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Statement

by

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Mr./Mrs. Chairperson,

Mr. Janneh, Executive Secretary,

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

I am honoured to address this Ministerial segment of the Eighth Africa Regional Conference on Women on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. I congratulate the Economic

Commission for Africa (ECA) for organizing this important meeting to take stock of what has been accomplished in the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, to review the challenges and obstacles encountered, and identify measures that must be taken to accelerate implementation.

Almost 15 years have passed since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. But the Platform for Action is as relevant today as it was then as a policy framework at the global, regional and national levels. The 12 critical areas of concern remain pertinent, and the focus of this Eighth Africa Regional Conference as well as the other regional meetings and global activities being undertaken in preparation for the 2010 global review underscore its relevance.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Since the Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995, we have reviewed progress in achieving the goals set at five yearly intervals – in 2000, in 2005 and now in 2010. In this review process, as in the previous

processes, regional reviews such as this one are being carried out to contribute to the global review which will be held in the Commission on the Status of Women in New York from 1-12 March 2010. At its session in March 2009, the Commission decided that the review should emphasize the sharing of experiences and good practices, with a view to overcoming remaining obstacles and new challenges, including those related to the Millennium Development Goals.

This fifteen-year review process will be particularly significant for a number of reasons. While the Commission on the Status of Women is meeting from 1-12 March, the General Assembly will also hold a meeting to commemorate the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The outcome of the review in the Commission on the Status of Women will feed into the 2010 Annual Ministerial Review of the Economic and Social Council which will focus on Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women. And the outcome of the Commission – particularly through its focus on the linkages between the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals - will also provide an important contribution to the high-level event on the Millennium

Development Goals to be held in the General Assembly in September 2010.

In addition, we should keep in mind that the Security Council will also commemorate the 10-year anniversary of the adoption of resolution 1325 (2000) in October 2010.

In the Declaration adopted at the ten-year review in 2005, Member States called for further action to ensure the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as well as the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Since 2005, there have been positive developments in a number of critical areas.

The “Synthesis Report” for this meeting and the discussions in the past three days have already pointed to the mixed record of progress in addressing the twelve critical areas of the Beijing Platform and Programme for Action within the Africa region. We are all aware of some of the pressing challenges and the gaps that continue to constrain progress in addressing the goals of gender equality and empowerment of women.

Poverty, globally, and particularly in Africa, continue to bear a female face. The global financial and economic crisis, alongside with escalating food and fuel prices and global warming, have intensified the associated challenges. Moreover, many women continue to face discrimination in access to land, housing and property, often because of traditional customs and practices. Without access to economic resources women find themselves ill equipped to cope with contingencies arising from old age, ill-health, disability, unemployment and other life-crises.

Progress has been made in getting girls into the classroom, as a result of a number of concerted actions including legislation, school feeding programmes, curricula reforms and the creation of girl-friendly learning environments in order to keep girls enrolled in school. However, ensuring that they remain in school continues to be a challenge. Absenteeism and drop out for girls deprive them of equal opportunities to learn and reinforces gender stereotypes and discrimination.

Ensuring the health of women and girls and especially reducing maternal mortality has fallen woefully short of expectations. More than 500,000 women die every year as a result of complications during pregnancy

and childbirth, many of which are preventable. The majority of these deaths occur in Africa.

The vulnerability to HIV and AIDS remains unacceptably high; often poverty and sexual violence interact to increase the vulnerability of women and girls to HIV/AIDS. Even when they are not infected, many women and girls are affected by HIV and AIDS as they often bear heavy caregiving burdens for the sick and the orphans.

Violence against women remains a major challenge in Africa, and a culture of silence constrains efforts to bring this scourge out into the open in order to root it out. Sexual violence in particular has become an unacceptable corollary of armed conflict. The consequences for women and girls are often devastating – infringing on their basic human rights, depriving them of health and alienating many from their families because of the shame brought upon the family.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:

With regard to women's role in decision making -- an area in which tradition and culture have at time constrained progress in the past -- Rwanda now holds the world's record for the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women. Other African countries have established quotas that raise women's share in government to unprecedented levels. It is important to acknowledge that Liberia, which only recently emerged from devastating consequences of armed conflict, has taken a bold new step in partnering with the United Nations, civil society and other partners to prepare and adopt one of the first National Action Plans in the region to ensure the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security.

These examples suggest that with determination, a comprehensive approach, collaboration and persistent policy action, the challenges being faced by the Africa region today could become the world's examples of success tomorrow. Indeed this is the message of the 2009 Millennium Development goals report which indicates that "the right policies and actions backed by adequate funding and strong political commitment can yield results".

The record clearly suggests that *commitment* at the highest levels of policy making is essential. Over the last 15 years, we have witnessed increasing commitment of African governments to addressing gender equality and women's empowerment, and by translating policy into concrete action at the national level. A number of countries have enacted laws reinforcing women's rights and clamping down on sexual violence.

Second, the importance of the *involvement* of women's organizations and other partners in addressing gender equality must be acknowledged. Women's organizations have been at the helm of promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Where the public sector is unable to provide services, civil society is often able to provide stop gap interventions that can begin to address the most pressing challenges. It is essential therefore that Member States continue to engage all stakeholders in their efforts to implement internationally agreed development goals including the Beijing Platform for Action, as well as the Millennium Development Goals. In so doing, entire communities will be engaged in identifying both the challenges and sustainable interventions.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen:



The United Nations, for its part, remains committed to the full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. It has taken a number of measures to provide more effective support to Member States and has intensified its own actions in a number of the critical areas of the Platform for Action.

For example, deeply concerned about the scourge of violence against women, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, in October 2006, launched his in-depth study on violence against women. A database has been established as a global “one-stop site” on measures taken by Member States to combat violence and contains information on the extent, nature and consequences of all forms of violence against women, and the impact and effectiveness of policies and programmes for combating such violence. Further to this, the Secretary-General launched his campaign “Unite to end violence against women”, at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2008. The campaign provides an umbrella for efforts to address this scourge at global, regional and national levels and engages a broad range of stakeholders – including Member States, United Nations entities, international and regional organizations, non-governmental organizations

and other civil society organizations such as the private sector and the media in a concerted effort.

Activities in the area of Women and Peace and Security have also been intensified. Follow-up to Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) has been significantly strengthened since 2005, with the development of national action plans for implementation by an increasing number of Member States. The adoption by the Security Council of three additional resolutions, in particular 1820 (2008) and 1888 (2009) on sexual violence in armed conflict, must be seen as important milestones. With these resolutions, the Security Council signaled its resolve to intensify actions to ensure that violence against women during armed conflict is eliminated. Concerted efforts are now needed to ensure full implementation of these resolutions to bring about real change on the ground.

The Declaration adopted at the ten-year review in 2005 recognized that the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and the fulfillment of the commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), are mutually reinforcing in achieving gender equality and empowerment of

women. Over the past five years, ratification of the Convention and its Optional Protocol has continued steadily. Today, 186 countries have ratified the Convention and 98 have ratified the Optional Protocol. The backlog of reports to be considered by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against women is significantly reduced. And it is particularly heartening that so many Member States refer in their national statements to the Commission on the Status of Women and the General Assembly to the importance of the Convention for their work at national level and their concrete efforts to ensure its full implementation on the ground. In December this year, the thirtieth anniversary of the adoption of the Convention and the tenth anniversary of the adoption of its Optional Protocol are being celebrated around the world.

The Commission on the Status of Women has continued to play an important role in advancing the global policy agenda on gender equality and empowerment of women, and in acting as a catalyst for the full implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy. Since 2005, the Commission has highlighted four critical areas - the equal participation of women and men in decision-making in all areas; the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against girls; the financing of gender equality

and empowerment of women; the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS. In each of these areas, the Commission developed concrete recommendations for action at global, regional and national levels to advance the full and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

One of the most important ways in which the United Nations is working to strengthen the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action is by strengthening its own ability to help Member States to take action at the national level. In this regard, the General Assembly has been considering the reform of the gender equality architecture in the United Nations over the past three years. The adoption of General Assembly resolution A/63/311, strongly supporting the consolidation of the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, the Division for the Advancement of Women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women and the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women, into a composite entity, has been hailed as a new milestone in the United Nations work on gender equality and empowerment of women. It is envisaged that the composite

entity, which would be headed by an Under-Secretary-General, would significantly enhance the support the United Nations system would provide to Member States at the country level.

The United Nations system is therefore at the cusp of major change in its work on gender equality and women's empowerment. The adoption of resolution A/63/311 signaled the willingness and readiness of Member States to move forward with implementation of the needed changes in the gender equality architecture. The Secretary-General is solidly behind a strengthened United Nations entity and has moved expeditiously in response to the resolution to enable establishment of the new gender equality entity as soon as possible. Expectations are high, and justifiably so. The time is ripe for this change.

With a new gender entity, the United Nations trusts that it would be better poised to help Member States, including African countries in advancing implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. It is expected that the new composite entity would be better resourced, have stronger field presence and a greater capacity to serve the Member States and the women of the world. It would, however, be incumbent on Member States to ensure

that national mechanisms are in place to capitalize on new opportunities that would be afforded by the new entity.

The whole United Nations stands ready to support Governments, civil society and other stakeholders in this region in their efforts to ensure the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

I wish you success in your deliberations and I am confident that you will be able to close this meeting with a sense of satisfaction at having taken yet another important step forward towards our common goal – the realization of gender equality and empowerment of women.

I thank you for your attention.