

AFRICAN UNION

الاتحاد الأفريقي



UNAFRIKIAN

UNION AFRICAN

**Statement by Ms. Winnie Byanyima  
Director, Women, Gender and  
Development Directorate  
African Union Commission**

**49th Session of the United Nations  
Commission on the Status of Women**

**New York, 7 March 2005**

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

It is a great honour to address the 49th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women. On behalf of the delegation of the African Union, I would like to extend to you Madam Chair and the entire Bureau, our congratulations on preparing and steering this important meeting efficiently. Our delegation thanks the Secretary General for his comprehensive report on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

We agree that while some gains have been made in the past decade, there are still many challenges to be addressed. Our delegation associates itself fully with the statement made by the delegation of Madagascar on behalf of the African Group, as well as the Statement by the delegation of Jamaica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Madam Chair

The Commission of the African Union affirms its commitment to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Outcome Document of Beijing + 5 and continues to work with African Member States to implement them. The BPFA is a vital means for attaining the MDGs and we urge all delegations at this session to uphold the Beijing consensus. Let us focus on how to address the remaining challenges and not revisit what we already agreed in Beijing.

Madam Chair,

The majority of African people, and African women in particular have just survived the decade since Beijing. Millions have died from HIV/AIDS, TB, Malaria and other preventable diseases. Millions others have perished, victims of senseless wars still raging on the continent. Hundreds of thousands of children have lost a future because they are malnourished and stunted. Others are orphans fending for themselves and heading families.

Poverty has increased, and more women than men are among the poorest people. More women than men are infected with the HIV/AIDS virus and the burden of care fall disproportionately on women. Access to treatment and care is still extremely limited. African women farmers are not able to get a fair price for their hard labour in the fields because of agricultural subsidies in the rich North. The total amount of aid to our countries is four times less than what we could earn if there was fair trade. Moreover, falling levels of ODA and the burden: of debt are taking away scarce resources from poor children.. Violence against women is still' rampant. Many countries have inadequate laws and others do not enforce the existing laws to protect the rights of women and girls. The majority of African women who constitute more than 80% of its farming labour still do not own, land and property, cannot access safe water, finance, technology, information and other vital assets and resources for development. Women and children are caught between armies of rebels and governments locked in civil wars. Their voices are seldom heard in peace negotiations and their needs and interests are not considered. They are the majority in Africa's humiliating, IDP and refugee camps and face rape and other forms of sexual violence that goes unpunished most times.

This is not a positive picture of the lives of African women but yet it is the reality. The world has to wake up to the issues of growing inequalities in a globalized world. Inequalities between and within nations will not allow anyone to live in safety anywhere in the world. That is why the review of the Millennium Declaration and MDGs is very important and why this review of the BPFA should be an integral part of the same process. For there cannot be gender equality in poverty and poverty cannot be halved without promoting gender equality.

Madam Chair,

Against the external and internal constraints, African women have continued to mobilize and advocate for their rights and to hold together their families and communities. Within the limits of scarce resources, governments too have taken innovative steps to address structural barriers to women and girl's especially in the area of education, decision-making, policy-making and through the establishment of gender mainstreaming mechanisms. There are many attempts to integrate a gender dimension in poverty reduction strategies. However, economic frameworks still reflect the orthodox economic thinking of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and do not include gender as a variable in macroeconomic analysis. Trade liberalisation, privatization, fiscal and other economic policies recognise market-oriented work and ignore non-market work. In Sub Saharan Africa, most of this work is the unpaid subsistence, reproductive and care work poor women do in households. Our delegation is of the view that the international financial institutions have an important role to play in integrating gender concerns in poverty eradication and macro-economic frameworks and the Commission on the Status of Women should challenge them to integrate gender in all their programmes and projects.

In designing poverty reduction strategies, there is a need to make a shift from the growth-based focus to a human rights approach so that Poverty Reduction Strategies become the instruments through which governments can progressively realise poor women and men's human rights, which they have ratified in international and regional agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Platform for Action, (BPFA) and the Millennium Declaration.

Madam Chair,

It is heartening to report important positive changes on the continental level. The Organisation of African Unity, which had led the struggles against colonialism, was transformed into the African Union. Efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment have gained a new momentum since the organisation came into being three years ago. At their first Summit in 2002, African heads of State and Government established a global precedent for gender equality by adopting the principle of gender parity in decision-making and elected five female and five male Commissioners to lead the Union. The principle is being applied to all the other levels of the Commission through the on-going recruitment exercise. For example, out of sixteen directors recruited recently, seven are women.

During the second Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly in Maputo, 2003 the Member States adopted a Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. This Protocol, which will come into force, soon, when five more countries have ratified it, will compliment the CEDAW especially with regard to issues that have emerged or taken more prominence after CEDAW was signed.

Madam chair,

History was made last year when the Pan African Parliament opened and elected a woman as its first president. It was none other than Ambassador Gertrude Mongella, the Secretary General of the Fourth World Conference on Women, or Mama Beijing, as she is fondly called in Africa. We are confident that she will nurture that institution to become dynamic force for the promotion of women's rights and gender equality. African leaders made another landmark decision last year, when after a gender debate, the Heads of State and government adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa. Through the Declaration, Member States committed to make annual reports on progress towards gender equality. These decisions, taken in the first two years of the existence of the organisation reflect the collective determination of African leaders to own the gender equality agenda, to hold each other accountable on it and to open themselves up for scrutiny by civil society. They also reflect the championing efforts of the AU Commission under the leadership of Chairperson Alpha Konare.

Madam chair,

Our strategy, as you may have observed is that of mobilising a strong African consensus on gender equality and women's empowerment, opening up a continental space for continuing high level dialogue on the subject and where accountability can be made. This strategy will complement the processes of global reporting on the BPFA, CEDAW and the MDGS. Indeed, our challenge is to find a means of reporting progress that integrates these related processes and that creates synergy. We are confident that a combined strategy of fostering continental ownership of the gender equality agenda, through the development of African instruments, and promoting the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the best way forward.

We urge the UN and other development partners to seize this opportunity and support our efforts at the continental and regional levels to mobilize Member States to genuinely own and drive the gender equality agenda. The African Union Commission is grateful for the support that various UN agencies and other partners have expressed or extended so far and look forward to greater collaboration.

Madam Chair, Excellencies, I thank you for your kind attention.