries to promote and monitor the implementation of the Nairobi Strategies through the development of appropriate policies, plans, programmes and activities. Unfortunately, the underpin to provide such structures with adequate resources and the necessary authority to carry out their tasks on a consistent basis has constrained their effectiveness. Broad sensitization of society at all levels on the need to take corrective measures to bring women into the mainstream as equal partners in all aspects of life has also been achieved within the past decade. This has resulted in a proliferation of dynamic and extremely energetic NGOs and women organizations and groups in all sectors, all forging to further the cause of the advancement of women.

It is in this context that the process of the broad consultations coupled with the findings of the assessment of the implementation of the Nairobi Strategies culminated in the identification of nine critical areas as the priority issues of focus in formulating the Draft Platform for Action now before you. They include women and: economic empowerment; education, training and science and technology; the family, culture and socialization; health, family planning and population; environment and natural resource management; the peace process; political empowerment; legal and human rights; and mainstreaming of gender-disaggregated data. Let us focus briefly on each.

The economic enablement of women through the elimination of poverty and the promotion of sustainable livelihood is a critical requirement for the achievement of sustainable development. The realities of women in poverty are complex and diverse and besides income deprivation, they include other forms of deprivation such as social discrimination, isolation, physical disability, vulnerability to such adverse situations as wars and famines. These constitute major obstacles to productivity. What is needed therefore is the enhancement of women's productivity and entitlements.

To achieve these major objectives requires that all women and girls have access to basic education as a fundamental right. This requires the mobilization of existing and potential resources in accordance with the principles of the 1990 Declaration on Education for All and especially the Ouagadougou Declaration of 1993 on the Education of Girls. Education is a powerful tool for the socio-economic integration of women and constitutes one of the major responsibilities of the African Governments.

The integration of women in all levels and activities of society is a critical need which must be met within the overall framework of the cultural fabric, the family and the socialization process. It must be recognized, however, that certain ideologies have tended to use culture to justify oppressive gender relations. Thus, inasmuch as culture can be a liberating dynamic force through its various active institutions, traditional practices that are harmful to the welfare of women must be eliminated. Legal and constitutional measures as well as strategies for information, education and communication should be developed to improve the image and the role of African women in the family, school, community and society at large.

Women occupy a special place in health improvement programmes because they participate in, and manage numerous activities that affect the health and well-being of their families. The unavailability of adequate health services including family planning services, and inaccessibility to information coupled with the presence of chronic diseases and malnutrition, leave many women unable to cope with the physical demands of reproduction. The emergence of HIV/AIDS and the multiple effects it has on women adds another dimension to their already vulnerable health status. Population policies and programmes in Africa must therefore strive to improve the status of women as recommended in the Plan of Action adopted at the recently concluded Conference on Population and Development. While the rates of infant, child and maternal mortality must be reduced, the provision of quality family planning services in which both men and women participate in partnership is essential.

The integration of population factors into development policies and programmes has direct implications for the environment. Indeed, the absence of alternative means of livelihood for a growing population results in increasing pressure on the ecosystem and creates strains for the management of natural resources. Natural resources are central to the livelihood of poor rural households and it is women who are directly involved in the use of these resources and often have no choice but to exploit them in order to survive. Thus, environmental policy will be considerably enhanced through the recognition of the managerial role of women in the environment and translated into legislation and actual entitlement to these resources.

The low level of women representation in the area of political decision-making can be attributed to a number of factors including socio-cultural perceptions and inhibitions; lack of adequate finances, civil education and good will on the part of men; high rates of illiteracy among women; and women's multiple roles, just to name a few. In effect therefore, women neither participate adequately in decision-making nor to benefit sufficiently from the on-going democratization process. This situation needs to be urgently and effectively addressed.

The issue of human rights is fundamental to all aspects of development. It comprises inalienable birth rights for every human being regardless of race, colour, religion, creed, nationality or sex. Numerous resolutions in favour of equal rights for women and

girls have been adopted at the regional and international levels. Yet, the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, now signed by 38 African countries as of October 1994, acknowledges that extensive discrimination against women continues to exist. Many African countries, however, have provided in their constitutions for fundamental rights and freedoms to both men and women. Their implementation, though, according to a recent ECA comparative study on African national laws on the rights and status of women in Africa, has been largely piecemeal and uncoordinated sometimes therefore neutralizing the positive results achieved in some areas. Women's legal and human rights should therefore be evaluated and reformed against the background of the 1993 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action of the World Conference on Human Rights.

Madam Chairperson,

A climate of peace and stability is a prerequisite for the respect and enjoyment of human rights as well as for sustainable socio-economic development. This notwithstanding, several countries in the continent are embroiled in war or civil strife, or problems related to extremism of which women and children are their worst victims. To day, women and children constitute 80% of the displaced and refugee populations in Africa. Violations of the fundamental rights of women and girls are widespread in times of war and civil strife including such atrocious crimes as rape, torture, murder, disappearance, maltreatment and neglect. It is ironic that women should suffer so disproportionately from the consequences of war and yet are hardly involved in the decision-making processes which produce conflict or mechanisms to resolve them in the region. The participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution is their right and governments should recognize this along the line of the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace. Measures should be taken to bring women into peace-keeping and peace-making and reinforce their roles as peace educators in the family and society at large.

Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

One of the indispensable requirements for monitoring the process of the advancement of women and their mainstreaming into society is the development of gender-disaggregated data and indicators on the basis of inputs from national and local levels. African governments

and researchers should therefore make provisions for the development of such data as a necessary component for the development of a knowledge base that will facilitate an understanding of the gender issues in Africa and thereby the implementation of the African platform for Action.

Ladies and Gentlemen

As you strive to complete the daunting task of building a consensus on a Platform for Action based on the nine critical areas that have been identified, you must also elicit commitment from the African Governments, NGOs, bilateral and multilateral organizations, the United Nations system and other international organizations and development partners to allocate the necessary resources for its implementation. As you review the proposals in the Draft Platform for Action, you must view them as the final outcome of a wide-ranging and representative consultative process that identified Africa's priority areas of concern in relation to the accelerated advancement of women. By adopting these proposals, you will have rendered the Platform for Action implementable and a part of the global Platform for Action that will be adopted in Beijing in September 1995. Conscious of the critical interrelationship between the Platform for Action, resources for its implementation and the necessary structures whereby it will be transformed into concrete action, the proposed institutional arrangements should be considered with seriousness of purpose and commitment.

Women have been said to be the major stake holders in the successful implementation of the Platform for Action. I would want to stretch the point further and suggest that the fate of women is intricately intertwined with that of men and society at all levels. When their welfare is at stake, so is the welfare of all. Let us therefore join hands to uplift and promote the advancement of women for our own betterment, and for the betterment of the world.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish you successful deliberations.