



**UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR AFRICA**

**Eighth Africa Regional Conference on Women (Beijing +15)
The Mid-Decade Review of the implementation of the Dakar and
Beijing Platforms for Action**

Opening Remarks

by

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Your Excellency, Mme Isatou Njie-Saidy, Vice-President of The Gambia,

Your Excellency, Mr. Jean Ping, Chairperson, African Union Commission, *(To Be Confirmed)*

Honourable Ministers,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great honour and pleasure to welcome you to this 8th African Regional Ministerial Conference to review progress in implementing the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action. I sincerely thank the Government of The Gambia, on behalf of UNECA and all distinguished Guests, for hosting this Ministerial Conference.

I am particularly grateful that so many eminent persons who have taken time from their busy schedules to be here including Their Excellencies, Mrs. Isatou Njie-Saidy, Vice President of the Gambia, -----.

I am also very grateful to the large turn out of Ministers, other high-level representatives, as well as all the other delegates and participants who are here to deliberate on this very important topic. This high level of participation is indicative of the great importance that you all attach to issues affecting women in Africa.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for the excellent, long standing meaningful partnership that the UNECA is sharing with the African Union Commission, and the African Development Bank. I would like to acknowledge the deepening collaboration between our institutions which is providing us with a much stronger position to effectively deliver as one towards meeting Africa's development priorities.

I would also like to thank our colleagues from the United Nations system in particular UNDP and UNIFEM for their valuable contributions towards the organization of this Conference.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

Next year marks the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that was adopted in 1994. The emphasis of the Beijing Platform for Action was not only on achieving equality, women's political and economic empowerment and eliminating discrimination, but also on the integration of women as full and equal partners in all policies and decision-making processes. This holistic vision for the achievement of gender equality and women's rights is also encapsulated in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) that was adopted in Cairo in 1994. The Beijing Platform for Action was further reinforced in the Millennium Development Goals, through the goals on gender equality, education and maternal mortality.

I would like to recognise other global and regional frameworks and initiatives that reaffirm the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. At the global level, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1820 in 2009 to strengthen the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 which calls for Member States to address issues of gender, peace and security.

At the regional level, some of the supportive frameworks and action plans adopted in the last five years include: the 2006 Continental Policy Framework on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, endorsed by AU Heads of State in January 2006; The 2008 African Development Forum VI Plan of Action for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women; the 2009 Addis Ababa call to action on Human Resources for Maternal and Newborn Survival, including task shifting/sharing for emergency obstetric and newborn care; the Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa recently launched by the AU; the 2009 African Union Gender Policy; and the AU summit of January 2009 that declared an African Decade on Gender to commence from 2010.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is important that we track progress that has been made thus far in the implementation of the BPfA and identify the needs to be done in the remaining five years of the 20-year Programme of Action. In this context, the ECA undertook a fifteen-year review of the implementation of the BPfA

in Africa based on the information that you the Member States provided and prepared the report that we are reviewing in this meeting. This report outlines the major trends, achievements, gaps and challenges in relation to the 12 critical areas of concern in the Platform for Action. The meeting of experts over the past two days has enhanced this report.

Allow me at this juncture to reflect the progress that has been made since 1995 in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. Overall some progress has been made in all the twelve critical areas; but we are not there yet, as you will find out from the review report that is before you.

I commend the excellent progress that you have achieved especially in the area of increased participation of women in decision-making. We now have the first female President on the continent - Mrs. Ellen Johnson, Sirleaf of Liberia. This has set precedence and provided a role model on the Continent. We have women now holding other powerful decision-making positions such as vice president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament. They may be very few but they go a long way in making people realize that it is possible for a woman to lead a nation. Rwanda is now the leading nation with regard to female representation in parliament with 55% of members of that body being women after their 2008 elections. Other countries that have high representation of women in parliament include Angola, Burundi, Mozambique, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda.

Another area of major success for Africa is increased gender parity in primary education. More than sixty per cent of all the countries have already reached the gender parity target in primary education.

In the critical area of women and the economy, countries reported increased participation of women in the formal economy at all levels and that both women and men are benefiting from capacity building programmes and support to set up business in almost all of the responding countries. Countries have implemented gender responsive employment policies, non discriminatory labour laws, and affirmative action policies.

In the critical area of human rights of women, tremendous progress has been made in the ratification of regional and global treaties affecting women. Most countries have also taken steps at law reform, policy development and planning, thereby providing frameworks for implementation at the local level. All countries, except for two have now ratified the Convention for the

Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and 27 countries have now ratified the African Charter on the Human and People's Rights. The reporting status of countries to the CEDAW committee is fairly on schedule. Since 2004, the CEDAW Committee has received reports from thirty African countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

However although these strides have been achieved, there are still major challenges that impede progress at national level.

Although progress has been achieved in primary education, we continue to face major challenges ensuring that girl children complete primary education and progress to higher levels of education.

Africa still has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world. Most of these deaths could be prevented if a few measures were put in place, including: access to skilled personnel at the time of birth, prompt emergency obstetric care if things go wrong and access to quality family planning methods.

Gender based violence is still an area of great concern. Violation of women's and girls' human rights persists especially in conflict and unstable countries. HIV/AIDS and poverty are still largely feminized.

The continued presence of long standing cultural and traditional practices that discriminate against women and girls have constrained the progress towards achieving gender equality. Discriminatory practices and public attitudes towards the advancement of women, and full participation of women in politics and decision making especially at local levels have not changed at the same pace as policy, legal and institutional frameworks.

The multiple global crises of food insecurity, climate change and the economic crisis are a major challenge to achieving gender equality and women's empowerment on the continent. Many countries are experiencing rising unemployment and deepening income inequalities. This has a significant impact on women as many of them are being forced to manage shrinking household incomes. This is likely to worsen the poverty level among women with major repercussions to children's food security, education and health, and maternal mortality.

Lack of adequate human and financial resources for gender equality and women's empowerment is a major inhibiting factor and the major reason for the big gap between what is on paper and practice. Africa should focus more on mobilizing internally-generated resources, as these are important for sustaining BPfA and MDG-related activities and interventions.

Other challenges include lack of statistics, particularly sex disaggregated data that is essential for policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation; and limited enforcement of laws leading to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and violence against women.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The scale of the challenge facing Africa in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action is huge but it can be overcome with vision, commitment and unwavering determination. There is not enough time now before 2015, but I believe that we can make a difference in the time that is remaining by focusing on the correct priorities. Our priority actions should be buttressed by increased recognition of women's rights, improved gender sensitive social protection, enhanced financing for gender equality, improved governance, and high quality, reliable, comparable, policy-relevant, sex-disaggregated data

At this Conference, we should agree on the main actions required to accelerate the progress in implementing the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action. The outcome of our deliberations is a commitment document that reaffirms your commitment and reflects your decisions on priority actions for the accelerated implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action over the remaining 5 years. I therefore urge you to adopt a thorough and feasible commitment document.

Honourable Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for being here and for sharing your expertise and experience. I wish you successful deliberations and thank you for your kind attention.