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ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA

FIFTEENTH MEETING OF
THE AFRICAN REGIONAL COORDINATING COMMITTEE
FOR THE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT (ARCC)

OPENING STATEMENT

Layashi Yaker
United Nations Under-Secretary-General,
Executive Secretary of
the Economic Commission for Africa

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Madam Chairperson,
Honourable Minister in charge of Women Affairs,
Distinguished members of the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee
on the Integration of Women in Development,
Distinguished observers,
Invited Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to welcome you all to the fifteenth meeting of the Africa Regional Coordinating Committee on the Integration of Women in Development in this historic Africa Hall. It is always with a sense of seriousness of purpose that one enters this majestic building, to deliberate yet again on the future of the people of Africa, and the challenges ahead. Once again we are gathered here in the heart of Addis Ababa, and the headquarters of the Economic Commission for Africa to take stock of what the past year has yielded in the way of steering women forward toward self determination.

I would also like to thank our host, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, for the unfledging support and generosity that it extends to ECA and all our guests in the spirit of African hospitality and friendship. In particular, I would like to thank the Honourable Minister in charge of Women's Affairs, Waizero Tadelechi Hailemichael, for availing herself from her busy schedule to open this meeting. It is indeed a demonstration of the importance she attaches to the issue of women's advancement and the search for answers to Africa's development problematique by women themselves.

The Fifteenth Meeting of ARCC holds at a time when the entire world is mobilizing towards participation at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Indeed it is already preoccupied with stock taking as regards the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women since their adoption in 1985. In examining the successes and constraints for their implementation, no doubt due attention will be given to the current global situation which has contributed significantly to the outcome

of the past ten years. Such aspects as the economic crisis and subsequent structural adjustment programmes, the democratization process, increased interest in human rights, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the move from planned to market economies and the focus on sustainable management of natural resources have all, one way or the other, had implications on the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies.

As concerns the Africa region, sensitization workshops that have just been completed in the five subregions of UNECA show that most countries are already poised to complete their assessment of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies shortly. Most national reports with recommendations for future strategies and priorities will be submitted to UNECA and the Secretariat of the World Conference in New York by the end of April and are expected to contain precise and concrete action-oriented recommendations geared toward women's empowerment economically, legally and politically. For while it is commonly accepted that women's economic situation needs to be ameliorated for their betterment and that of their families, a development strategy whose package does not take into consideration the gender dimension is surely unsustainable. Gender analysis in all policy decisions is indeed of paramount importance as a strategy for mainstreaming women as recommended by a recent Ad Hoc Expert Group Meeting on strategies for the enhancement of women's skills in mainstreaming and decision-making which you will have the chance to review in greater detail during your deliberations. But concern for gender issues, genuine as they are, however, need to be taken within the context of a comprehensive development strategy for the society, covering economic, technological and social spheres. What we are, in fact, saying is that while there is role playing for both men and women within this strategy, their contribution of the latter should be maximized.

Another issue that needs to be strongly emphasized among the recommendations for accelerating the implementation of the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies is the importance of political

commitment on the part of the decision makers. Forward looking strategies without the necessary resource back-up will, needless to say, remain unfulfilled aspirations. The experience of preparing the national reports has amply highlighted this problem as the national committees found themselves with an important job to do but with no resources to carry it out. Political commitment to gender issues therefore must be demonstrated through concrete allocation of resources for the implementation of adopted strategies and accompanied with concrete efforts to develop basic institutional and human capacities to facilitate the attainment of the stated objectives.

Of course one of the most effective ways of ensuring political will is the participation in the decision making machinery. Unfortunately, women are seriously marginalized in this domain with serious repercussions not only on the pace of women advancement, but also in the course of development as a whole. Matters related to war and peace, investment choices, types of structural adjustments etc. have been decided upon with little input from women. There is also evidence that while some nations are yet to establish machineries that operate as focal points for women's issues, others that have been in existence for some time are eroding steadily both in influence and resources as the economic situation of most African countries deteriorate and competition for extremely scarce resources becomes fierce. As priorities for future action are established in the national reports and eventually in the platform for action, mainstreaming women's programme within the decision-making system must be established at the top of the agenda if the current trends are to be reversed.

As you are aware, the difference in the intended outcome of the Regional and the World Conferences as compared to previous ones is the conscious effort made this time to adopt strategies that are realistic and quantifiable. The responsibility for their implementation should be pin-pointed and the time frame needed for that should also be indicated. In addition, resource implications for their realization should be well articulated and the sources

identified. This approach is particularly important for Africa in the light of the low rate of implementation of policies and strategies for development that have been adopted over the years. You will, no doubt, welcome the change and ensure that it is incorporated in all the preparatory work in progress.

On its part, UNECA as the official convener of the Regional Conference on Women has continued to steer the preparations at the subregional and the regional levels. As mentioned earlier, UNECA has just completed conducting sensitization workshops on the preparation of national reports for all the UNECA subregions. It is expected that the exercise will not only help speed up the process, but also sharpen the focus of the contents for a more precise and practical plan of action. Indeed, it is on the basis of the national reports that the bulk of the substance of the Platform for Action will be drawn. Already, its structure has been the focus of two meetings at the Conference Secretariat in New York which you will have the opportunity to review in your deliberations.

The Inter Agency Task Force that was constituted to steer the preparations for the Regional Conference has continued to meet to review developments. At its September 1993 meeting in Addis Ababa, the Task Force reviewed the communication strategy with regard to the Conference and made recommendations as to the information that should be disseminated within member States in this connection. Responsibility for the preparation of thematic papers for the Conference was also decided upon among United Nations agencies and some of the subregional and regional intergovernmental organizations.

To keep member States informed about the Regional and World Conferences, UNECA has distributed several documents to the national machineries. A quarterly newsletter has also been launched for the same purpose, both in French and English and it will welcome contributions from member States. Participation of the media in publicizing the Conferences has also been encouraged through collaboration between the secretariat and the Union of

Radio and Television Organization in Africa (URTNA) in sponsoring competition on films on women, and also by having radio spots, announcements and posters on the Conferences and on gender issues that are of interest to women.

Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Strengthening women's entrepreneurial capacity through improvement of their access to credit and other resources has been a priority for UNECA in the past year. During your deliberations, you will review progress made in this area through the establishment of the African Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (AFWE) in June 1993 in Accra, Ghana and its subsequent activities. Among its accomplishments is the formulation of a plan of action for the next three years. Top among its priorities is the move to strength itself through membership drive and resource mobilization. With the recognition of the potential for joining forces around common interests and objectives, the Federation expects to promote the strengthening of the existing national associations of women entrepreneurs which are its building blocks. It also expects to extend this idea to the subregional level by both forging a collaborative relationship with the existing organizations and encouraging the formation of new ones where they do not exist. At the international level, this idea has already been turned into concrete action THROUGH AFWE joining the now autonomous International Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (IFWE) to which it was elected as one of the Vice Chairpersons. AFWE attended the inaugural meeting of IFWE in Karachi, Pakistan in February 1994, and also the first meeting of the interim Executive Committee in Addis Ababa in March 1994.

Another major activity in the sector of empowering women economically has entailed an in-depth pre-feasibility study on the establishment of an African bank for women. This study was a follow-up to the preliminary one that had pointed to the need for

a more detailed research as to what specific mechanism would be viable, what the financing modalities would be and how it could operate to be of benefit to the women who need it the most. The recommendations of the research include the convening of experts who would make concrete proposals on the operational modalities of the bank, strategies for resource mobilization, the administrative arrangements, individual application procedures at national, subregional and regional levels as well as the specific target groups. It is expected that the expert group meeting will be convened by the secretariat in the next two months. You will no doubt have contributions to add to the findings of this study.

Yet another aspect of the empowerment of women that has been the focus of attention relates to the peace process in its broadest sense. Peace represents more than the absence of war, violence and hostilities; it is a situation in which "all people have access to economic and social justice, and to the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms and in which the environment is protected." ^{1/} In Africa as everywhere else, conflict brings about destruction, despair, desolation and death with women bearing a disproportionate part of the burden. Yet, they are hardly involved in decisions that lead to war, nor in matters of security and peace. At the Regional Conference on Women, Peace and Development in Kampala, Uganda, jointly organized by the Government of Uganda, UNECA and the OAU in November 1993, it was agreed that sustainable peace and development could only be attained with the empowerment of women politically and economically. Similarly, it was recognized that women had a special role to play in eliminating the causes of war, mediating existing armed conflicts and creating conditions where peace can be sustained at home and through committed leadership at the local, national and international levels.

^{1/}Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace adopted by the Regional Conference on Women, Peace and Development, November 1993

Concerned about the importance of rendering practical the concept of sustainable peace through the participation of the cross section of society and especially women, the Regional Conference on Women, Peace and Development adopted the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace. The Action Plan which you will have the opportunity to review and make recommendations on to the UNECA Conference of Ministers, contains a series of actions to be taken by the African governments, NGOs, women, society, UNECA, OAU, UN, international organizations etc. The areas of concentration covered by the Action Plan include women participation at all levels of decision making, re-examination of the status-quo with regard to social justice; women economic legal and political empowerment; human and institutional capacity building in favour of women participation in decision-making; and action for peace. It is, as you will have noticed, a comprehensive plan which if conscientiously implemented will, no doubt, go a long way to altering the process through which matters of war and peace are decided. And in view of the prevalence of the incidence of conflict in the Africa region, the report of the Regional Conference on Women, Peace and Development will be an input into the Regional Conference in Dakar under the theme of women and peace.

Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your task for the next three days has implications for the direction in which the African continent will move in the twenty-first century. Your input in the various issues that you will tackle will pave the way for lasting policy decisions in the sector of the advancement of women. There is no doubt in my mind, however, that you are equal to the challenge before you. Allow me, all the same, on behalf of my colleagues in UNECA and myself, to wish you a successful meeting.

I thank you for your kind attention.