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**Addis Ababa (Ethiopia)**

**THE PROBLEM OF INTEGRATING CONGOLESE WOMEN  
IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS  
OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

## INTRODUCTION

The initiators of this seminar, including the Government which pioneered it have had the opportunity to explain the reasons for the organization of this gathering whose central theme is "Equity and Economic Empowerment of Congolese Women in the Democratization Process".

This subject instigates a legal, economic, political and ethical debate. However, in order not to go beyond the scope of our meeting we will give priority to political and economic matters.

In fact, our task during these three days of work is to analyze all current obstacles to women's contributions to family and national economic development and therefore define theoretical and practical strategies for a liberation revolution.

Some may ask whether there is any need to discuss women's economic empowerment in a State whose economy was in deep crisis at the arrival of the new Government.

Furthermore, is it really necessary to preach women's economic advancement in a society whose matrimonial ideology is that, like children, women should be considered dependants of their husbands? Indeed, in almost all cases, once a Congolese woman's income equals or exceeds her husband's, her household is destabilized and threatened from the outside (the respective in-laws) and from within.

Will the resolutions to be adopted on the subject of equality between men and women not become *lettre morte* as has always been the case? For example, the fact that the application of the options recommended by the World Conferences on women has remained hypothetical, particularly in our developing countries.

These general and fundamental issues suggested the order of presentations to be made as established this morning.

This presentation which is one of a series of four approved by the organizers will serve primarily as a reference framework for the three subsequent ones which will be sectoral and technical.

This is to say that our presentation portrays the Congolese woman and society through time, emphasizing the fairness of effectively integrating this woman into the process of economic and social recovery aspired to by all our people.

For some time now, conferences have been held here and there, some by snobbery, others by exhibitionism and others still by opportunism. But this particular presentation intends to be critical, responsible and patriotic, for the development of our dear Congo depends on it.

To begin with, it should be noted that the subject of integrating Congolese women into the national development process is vast and controversial. For better ordering of ideas our presentation will first focus on the points outlined below and then conclude by summing up the facts. The points are:

1. The concept of integration;
2. Congolese women in the former Congolese society;
3. The disintegration of women during the Second Republic;
4. What policy to be adopted for the integration of Congolese women into the development process of the Republic of the Congo?
5. conclusion.

### **First point: The concept of integration**

Scientifically speaking, a single concept may have a variety of definitions, depending on the discipline, the era and the authors involved;

In view of the aim of our presentation and the heterogeneity of our audience, more emphasis will be put on type of integration and mechanisms for achieving it than on definition differences.

Normally connoting adaptation, adjustment, social cohesion ..., integration is defined *inter-alia* as the process whereby an individual adopts the cultural norms of a society or group. It may also mean assembling of all the elements of a social system.

In his *Lexicon of social sciences*, MUCCHIELLI, A. noted that social integration in the broader sense of the word is a kind of acculturation which specifically involves personal assimilation of socio-cultural models of behaviour and thinking by individuals in the group concerned. In other words, integration supposes constituting a whole group whose component parts interpenetrate and which as a superior unit contains all the member units. To integrate therefore means to create a dynamic perspective in which some relations of interdependence or solidarity are introduced between the elements of a whole which is yet to be integrated or constituted into a single unit. This is integration as a process and not as a state.

In accordance with the direction of this first point of our conference, we have to explain the various stages of social integration. Socialized literature on the subject acknowledges four levels of integration, namely:

1. Integration of norms, formerly known as cultural integration, which varies from the highest level of concordance to the lowest. This type of integration supposes drawing up of unified and harmonized laws to facilitate individual and collective development.
2. Integration of persons between norms and behaviours or normative integration whose aim is to measure the degree of adaptation to a group's values. It varies from a high frequency of concordance with behaviours and values to a high frequency of norm violation.
3. Integration between persons or communicative integration: it occurs between individuals who are exchanging signs or communicating freely, that is, without barriers.

4. Functional integration, which involves exchange of mutual services among members. This type of integration is only possible when there is interdependence as opposed to individual autonomy. It therefore stresses interdependence and solidarity among members and it is a system that produces division of labour.

The works of G. ROCHER, W.S LANDECKER, A. TOURAINÉ and others elaborate on this subject. We will return to these various levels of integration during the Second Republic and in connection with the proposed society which AFDL has invited us to build.

During this exercise, we will not overlook the integrative role of such factors as level of schooling, level of organization, type of activity, type of law, justice or equity and, especially, democracy and political status.

### **Second point: Women in the former Congolese society**

In our tradition women have always occupied an important position in our society. Every family should have at least a woman to carry out the tasks that are indispensable for its survival because men can neither perform such duties themselves nor assign them to someone else.

Women were therefore polyvalent, capable of performing such duties as ploughing, sowing seeds, maintaining fields, transporting food products, fetching water, preparing and fetching firewood, buying and selling in the market, brewing beer, catering for the children and taking care of the home. They have always been the planners of domestic management, in using foodstuff from the granary, preparing food... and are the production agents in agriculture, fishing, animal husbandry and in the handicrafts industry; indeed they are the pillars of family and community life. The contributions of women in the former society were therefore multi-sectoral. These women were well integrated into their society by their role which was based *inter-alia* on division of labour by gender and on observance of religious and social ideals.

Once again it is our view that women of that time were never on the sideline.

In their context, all four types of integration seemed to have taken place. An illustration of this is integration between norms because customs were clearly implemented in the interest of the individual and the community and, being the means of continuous social control, made it possible to achieve integration between norms and behaviours. Functional integration was achieved fully through a high degree of interdependence and solidarity between members, which culminated in a division of labour in the system, as earlier pointed out. Only the last mentioned form of integration was apparently not fully achieved because of the various religious and politico-judicial taboos which created some vertical social distance between men and women.

Generally speaking, during that period men based their superiority on the assumption that women were weak and hence the description of women as the weaker sex. This resulted in a trail of prohibitions which gave women a very low socio-political status.

In the circumstances, women must obey their husbands and respect all men. They were never to seat in public side by side with men. When there was need for that (during a case, funeral,...) women would stand aside in relation to men. Women were never allowed to address a male assembly in public, except if specifically asked to do so by the wise-men, as in the case of giving testimony.

The self-restraint and modesty demanded of women of the former society compelled them to lead a self-effacing life, especially vis-à-vis men. For all these reasons it was difficult to determine the legitimate ambitions of women.

However, in spite of this, the image left by women of the former society was that of persons who were involved and lived up to the status and functions entrusted to them by their society, and therefore whose contributions were needed for community development.

### **Third point: The situation of women in the Second Republic**

Going by the classical concepts for delineating the major stages in the historical evolution of our country, we ought to be able to find a distinct point to explain the politico-economic situation of Congolese women during the colonial days. If we did not do so it is for many reasons prominent among which are the fact that:

- There is a similarity between the events of the colonial, post-colonial and Second Republic days;
- The time allocated for presentations in relation to the scope of the subject is so short that we consider it wise to make summaries.

However, before moving on to the discussion on the reign of the previous political regime it is necessary to point out that the advent of colonialism reinforced and encouraged inequalities between men and women, particularly in the areas of education and economic production.

In fact, it is clear that the main pursuit of colonialism was material and economic interests, as shown by the exploitation of our wealth and its export to the metropolis. The work for this purpose was hard and women were excluded from it. They were simply housewives who provided the logistical support of preparing food for men who stayed in the "production front".

When Western schools were opened in our country, their aim was to improve services (administration) and production. During the colonial days, **education aimed more at increasing production than at developing Congolese people.**

True, our presentation may be considered incomplete if we do not mention the issue of **girls schools**. Such schools were indeed opened but their scope was very limited. The curriculum was based generally on domestic science and hygiene. The aim was to prepare them to become housewives and **mothers**.

Now let us examine the **political fate of women** during the three decades of the **autocratic regime** of the late President Mobutu.

One may inquire: what criteria for assessing the period of the tumultuous Third Republic? The criteria for opening the debate should rightly be to evaluate the **level of schooling of women** because **their political and economic advancement depends on it. The more women are trained, the better equipped they are** to carry out, individually or collectively, **all forms of political and economic struggle**. Today, schooling is increasingly **becoming the key to development and the appropriate instrument for** combatting all forms of **oppression, discrimination or injustice**.

As to the state of affairs during the Second Republic, before focusing on the Congolese experience let us first comment briefly on the world and African situations.

Studies conducted by UNESCO showed that women form the bulk of uneducated persons. In fact, in 1981, UNESCO experts put the world estimate of illiterate persons at 800 million; and about 80 per cent of this number was women and the gender disparity continued to grow. In 1970, also, the number of illiterate women was higher than that of similar men by about 140 million; that number increased to 170 million by 1980 and to plus or minus 190 million by 1990.

According to UNICEF 1984 report on the situation of children in the world which was examined by our colleague MUPAPA, the rate of illiteracy by 1980 was 82 per cent for men and 95 per cent for women in Burkina Faso, 81 per cent for men and 92 per cent for women in MALI, 39 per cent for men and 97 per cent for women in Senegal, 61 per cent for men and 85 per cent for women in Burundi and 25 per cent for men and 63 per cent for women in Zaire, to limit oneself to these selected countries.

Although **the Congo** is one of the countries with the highest literacy level in Africa, the **gap between men and women** remains very wide. In **1980**, in the Congo, there were:

- 65 girls to 100 boys at the primary school level;
- 35 girls to 100 boys at the secondary school level;
- 13 girls to 100 boys at the post-secondary school level;

This **low level of schooling for girls is further compounded by a high rate of dropping out of school by girls**, which drastically reduces the educational life span of young girls.

According to statistics published by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of the Congo, out of the 503,532 girls in the first year of primary school in the 1975/1976 academic year only 283,713 were still in school in the 1978/1979 academic year, including those who passed to primary four and those repeating primary three. This represents over 40 per cent rate of dropping out. This rate was expected to reach 50 per cent by the time they complete their primary education.

It should be noted that the rate of **schooling by young girls is higher in the urban areas than in the rural areas.**

Thus in 1976, in a city like Kinshasa, out of the 98.7 per cent of girls capable of attending school, 98.8 per cent actually went to school, only 4.8 per cent did not. In contrast, in the Equator Province, out of the 99.2 per cent of girls capable of attending school, only 49.7 per cent actually went to school.

Furthermore, the more urbanized provinces such as Katanga and Bas Congo have a higher rate of schooling than the more rural ones such as Equator, Bandundu, and Oriental provinces.

This disastrous educational results do not make for women to compete politically and economically with **men, who are numerically more educated.** This schooling handicap on the part of women is all the greater as **Congolese women are faced with a variety of myths and prohibitions which limit their room for manoeuvre in many sectors of public life.**

In the political context, women were marked by the **slogan of women' emancipation** from 1967 and the status of **fans** and standard bearers of mobutism during the hey-day of the M.P.R.

To begin with women's emancipation, this started as a struggle for equality between women and men. On the one hand, it involved a struggle for freedom and on the other for their promotion to the same rank as men. Since they did not go about it the right way, this politics created more problems than it solved. As Congolese women increasingly considered themselves equal to men, they often made unnecessary protests and demands for rights and created tensions both at home and in their professional places of work.

As it is well known, **liberation is not achieved by decree, but by acquisition.** It is first acquired within the family, then at school where training and general education is given and then in public places, such as the office. In our country, therefore, what took place was rather an illusion than a real emancipation of Congolese women who remained more of an object than a subject of the history of their society.

Neglected by the government of the time, having limited education and lacking much professional qualification, especially in the urban areas, they found themselves abandoned, down-and-out and thrown to debauchery and other vices.

Let us now proceed to the Congolese women's status as fans during the reign of the M.P.R, the State Party.

The cherished ideology of the former President that **happy are those who sing and dance** led to the creation of many **regional, political and cultural groups of enthusiasts.** **Time, energy, material and financial resources** were invested in this unproductive sector instead of establishing development objectives which would give women happiness and dignity. At the economic level, the situation was different depending on whether it concerned the public sector or the private sector.

Owing to their lack of qualification, very few women have excelled in the national public sector economy. Rare are Congolese women who have been involved in the establishment or management of such institutions as banks, business firms, factories and industries... They have thus remained powerless, marginalized and disorganized.

In contrast, in the private sector, Congolese women have managed to cope even without being provided resources. In such a context many women end up being discouraged or being contented with little.

The second presentation, today, will cover this issue by examining the various productive activities carried out by women. In short, most businesswomen struggle for survival and not really to promote their enterprises.

In summary, the previous regime was characterized by nepotism, arbitrariness, impunity, stealing, violation, bad governance and many other ills which led to a total disruption of the State. In such a context, no form of integration could be expected to occur. The task before the present Government is therefore to strive to gradually and meticulously eliminate the bottlenecks in the way of women and our entire dear country.

Fourth point: What policy to be adopted for integrating Congolese women into the development process of the Republic of the Congo?

For the reasons mentioned above, the contribution of women to nation building was held up for three decades. The Government in power should strive to change this trend in the history of our country through tangible transformations in time and space so as to change permanently and substantively the social organizational structure of our Republic, thus changing its history.

- In the political sphere: for a better management of State affairs and greater security for individual and collective freedoms there must be a true separation of the powers of State by ensuring independence of the judiciary. Genuine democracy has to be installed as His Excellency the Minister of Planning rightly underscored this morning.

Liberation, about which much has been said today, must be total and lasting. It must go beyond the fall of Mobutu's regime to all forms of injustice and the most surreptitious socio-cultural discrimination all of which stifle the development of the individual and the community.

The present government should take up the challenge of releasing all productive energies in order to ensure a rapid and lasting development of our dear country.

- With regard to training: the need for education in the development of countries cannot be overemphasized. Women themselves expressed this view during the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995. One of the resolutions adopted during the Conference states that literacy of women is an important key to improving health, nutrition and education in the family and to empowering women to participate in decision-making in society; that there is the need to ensure equal access to education, eradicate illiteracy among women, improve women's access to vocational training, science and

technology, and continuous education; and that women of all ages can acquire the knowledge, capacities, aptitudes, skills and ethical values needed to develop and to participate fully under equal conditions in the process of social, economic and political development.

The present government should pay attention to this. Special measures should be planned to encourage girls and women to attend school.

- In the economic sphere: what is needed is *inter-alia* to promote an integrated social market economy that is human-centred without discrimination on the grounds of sex; ensure the welfare of Congolese people by encouraging free enterprise and private ownership of property also without discrimination on the grounds of sex; revive the banking system; intensify mineral and petroleum prospecting; support an industrialization programme to process local raw materials; modernize the transport infrastructure and apply a coherent telecommunications policy; and mechanize agriculture.

- In the social and cultural sphere: the Government should, among other things, rehabilitate the health-for-all system; courageously call in question the ancestral cultures which have become obsolete and efficiently manage ideologies, especially religious beliefs which are inimical to development.

And then what should be our conclusion?

### General conclusion

Finally, are Congolese women integrated into the national reconstruction process? No. Can this be achieved? Yes. We can say yes because not only are women themselves available but are also demanding to be treated as development agents on an equal footing with men so that they can put in their best.

If the Government of the Republic truly expects the support of all citizens to develop the country, it must see or pay particular attention to the situation of women. Urgent measures to be taken include:

1. Rehabilitating school infrastructure and raising the quality and standard of education. Moreover, particular attention should be given to girls and women who are very backward in relation to the opposite sex.

Focusing courses on useful and priority sectors in accordance with our economic and social development needs.

2. Banning obsolete cultures and ideologies which relegate women and the entire Congolese society to the bottom.

3. Effectively implementing equality between men and women before the law and in the productive sectors.

4. Eliminating superiority or inferiority complex between men and women. Let me present to you one of the questions we asked during a survey we conducted in Lubumbashi

in 1985 on Sociological analysis of the implications of the socio-economic promotion of the spouse. The question produced the following results:

The question itself was:

What, in your view, is the situation which general prevails in a household where the wife has an income equal to or higher than that of her husband?

Results obtained

TYPES OF RESPONSES	NO. OF PERSONS	PERCENTAGE
Wife's superiority complex	17	27%
Husband's inferiority complex	36	57%
Harmony between the spouses	10	16%
	63	100%

In fact, in such a situation where there is 84 per cent chances of conflict is it worthwhile to commend the economic empowerment of women? This table seems to reflect the reality in many households. Generally, in such circumstances, men become frustrated, lose pride and lack authority, especially when their in-laws interfere. Husbands tend to respond wildly to their wives' opinions.

On the part of the wife, she tends to be unsubmitive and vain... which negatively affects the conjugal life. What should be done about this, especially as we are now advocating the question of equity for the purpose of empowering women economically.

The only remedy here is a continuous education campaign to change people's mentality, to create a critical spirit, to encourage passion for virtue, to honour a person for what he/she is rather than for what he/she seems to be...

The nation needs each one of us, that is, men as well as women. This must be listened to, understood and practised over and above any form of discrimination.

If placed in an serene environment Congolese women are capable of shining.

We thank you for your kind attention and we are available for the debate which we think will be fruitful.