



**Economic Commission for Africa  
Commission économique pour l'Afrique**

**BEIJING + 5: TOWARDS A GOLDEN ERA  
FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

*Keynote address*

*by*

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*at the*

**SIXTH REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON WOMEN**

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**Madame Chairperson,  
Your Excellency, Dr. Negasso Gidada, President of the Federal Democratic  
Republic of Ethiopia,  
Honourable Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Civil Society Leaders,  
Experts from throughout Africa,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to Ethiopia and to the United Nations Conference Centre. It is a particular privilege to have with us His Excellency, the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, whose government has shown consistent interest in, and support for the work of the Commission. I thank you, Mr. President, for your stimulating remarks, which have helped to set the tone for this important Conference.**

**I also want to take this opportunity to recognize the hard work of all of those who have contributed to the preparations for this meeting. At the national level, you have laboured to write the country reports, which form the basis of the regional profile to be presented. At the subregional level, you have shared experiences and strategized, ensuring a strong, collective voice for issues of common concern. The process has been enriched, I believe, by the close collaboration of governments and civil society.**

**This warm partnership is reflected in the composition of ECA's Committee on Women and Development, which has guided us in this process and brought us to this point. I would like to offer special thanks to Her Excellency, Mrs. Neziha Zarrouk and her colleagues for their commitment and outstanding work. In the same vein, I would like to express my great appreciation to all my colleagues in the UN System who have worked closely with us and have demonstrated the increasing capacity of the UN for solidarity, coherence and commitment to the advancement of women.**

**Similarly, I would like to thank all our other partners who have contributed in one form or the other to the preparation of this Conference. Here I would like to single out the governments of Canada and France for their generous financial support.**

**To Josephine Ouedraogo and her staff of the African Centre for Women (ACW), I want to say how proud I am of all of you and how grateful I am to you for your dedication and willingness to go beyond what duty requires.**

Josephine, I believe, you are an example of the transformative leadership for which women are calling and you reaffirm my personal commitment to gender equality in Africa and, in particular at ECA.

I join you, therefore, with some pride in the fact that ECA is one of the far parts of the UN where, through deliberate action, half of the executives are women. I join you also as the father of three daughters, two of whom are in training to be lawyers and the other who is on her way to becoming a better economist than her father; the husband of a woman who has a professional career; and a representative of ECA, which 18 months ago celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by focussing on the role of women in development in Africa. All of these things have made me one of the male Africans in a leadership position who works for the full equality of Africa's women and men.

It is not the purpose of this meeting to just deliver rhetoric; rather our purpose is to take stock and to move the agenda ahead. We are here on serious business, for women's issues, more than any others, affect what Africa's future should be and must be -- an Africa in which everyone is valued and where everyone has an equal chance to grow and prosper.

We are here to evaluate the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms of Action, to formulate and adopt a regional plan of action to accelerate the implementation of these Platforms, and to prepare for Beijing plus five, the Global Review that will take place next June.

Looking back at the preparations for Beijing five years ago, I must say that the process itself was one that strengthened the network of women in Africa.

Beijing was a special time for African women and for those men wishing to see African women move forward. We were all so proud that Gertrude Mongella was Secretary General of that global meeting. We delighted in the vibrant African village. And we were equally proud of the African spirit, which imbued and transformed the Conference.

Beijing has not been the only impetus for action in Africa over the last five years. Education, communications, organization, awareness, as well as strength and courage, have also played a part in our progress. These factors have challenged the forces of subordination, oppression, ignorance and discrimination. The forces of right are pushing back the forces of wrong.

The Dakar Prepcom and the Beijing Conference with their Plans of Action have given a stronger sense of recognition that change is possible. In this regard, Mahbub ul Haq, the late Pakistani development thinker, said that development is about enlarging people's choices. These meetings and the work of the last five years have given the women's movement in Africa a clearer sense of what their choices can and should be. I think that more and more women on this continent feel those choices are within their grasp – and further, that their own life choices are paving the way for Africa's daughters. And I regard it as a particularly healthy sign that the men of Africa are coming to understand the benefits that come from women making their own choices.

But we still have a long road to travel. Women throughout Africa are still being deprived of land and inheritance; women still do not have equal access to, or benefit from education; and glass ceilings are often very low.

At the same time, however, the force unleashed in Beijing is being felt in popularizing gender issues; in helping to set a climate for change; in pushing governments to change; and increasingly, in selecting leaders, both women and men, who are supportive of change – of doing the right thing. Overall, I see that the work you are doing in civil society and government, is helping country after country enact more enlightened rules and laws.

But now comes the tough part. Institutions and officials in administrative functions, especially in our legislatures and courts, must follow up to ensure implementation of our plans. We have all learned that it is far easier and faster to change a law than to ensure its implementation. The paper barriers are coming down, but the behavioral barriers are still largely up.

What has happened in Africa since Beijing? Later this morning, you will hear a full progress report on the critical Areas of Concern formulated at Beijing; but now I would like to comment on some of the highlights of that progress. As you know, national assessment reports were solicited from all African countries. Forty-three of the 53 countries sent us their reports. Of that number, 30 or more countries reported that they placed as areas of priority the following concerns: women and poverty, education and training of women and girls, women and health, and the human rights of women. As part of their efforts to address these priority issues, the countries reviewed their constitutions, revised national policies, set up sector task forces, established human rights commissions and developed innovative programmes, such as the provision of soft loans in agriculture and the introduction of adolescent health programmes.

But these country reports also make it clear that women's access to resources and services is still a cross-cutting problem – be it access to credit by women farmers, access to schools, access to health services or access to legal services. Moreover, there is erosion of progress to report in some areas. For example, in a number of countries, official finance for health services is declining, which often results in diminishing women's access to health care.

And many of the old problems persist. In the area of education and training, there are still disparities in enrollments, literacy, educational attainments and dropout rates – all of which are worrisome. The causes are well known: early marriage, teenage pregnancy, inappropriate school environment and facilities, negative attitudes to girls' education, and inadequate budgets. Also, there continue to be major problems in the area of health, with high rates of maternal and infant mortality, as well as the physical and psychological damage resulting from violence against women. And still, only half of Africa's women have safe water, and suitable sanitation facilities remain a luxury. Although there have been some innovations, including health insurance for women, adolescent health programmes, counseling for victims of violence, and education on harmful traditional practices, we still have much to do. We must deal with these problems more aggressively and pervasively.

But perhaps the most grave of threats to women is the advance of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The rapid and disproportionate spread of the disease to the women of Africa and the rising number of AIDS orphans have serious implications for our future. The disastrous economic and social impact of this health crisis must move AIDS to the centre stage of our priorities. In recognition of its importance, and in response to this crisis, ECA will devote its next region-wide African Development Forum in the year 2000 to the issue.

In addition, there remain serious problems in the area of human rights of women. There are serious discrepancies between national legislation and the provisions of the international human rights instruments, including major discrepancies between statutory law and customary and religious laws. Here, we have a classic gap between new laws and actual implementation.

Madam Chairperson,

I have touched on some of the Areas of Concern that African countries identified as high priority issues; however I would now like to mention three Areas that were not given such importance, but that I regard as fundamental to our progress, namely:

- **moving women into positions of power and decision- making;**
- **creating the institutional mechanisms needed for the advancement of women; and**
- **involving women in conflict prevention and resolution.**

**Moving women into power and decision- making is fundamental to effecting all the other changes. There are few parliaments in Africa that have more than a token representation of women. This is clearly an arena in which we can apply our efforts. One way to do this is to celebrate our successes. In South Africa today, more than 30 percent of parliamentarians are women, and at least 25 percent cabinet members are also women. Another such success is the recent appointment in Botswana of the first woman Governor of an African Central Bank. In all cases where women have become empowered, I suspect it has taken great personal courage, as well as the collective strength of their supporters. And each success where a woman has moved ahead makes it that much easier for the next woman.**

**I also want to comment on the institutional mechanisms needed for the advancement of women. There are many factors that constrain our progress in developing institutional mechanisms: resource allocations for national gender focal points are often inadequate; outreach to rural areas is poor; technical capacities to analyze issues is often inadequate; and there is a critical need to institutionalize monitoring and accountability.**

**The last of the Areas of Concern – the one that surprisingly received a priority rating in only 15 African countries – is women and armed conflict. It is puzzling to see so little attention to this, since women are so adversely affected. Yet, contrary to this low priority ranking, the fact is that, over the last five years, it is women who are giving us the early warning of conflict and who are pressing for demilitarization of our societies.**

**Whether you look at Liberia, where women were critically important in bringing about peace, including staging a sit-in at the door of the former regime, or whether you look at the women from Sierra Leone putting pressure on warring forces to resolve their disputes peaceably, or look at the current efforts by women to keep the peace in Burundi, it is clear that there is a new activism by African women to press for peace.**

**Mr. President,  
Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues all,**

**As I look across the Areas of Concern emphasized by the Regional and Global Platforms for Action, as well as the national reports received as input to this meeting, I feel that there are four areas where we should emerge from this meeting better informed and more determined to effect change:**

- **First, I believe there must be a renewed effort to formulate and implement policies which responds to the different needs of women and men. I hope we emerge from this meeting with a clearer idea of how to achieve this basic goal.**
- **Second, we must do much better at monitoring our progress, but also our failures. Data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results are key to our advance.**
- **Third, monitoring alone is not enough. We must also link performance and accountability. We can help forge that link by keeping up the collective pressure on governments and other institutions whose work impacts on women's welfare.**
- **Fourth, this conference is organized in a way to demonstrate the kind of wider networking and coordination that is needed throughout Africa. At this conference are national representatives whom we appreciate as absolutely necessary, but they alone are not sufficient. We need more NGOs to work with both women and men; we need to engage the media who increasingly are the communicators of social change, and thus key allies for the gender movement; we need to include academia and the business sector -- both notably few at this meeting; and we need to mobilize youth, who are our future, and to make them a regular part of our deliberations.**

**We need to assure that the alliance of interests works well -- that we include representation across the spectrum and that no area of strength is untapped.**

**And finally, I want to turn your attention to fostering leadership within Africa. We all know that we need sympathetic leaders to set the signals for accelerated progress. But not every leader is a Mandela or a Mwalimu. So our task is more complex:**

**We must help leaders to lead. We must help them understand how they stand to gain if they adopt our ideas. And, whenever they act on our behalf, we must acknowledge their help and encourage them to move even further. I hope that in our future meetings we will be able to trade many stories on how we succeeded in gaining the active support of our leaders.**

**Friends,**

**We know that there is still so much to do and that the issues are urgent; we know that a great deal of progress has taken place, but that many policies and good intentions have not yet touched the lives of most women in the cities and countryside of Africa; but we also know that this meeting provides an opportunity that can and must be seized if we are to find ways to accelerate gender progress.**

**Madame Chairperson,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

**Eighteen months ago, we celebrated ECA's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by focusing on the role of African women in economic development. I spoke of a golden era for social development in Africa. I spoke of women willing to change, women who see a different future for themselves, with real opportunities, and with the odds shifting more in their favour. I spoke of men willing to change; men who value gender partnership, who see that, when women meet their full potential, societies will be better off, communities will be a better place to live, families will be more prosperous, and children will have a far brighter future.**

**We must make this golden era the reality of Africa of the twenty-first century, remembering the African proverb: "Paradise is open at the command of mothers".**

**It is in this spirit that I encourage you, I welcome you, and I wish you an extremely productive meeting.**

**Thank you.**