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Conference Briefs

Joint AU/ECA Conference of Ministers of Gender and Women's Affairs 25-29 August 2008

Update of selected sessions

Intense Debates Set The Tone For the Joint AU/ ECA Conference of Ministers of Gender and Women's Affairs



Over sixty five experts from gender ministries, sixteen resource persons, twelve delegates from various UN agencies and members of civil society organisations are attending the Expert Committee meeting of the joint AU/ ECA Conference of Ministers of Gender and Women's Affairs that kicked off on Monday, August 25, 2008. The first day was dedicated to two major items: presentation and discussion of the AU Gender Policy and Beijing +15 achievements.

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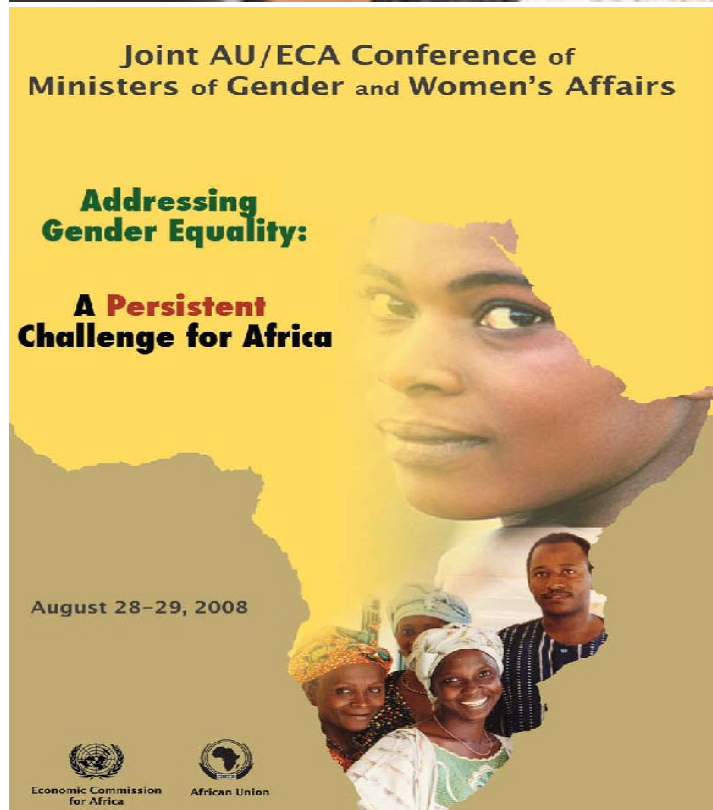
ECA's Galvanizing Role To Achieve Gender Equality

Opening officially the meeting, Ms Lalla Ben Bar-ka, the Deputy Executive Secretary of UNECA hailed this joint initiative as an opportune way to facilitate consultation and adoption of common positions on a wide range of gender issues. She then underscored the role ECA has played to galvanize Africa's women and mobilize them for a meaningful participation in various conferences on women at both regional and international levels.

In her statement, the Officer-in-Charge of the ECA's African Centre for Gender and Social Development, Ms. Thokozile Ruzvidzo, underlined the importance of this joint conference as a unique opportunity to examine, coordinate and harmonise policies and programmes that are being developed to achieve gender equality and the advancement of women in Africa. She also noted that "the pressing nature of development challenges facing Africa, including gender inequality, makes it necessary for all continental institutions and other development partners to collaborate, in order to harness resources, ensure coherence and avoid duplication."

Touching on the upcoming Beijing +15 evaluation process, Ms. Ruzvidzo, underlined the importance of such a reporting exercise to be undertaken by various countries so as to track progress in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). To this effect, a questionnaire will be developed for data collection on progress achieved, in addition to drawing information from national reports that member countries are expected to produce.

Exchanging information and good practices as to the implementation of Beijing Platform for Action will be made possible through the use of the Information Portal of the E- Network of gender machineries in Africa initiated by ECA.



An AU Gender Policy To Translate Commitment into Action



Representing the African Union Commission, Ms Lytha Musyimi-Ogana, Head of the Gender and Development Directorate commended the close collaboration between the AU and the ECA that led to the convening of this Conference. She then expounded briefly the historic process of the AU gender policy, which she said, has been inspired by the political will of African Heads of State and Government. The main *raison d'être* of this policy, she explained, is to ensure women's effective participation in all walks of life, hence the need to build women's capacity, although this Policy it is not binding to member countries,

Linking women's participation in the economy to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the AU representative insisted that persistent discrimination against women, unequal access to employment and resources, gender based violence, etc can only hamper Africa's efforts to move ahead with its development agenda and hence reduce its ability to achieve the MDGs.

Underlying the importance of the Policy's Plan of Action to be implemented over a ten- year period, Ms Lytha Musyimi-Ogana noted that it will seek to ensure a wider participation so that both decision-makers and beneficiaries will own it and lead it to fruition. The Plan of Action is all the more crucial since it will help monitor and measure progress in achieving gender equality in Africa.

But while recognizing the importance of the AU Gender Policy, participants discussed in length the relevance of such a policy and the purpose it would serve, given the fact that there are already both National and Regional Gender Policies that are being implemented.

We Want More, Says Ms. Astou Koite,

The massive presence of women NGOs in AU/ECA Joint Conference of Ministers is quite remarkable and shows the extent to which the civil society is committed and endeavouring and working hand in hand with governments to reduce discrimination against women. Ms Astou Koite tells us more about it in the following interview:

Question 1: How did PAWO start?

Answer; PAWO was created in 1962 by a group of African Women Leaders, when many African countries were still fighting for their independence. At the beginning, it was a political organization aiming at advocating for women's emancipation, as women did not have the right to have their say, in addition to the high illiteracy rate among them. Those who created PAWO were educated and understood the need for a political structure, therefore, they tried to sensitize rural women and include them in their action. They relied strongly on women from rural areas as their grass root in a context of striking inequality. As girls and women did not have access to education (in the same way as the boys and the men), educated women were rare in number and had to rely on their sisters living in rural areas to launch and sustain their struggle. That's why PAWO was initially considered to be a political organization, whereas in fact, it was an organization advocating for the emancipation and inclusion of women. .

Question2; During this joint meeting, the AU gender policy will be presented and discussed. What do you expect from it?

Answer; Since its creation, the African Union has started relying on dynamic women structures and organizations such as the Pan African Women Organization who has a focal point in all 53 AU member countries. During the African Summit held in January 2004 in Addis African, African Heads of State and Government dedicated a whole day to gender issues. This is a clear indication of the political will of our government. We don't need to run after them any more. We have progressed together and shall continue.

Question 3: Progress has been achieved since the Beijing World Conference on Women in



1995. What breakthroughs you think are noteworthy, thirteen years down the line?

Answer: Significant progress has been achieved indeed, but we have been rather modest in our request during Beijing Conference when we called for the (?) 35% representation. This has somewhat blocked us as governments understood that we had to stick to that limit , when we wanted to go further. Women usually outnumber men everywhere in the world, and we want to go beyond the 35 % limit. However, in Africa we managed to go beyond the 35% representation, and this meeting will allow us to take stock of the situation.