

# **Statement of the Executive Secretary of The Economic Commission For Africa at The First African First Ladies Summit**

**5-7 May 1997, Abuja, Nigeria**

Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim, Secretary General of the OAU

Ibrahim Fall, The Representative of the Secretary General of the United Nations,

Madam Chairperson,

Your Excellency Sani Abacha, the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,

Your Excellency Mrs. Sani Abacha, First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,

Your Excellencies the First Ladies of Africa,

Your Excellencies, Ministers and Ambassadors,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and privilege for me to address such an august assembly of distinguished personalities in this beautiful city of Abuja and especially to be associated with an important initiative, indeed, the first of its kind. It is an initiative that sets a shining example of what women in leadership can accomplish.

I offer a special thanks to Her Excellency, Madame Sani Abacha for her indispensable role in facilitating the final realization of this initiative. Without her drive, interest and commitment, this Summit, undoubtedly would not have been organized here in Abuja today. I also wish to thank the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, His Excellency, Sani Abacha for his generosity in accepting to host this meeting in this lovely city of Abuja. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to enjoy your wonderful hospitality.

## **Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Our presence here today is the culmination of a process that started back in 1995 in Beijing, China, when the First Ladies present at the Fourth World Conference on Women which was so ably conducted by our very own Mrs Gertrude Mongella, picked up the momentum of the time and decided to discuss what contribution they would make towards the drive for the empowerment of women. At that meeting to which I and a representative of OAU were invited, the First Ladies decided to work together in the area of

peace. This decision was underpinned by the fact that our continent is plagued with a seemingly never-ending state of conflict and unrest that have left millions dead and wounded and equally large numbers as refugees and displaced persons.

- In 1996, one third of the estimated refugee population of 20 million are in Africa;
- The number of internally displaced persons was about 30 million;
- 16 million of the displaced persons of the world were estimated to be in Africa;
- women are estimated to make up to 80 percent of the refugees and 60 to 80 percent of the internally displaced persons in Africa.

In these circumstances, the traditional gender inequality of women under refugee and displaced situations is exacerbated by:

- lack of food security which places a great burden on women who continue to play a critical role in household food security;
- women's vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse which tends to increase under crisis situations when family and community support are non-existent;
- absence of specific legal protection of refugee and displaced women in the host countries; and
- lack of knowledge by most refugee and displaced women of their economic, social, and human rights.
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**Madam Chairperson,**

**Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Despite the fact that women bear the disproportionate burden of war and conflict, they are seldom involved in the decision-making processes that lead to conflict and peace at the national and international levels. At the national levels, government bodies dealing with defence, security, and international relations have virtually no women representatives. Women have no voice in framing the system of ethics which defines human relationships in every society and religion.

In fact, until recently and on a very small scale, women have had no place in politics. In 1994, the percentage of women serving in ministerial positions ranged from 0 to 12.9 with the exception of the Seychelles that had 30.8 per cent. To day, of course we are encouraged also by the case of South Africa where women occupy at least 25 per cent of the total number of parliamentary seats.

We at ECA hail the initiative of the First Ladies of Africa in demonstrating that women in leadership positions have a unique contribution to make to enhance the general welfare of society at large and that of women in

particular. In fact at ECA, in our efforts to carry out strategic institutional changes that will render our role in promoting development in Africa more effective, we have decided to pay special attention to gender issues both within ECA and in our member States. Our new senior management team at the Commission is 40 percent women. We also approach gender issues as cross-cutting in nature and as such they are being addressed in the work of each of the five substantive Divisions of the Commission. I have also strengthened the African Centre for Women to facilitate its role in the Commission and have placed it in the Cabinet Office for more visibility.

Last year we had plans to launch the Leadership and Empowerment of African Women Fund. The World Bank gave us the seed money of \$1 million and we have mobilized additional resources. Through our conversations and negotiations with other partners, we expect that the programme will be fully funded at \$5 million for the next three years.

The substantive work programme will have two major components. The first component is built around the Leadership and Empowerment Fund for African Women, which has been established to operate as an integral part of ACW. The Fund will support activities to promote leadership of women in decision making, economic empowerment of women, and women's human and legal rights. The second component includes high-level work to promote the implementation of the Global (Beijing) and Regional Platforms of Action, and on mainstreaming gender in all aspects of the Commission's work.

#### **Distinguished Guests,**

#### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The role that the First Ladies of Africa have carved out for themselves as ambassadors of peace through peace missions in war-torn countries and as advocates for the inclusion of women in negotiating teams as part of the mechanism for conflict prevention, management and resolution, will add a welcome voice to the recommendations of the African and Global Platforms for Action. Indeed the presence of peace is a necessary condition to sustainable development, hence its inclusion in the theme of the Regional and Global Conferences on Women, "Action for Equality, Peace and Development."

Advocacy for peace and for the inclusion of women in the peace process at the highest level has been the preoccupation of women since the Regional Conference on Women, Peace and Development which was held in Kampala, Uganda in November 1993. The Conference recommended through the Kampala Action Plan the creation of a Women Peace Committee that would facilitate the participation of women in the peace process at all levels.

Through the initiative of a Women Leadership Forum facilitated by ECA and OAU in Johannesburg, South Africa in November 1996, the terms of reference of the proposed Committee were elaborated and recommended for approval by the ECA Conference of Ministers, the OAU Council of Ministers and the African Heads of State. Already, this approval process has

been completed at ECA as it will be at OAU in the forth-coming meetings. The Committee which will be known as the African Women Committee on Peace will then be established and members nominated from countries that constitute the current OAU Central Organ. The membership will be varied to reflect the diversity of actors in the area of peace promotion.

**Madame Chairperson,**

**Your Excellency the First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

A day hardly passes that we do not hear of the horrendous suffering of refugees and displaced persons in the various parts of the continent and the world at large. Starving refugees on the run, under attack by the enemy or by threatened nationals of the host countries have become regular news. Disease outbreaks in overcrowded refugee camps that barely have sanitary facilities for the already weakened people by starvation and disease are also a common phenomenon. In countries recovering from war, women and children continue to be maimed by remnants of the land mines laid out in the fields in times of war. The number of orphans and products of rape are countless.

I believe that the First Ladies can play an important humanitarian role in those countries that are unable to care for its victims or have not received assistance UNHCR and the non-governmental organizations. This material, social, and psychological relief from you can ease the long-term suffering and death experienced by the refugees and displaced persons. And beyond this, you have the capacity ensure a peaceful society by cultivating and promoting:

- a sustainable culture of peace and harmony;
- peaceful resolution of differences;
- the value of constructive competition;
- a universal collective responsibility for peace; and
- peace education in primary and secondary schools.
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**Excellencies,**

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

In all these possible roles and actions for the First Ladies of Africa, the Economic Commission for Africa firmly believes in the value of collaboration and partnerships. While the lessons learned from exchange of information and experiences, as well as in building alliances can hardly be measured in tangible ways, they add significantly to the quality of the end product. As stated earlier, ECA welcomed the opportunity to contribute in the organization of this historic Summit.

Similarly, it will continue to welcome opportunities for further collaboration with the First Ladies, particularly technical assistance and advisory services.

We are both part of the larger community that is linked by common concerns with regard to women and gender issues and for which we are determined to be active agents at the vanguard. May we forever find strength in our joint efforts.

I thank you for your attention.

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