

7th African Regional Conference on Women Ministerial Conference on the Decade Review of the Implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action

Opening statement by

K.Y. Amoako
Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

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Madam Chairperson,
Your Excellencies,
Honourable Ministers,
Representative of the Chairperson of the
African Union Commission,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this 7th African Regional Ministerial Conference to review progress in implementing the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action.

I am particularly grateful that so many eminent persons are here, including the First Lady of Burkina Faso and the Vice President of Gambia.

I am also grateful to the many Ministers who have taken time from busy schedules to be here, and to so many other leaders of organizations and institutions.

In thinking about this conference, I am reminded that the United Nations' work on gender is probably one of its two greatest contributions to humanity, the other being its work on peace.

It was a brilliant concept for the UN to hold four global conferences to promote the empowerment of women and to create a more just world. These conferences captured the imagination of millions around the world.

The gender movement gained momentum after every conference. Altogether they created a climate of legitimacy, for gender movements and gender reform, which otherwise would have taken much longer to achieve.

Since Beijing, momentum has slowed at the global level. But in Africa at least, the regional picture is very different. Particularly at the high political level, we have seen real advances and a gathering excitement about what can be achieved.

A commitment to Fifty percent representation in the AU commission... the presidency of the Pan African Parliament... nearly 40% of Rwanda's parliament and rising numbers in others... women have been lobbying pretty effectively for a seat at the political table.

Yes, there is so much more to be done; but I believe that in Africa, the conditions for making progress are promising, with a renewed conviction being widely shared that better governance and social justice have been under valued and must come to the fore.

As I turn to this conference's agenda, I do so with gratitude to all who participated in preparing the national reports and the background papers. And to all those who participated in what I have heard have been excellent discussions over the last days.

A remarkable wealth of talent has prepared for these Ministerial meetings. Let me single out for special appreciation my colleagues in the African Center for Gender and Development led by Josephine Ouedraogo. They

are a remarkable group.

Honourable Ministers,

Your excellent background papers and your solid agenda provide you the opportunity to review progress. This meeting will reflect on what has happened in Africa, and codify the achievements since those meetings. Overall, if anything, the justification of seeing the world through a gender lens has markedly increased.

For example, ten years ago most African opinion makers did not consider HIV/AIDS as a major threat to women and girls. Today we all know better.

It is good to note that the background papers and national reports provided for this meeting clearly show that real progress and much solid work is being accomplished to open new opportunities and provide additional protections for girls and women in Africa.

The growth in achievements across this continent provides a broader base of real experience to compare and to provide peer learning.

So, on the one hand, we can see more activity and progress than ever before, and this we should celebrate.

But, on the other hand, there is still a vast gap between where we are and where we want to be. There is no room for complacency.

Our sense of morality, and our need for development, require us to mobilize and harness the full contributions of this and coming generations of women to Africa's development.

Our women bear the brunt of poverty, of HIV/AIDS and poor health, of illiteracy, the lack of legal protections and the denial of high-level employment. We have a lot more work to do.

Madame Chairperson,

My colleagues and I look forward to the recommendations this conference will make on the way forward. We have a few suggestions in that regard:

First, we can and should bolster the empirical evidence of our initiatives and pressures. The African Gender and Development Index, launched this week by ECA, is a tool that we believe will help benchmark progress, and allow for comparisons between countries. The data from this conference and from that Index, will provide a stronger empirical foundation for our case.

Second, although we can justify the integration of women in development on the grounds of morality, efficiency and effectiveness are equally powerful justifications for removing gender inequity.

We have empirical evidence that gender inclusion will raise growth rates, increase government revenues, and improve the country's image. Arguments that will be heard by pragmatic political leaders, no matter what culture they come from.

Third, I believe that we should move from devoting our energy to women-specific projects, to mainstreaming gender concerns into all aspects of development work, and to move actively to redress persistent gender disparities.

ECA's work on analyzing government budgets for gender impact, is but one of many concurrent approaches, which may be necessary to mainstream our shared concerns.

Fourth, I believe that it is now possible to change our lobbying strategy from the focus on emancipation, to one of gender equality targeted at both men and women.

In so doing, we should be able to spell out more clearly that the aim is not to replace discriminatory patriarchal society by discriminatory matriarchal society, but to create a society of gender partnership.

Frankly, none of us have been too specific about what the nature of a gender partnership society should be, and it

is timely that this be taken on.

We need to envision a new Africa and we need to be able to sell that vision. If it is not obvious where our train is heading, it will be hard to attract passengers.

Dear colleagues,

Having made those four suggestions on overarching strategy, let me put three concrete goals on the table that I think we should embrace for immediate action.

One of those is already on our agenda via the Millennium Development Goals. That is, the achievement of gender parity in elementary education.

I need not take your time by listing all the compelling reasons. We are all committed to this goal. Education of girls is vital.

I think we need to move from goal-setting, to the "campaign stage" on girls education. We need national campaigns in every country where progress is slow and we need a continental center to track and spur progress on these campaigns.

I propose this because

- the cause is fundamentally important,
- the cause is already on the agenda,
- it is easily benchmarked,
- and because it can be done.

Since this goal is achievable within relatively few years, we could gain a much needed victory in Africa upon which to build other campaigns.

Another quite accessible goal would be to work with the African Union on the question of empowerment of women at higher levels.

The political appointments have been good, but the benchmarking, the accountability for actions, and strategic support and pressure, are all still needed.

And finally, an area which presents great challenges but is far too vital to ignore, is HIV/AIDS.

Most of you know of the existence of the Commission on HIV/AIDS and Governance in Africa, convened by the UN Secretary General, which I have the honour to chair. The Commission is meeting this week and is working towards its final report next June.

It is expected to recommend actions, across all levels of government and all components of societies. These will involve a wide range of economic, social and political initiatives needed to prevent the disease, and to care for those families and communities living with the disease.

The area that is among the most difficult, and which applies not only to those with the disease, but to those vulnerable to the disease, is the human and legal rights of girls and women.

Anyone reading your background paper on the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS, can see the seriousness of the situation.

Most countries have laws against rape and for the protection of property rights. But, everywhere getting legal redress is cumbersome and lengthy, and mostly available only to the privileged few.

If we are fighting to get our girls into school only to have them raped by HIV infected teachers who get off scot free, what is the point?

If we work to give medicine to the male breadwinner, but he dies and his assets are taken from his immediate family, what have we achieved?

And if we get a brave girl into court for redress from her being abused by her family and the judge merely returns her to her family, what have we done to her?

These questions point to the kind of fundamental governance issue which I hope will be addressed not only by you at this meeting, but through you, at our concurrent African Development Forum.

Fundamentally, we need gender sensitive justice delivered to the girls and women on this continent. It is not that we need to scale up our current systems of "justice."

We need to reform those systems, adding a lot of service innovations. We need justice systems available throughout our societies, we need them to be cheap and we need them to be quick. Your wisdom on how to accomplish this would be most welcome.

Colleagues and Friends,

The most valuable time at this conference is your time, and I will not take up more of it. I just wanted you to know how welcome you are and how important your deliberations are.

Thank you for being here. Thank you for sharing your expertise and your energy and your courage on these matters.

I wish you every success in your work.