



Side Event: Concept Note

Africa Women's Forum

Accelerating Implementation of Commitments to Gender equality & Women Human Rights

Date: 22 September 2008

Time: 3 PM to 6 PM

Venue: UN Secretariat, Conference Room 3

Sponsors/Co-Sponsors: UNIFEM, UNV, UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, ITC, UN, ECA, OSAA, AU

Co-Hosts: Liberia, Rwanda, Iceland, African Union, European Commission

Context: The Enabling Environment

Over the past decade, the political and social context in Africa has been marked by increased political will by African States to address issues of gender inequality and women's human rights. All States have signed on to the 2000 Millennium Declaration, pledging to halve poverty by 2015 through the achievement of targets set by the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). African governments have also developed and adopted a number of normative and policy frameworks at national, regional and international levels. Among these frameworks are the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) on the Rights of Women in Africa that builds on, strengthens and domesticates key documents that Africa has signed or ratified, such as CEDAW¹, UN SC Resolution 1325, the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). A significant number of countries have also ratified the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

¹ Fifty-one of the African Union's (AU) 53 member states have ratified CEDAW and made it the basis of their commitments in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, and in its Protocol on Women's Rights.

In the continent-wide 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, African Heads of State pledged to ensure the full and effective participation and representation of women in peace processes as stipulated in SC Resolution 1325; to launch public campaigns against gender-based violence; to reinforce legal mechanisms that protect women at the national level and to end impunity for crimes committed against women. Additional regional frameworks for the protection and safeguarding of women's rights include the Addis Ababa Declaration on the Eradication of Harmful Traditional Practices; the Plan of Action on Enhancing the Participation of Refugee, Returnee and Internally Displaced Women and Children in Post-Conflict Reintegration, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Peace Building; the Abuja Declaration on HIV, Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases; the Kampala Declaration; and the Maputo Plan of Action, which maps Africa's strategy towards universal access to comprehensive reproductive health services by 2015.

At sub-regional levels, the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), including ECOWAS, SADC, IGAD, EAC, have adopted various gender policies and declarations, in line with various agreements on free movement of goods and people, harmonization of policies on taxation, market access and migration which are within their mandate. Together, these agreements constitute an important entry point for improving and mainstreaming gender into policy frameworks that can benefit and enhance women's lives.

By ratifying these instruments, African Governments have agreed to meet legal obligations to respect, promote and protect the economic, political, social and cultural rights of women. Despite this overarching, enabling environment, a recent report of UN-ECA assessing government performance vis-à-vis their commitments to gender equality and women's human rights found that, while African governments score high both in terms of ratifying and developing policies, performance is rather poor when it comes to their implementation.² This conclusion is further corroborated by research findings from several countries at sectoral levels that reveal that the implementation of actions is highly deficient and has led to a failure of delivering on gender equality and women's human rights, including women's reproductive health and rights and violence against women. Continued and repeated calls by human rights and women's rights groups also underscore the general crisis of implementation affecting African governments.

Some progress has been made to improve the legal frameworks that protect and empower women to demand accountability for the enforcement of their human, social, economic and political rights, as evidenced by existing and current legislation on HIV/ AIDS and sexual and gender-based violence in many countries. However, their implementation is weakened by the lack of accountability and institutional capacity for their adequate enforcement and monitoring. This is further compounded by the very few number of women's rights networks with regional and sub-regional mandates that have the potential to advocate and demand for accountability to these commitments. The potential of such networks has not been sufficiently harnessed to support the African Union in the implementation and monitoring of gender equality and women's empowerment programmes based on existing commitments.

In the economic sphere, the national economies of many African countries continue to sustain the growth momentum of previous years, recording an overall real GDP growth rate of 5.8% in 2007. This economic growth recovery, however, has not translated into meaningful social development for poor and vulnerable groups and has had very little or no impact on gender equality and the status and condition of women's lives.

Main issues and challenges

Women are the face of poverty in Africa. For the majority of African women, poverty, exclusion, violence and discrimination remain the biggest threats to their progress. Despite commitments at Beijing and B+5, many women – especially poor women -- and their communities are worse off today than they were a decade ago.

² Using the Africa Gender and Development Index (AGDI), UN-ECA mapped the extent of gender inequality in Africa and assesses government performance in addressing the above issues.

Economic Security

Women's poverty is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities, lack of access to resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance and support services. Land is the single most important asset for both poor and non-poor households in Africa. It underpins cultural identity, political power and participation in decision-making, provides a secure place to live and engage in economic and social activities, and constitutes collateral for credit. The widespread exclusion of African women from owning and/or controlling land means that they are often barred from effectively engaging in economic activities and having a secure and sustainable livelihood. Women's access to land and ownership is governed by traditional customs that favor men, even though statutory laws may explicitly prohibit gender discrimination. AIDS exacerbates the dispossession of widows and daughters of their property, because they experience further destitution and are not able to care for their children.

Women's economic marginalization is further exacerbated by labor migration, changes in family structures and persistent income inequality. Rising poverty and unemployment have spurred prostitution and trafficking of women and children, leading to the criminalization of women victims and the tightening of restrictions on cross-border migration. The feminization of poverty also needs to be analyzed in the context of its impact on children and families. Given the strong correlation between the status of women and that of children, the best way to break the inter-generational cycle of poverty in most countries is to ensure that women are educated, financially secure and socially empowered. Providing the foundation for stronger, more stable families will result in healthier children who go to school and are better protected from abuse, exploitation and violence.

As a consequence of deregulation and privatization, many formal sector jobs have been eliminated or have become increasingly insecure, further pushing women into precarious employment with less access to social protection and public services. The number of women engaged in the informal, unregulated and unprotected economy has increased over the last decade and now women in Africa make up the majority of these workers, especially in the agricultural sector. They have not, however, benefited from expansion of trade in agricultural products due to limited access to productive resources, such as credit, land, transport, and technical assistance. Moreover, African rural economies have been devastated by the dumping of cheap agricultural goods, further undermining the livelihoods of women agricultural producers and limiting their economic participation to lower-wage positions or in sub-contracted work, which may carry more health hazards.

MDG 3 offers governments an opportunity to assess and address the legal, regulatory and administrative frameworks that impact gender equality and women's empowerment. As the indicator of success is the movement of women into waged employment in the non-agricultural sector, this encourages a close look at unprotected, precarious forms of work in the informal economy that have increased over the last decade and ways in which women might be able to secure decent work in the formal economy, including through entrepreneurship (i.e. expanded credit lines; provision of technical assistance to diversify and have higher value products). A gender-sensitive approach to privatization, for example, must be adopted to ensure that any reduction in women's access to jobs in the formal sector does not further marginalize women into precarious employment with less access to social protection and public services. In addition, the push to privatize public services can lead to rising costs and cuts – quantitative and qualitative - to public services, which can have a disproportionate burden on women as consumers, as those most dependent on health services, transport and as those for whom education is to play a role in achieving MDG 3.

Governance & Political Participation

The increase in women's political participation in recent years is one area where African women have posted remarkable success as a result of governments' establishing quotas and/or reserving seats for women in national and local, legislative bodies. The share of parliamentary seats held by women increased from 7% in 1990 to 17% in 2007³, which is in line with the global average; and according to the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), 30% of Africa's local councilors are women. In Rwanda, women hold 48.8% of seats in the Lower House, the highest percentage worldwide; and in Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became Africa's first elected women president in 2006.

Nevertheless, serious and persistent obstacles such as poverty, the lack of equal access to health, education, training and employment, and the impact of armed conflict and natural disasters affecting some countries in the region, continue to undermine the advancement of women and their participation in decision-making processes.

Health, including reproductive health and HIV/AIDS

In order for African women to achieve their human rights to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, more needs to be done. As is the case in many parts of the world, African women face challenges when it comes to their health. For example, reproductive health conditions are devastating the African continent. Africa has the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, with one in 16 African women dying during childbirth. Furthermore, of the 25 million Africans infected with HIV, nearly 58% are women. Infection rates among adolescent girls and young women between the ages of 15-24 in much of Africa are strikingly higher than those of their male counterparts, exposing the disturbing reality that young women face appalling levels of abuse and discrimination.⁴

In addition, harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) continue to threaten the livelihoods of young girls. Similarly, child marriage carries a risk not only to health, but to other opportunities related to education and economic empowerment. Reaching the MDG targets and reducing poverty by half by 2015 will necessitate addressing the health and empowerment of African women.

What else has gone wrong?

Despite their commitments—and despite decades of research and advocacy by African feminist economists and women's rights activists—macroeconomic and trade policies from the national to global levels remain gender blind. Gender-impact analysis of economic policies and trade agreements continue to be insufficient or lacking, so that the adverse impact of such policies on women's lives is neglected. Improved consultative mechanisms to bring on the voice of professional business women's organizations and associations is necessary to ensure that the gender dimension of policies and programmes is considered in each phase from needs assessment to drafting, implementing and in monitoring and evaluation. Failure to do so invites a continuation of the status quo: exacerbation of the gap between rich and poor, worsening social and economic inequalities, erosion of labour rights and environmental protection measures and intensification of imbalances in productivity, resource flows and the distribution of goods, services and wealth.

Governments agreed in Beijing and Cairo to promote the harmonization of work and family for shared responsibilities among women and men—reflecting the necessity for transformation of traditional and cultural gender norms if gender equality, women's empowerment, women's rights and poverty eradication are to be achieved. Yet there continues to be a lack of recognition in national accounts of women's unremunerated work. Budgets for many public services in which women play a key role (water and fuel

³ UN report "Africa and the Millennium Development Goals – 2007 Update".

⁴ Human Rights Watch. "HRW Work on Women and HIV/AIDS." <http://www.hrw.org/women/aids.html>

collection, working on family farms, and caring for children, sick and elderly persons) do not provide for specific needs of women. In fact, women's role in the care economy is largely un-counted and uncompensated. More gender-sensitive budgeting will improve accountability on how public funds are invested and monitored, and to what extent women benefit from these investments.

Several countries in Africa still do not have HIV prevention programmes designed specifically for women, much less commitment to promoting and protecting women's human rights. In fact, in some countries there is evidence of HIV prevention related campaigns reinforcing gender stereotypes rather than challenging them.

Few measures exist to create conditions of equity in sharing family welfare and household responsibilities. While often remunerated, women's work in the informal sector typically receives incomes below a decent living wage, goes unrecorded, and remains outside of the coverage of labor protection laws. Thus economic policies and development strategies fail to take into consideration and provide much needed support for the work of many women. Present approaches to macroeconomics have tended to enforce and reinforce a simplistic anti-poverty agenda that is not sufficient as a goal of gender mainstreaming.

So what needs to be done?

We are now at a critical mid-point between the millennium and 2015 and still the implementation of commitments that would help alleviate the lives of the poor is consistently delayed. Delivering on the promises of the Millennium Development Goals is one of the main challenges confronting the international community. Gender mainstreaming must be a cornerstone of the process towards achieving poverty eradication, good governance and sustainable development. Increasingly, however it is being used as an instrument to achieve a programmatic goal or as a tool to be applied in some cases and not in others.

To achieve the MDGs, a number of drastic and parallel measures need to be taken at national and international levels. First and foremost, commitments need to be translated into concrete actions that result in the improvement of women's lives in Africa. The continued inaction, marginalization and exclusion of African women from the realm of policy design and implementation, as well as government's inability to build on their capacity and ingenuity to be effective agents of Africa's development dramatically risks the reversal of progress made thus far.

Present approaches to macroeconomics have tended to enforce and reinforce a simplistic anti-poverty agenda that is not sufficient as a goal of gender mainstreaming. There is a need to examine the prevailing structural issues of inequality and economic injustice and to seize the opportunity availed by the existence of normative frameworks to accelerate progress on gender equality and women's human rights by putting measures that will enable women to have access to income, employment, jobs markets, technology and credit. Some key actions may include developing clear legislative frameworks for protecting the rights of women regarding inheritance of land and land-based resources, and proactively inform and train women of their rights in this regard; increasing gender sensitiveness in economic governance structures (i.e. assessing to what extent public financial management systems provide for and monitor budgets for services where women are providers and/or capturing the value, and remunerate women's contribution to the care economy, particularly with respect to care of orphans). Equally important are the following measures: setting the pace to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, and improving African women's access to education, and decent work; bringing women, their organizations and networks to build on the existence of this unprecedented political environment to exercise their rights to demand accountability; and taking concrete steps to implement the Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development to help achieve the MDGs, and the recommendations of the 52nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women on financing gender equality.

Possible Questions to guide an interactive discussion

- What can States do to ensure accountability to commitments made regarding gender equality and women's human rights in Africa?
- What measures need to be taken/strengthened to address the needs of the poor, most marginalized and excluded women?
- What examples of good practice can you cite of initiatives that have served to foster the economic empowerment of women?
- What will be the role of various stakeholders in promoting women leadership as a way to address marginalization, as well as getting gender into local development plans, tracking expenditure, and collecting reliable data and statistics on gender?
- What progress has been made to date to address the specific commitments made in the above-mentioned policy frameworks developed in Africa?
- What measures can States take to develop capacities to respond to commitments already made and to address priority issues as they relate to gender equality, namely feminization of poverty, feminization of HIV and AIDS, violence against women, employment, education, implementation of SC Resolutions 1325 and 1820, etc?