



UNIFEM Headquarters  
304 East 45th Street, 15th Floor  
New York, NY 10017, USA

Tel: +1 212-906-6400  
Fax: +1 212-906-6705  
Website: [www.unifem.org](http://www.unifem.org)

## **“Our Common Interest? Engendering African Development”**

A paper presented at the Wilton Park Conference 16 – 20 May 2005

On

The Commission for Africa: Implementing the Findings

By Letty Chiwara – Acting Chief, UNIFEM Africa, New York

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*Esteemed delegates, colleagues and friends*

I am pleased to be invited to this conference on the Commission for Africa report and to add a perspective that reflects women's empowerment and gender equality into this dialogue on implementation of its findings.

Let me start by introducing the organization that I work for. UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations, Created in 1976 by UN General Assembly resolution 31/133, following a call from women's organizations, UNIFEM provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies to foster women's empowerment and gender equality. Placing the advancement of women's human rights at the center of all of its efforts, UNIFEM focuses its activities in four strategic areas, 1) reducing feminised poverty, 2) ending violence against women, 3) reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS among women and girls and 4) achieving gender equality in democratic governance in times of peace as well as war. Now let me come to the reason why we are gathered here to, the Commission for Africa, Implementing the Findings.

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For further information contact: Letty Chiwara, Acting Chief, UNIFEM Africa email: [letty.chiwara@undp.org](mailto:letty.chiwara@undp.org)

## Commitments to commission report

I want to start by commending the Commissioners for the report and for highlighting Africa's development as a worldwide priority. I applaud the commission for highlighting that African women's contribution to the economies of their countries deserve greater recognition and a concrete response in economic plans. The report acknowledges what has long been recognized but not acted upon:

- That African women account for 70 percent of the food production in Africa's rural economy.
- That women are a key part of the solution to Africa's problems.
- That women's contributions and interests cannot be effectively taken into account without confronting women's exclusion from formal and informal leadership.
- That addressing women's leadership, empowerment and human rights are key to implementation of the commission report and fundamental to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

The NEPAD process as well as the Africa Union and other regional and sub regional bodies have also endorsed the centrality of gender equality. The African Union's commitment to parity in decision-making positions between men and women is a landmark commitment and one that is fundamental to the Commission report.

Let me now focus on some of the opportunities and challenges in implementing the report's recommendations, particularly with regard to the gender dimensions.

## **Leaving no one behind - Investing in People**

The proposed recommendations to eliminate poverty in Africa must be able to focus on the different interests and contributions of women and men. The report's call to invest in people must build on the significant knowledge that already exists within Africa about how to ensure that gender analysis underpins all policies and programmes to address poverty. Without deliberate attention and a focus on wealth creation for women, the benefits of globalization, of debt relief or cancellation, and of trade reform are unlikely to reach rural or urban poor women in Africa.

The causes of feminization of poverty in Africa are linked to the tragic consequences of women's unequal access to economic opportunities. Women constitute the majority of informal and small scale enterprise owners as well as agricultural producers in the rural areas. UNIFEM has supported women producers of shear butter in Burkina Faso, whose products have landed on markets in France. The widows from the genocide in Rwanda, have been supported to produce "peace baskets" with a lucrative market in the USA. It is critical that such initiatives are given priority and incentives, both in Poverty Reduction Strategies as well as in incentives to attract foreign direct investment. Gender-responsive action plans for the proposed recommendations will contribute significantly to economic growth as well as to equity objectives by ensuring that all groups of the poor share in the benefits arising from the new face of Africa.

## **Getting systems right - Governance and Capacity Building**

The report calls for improving *"accountability by broadening the participation of ordinary people in government processes and strengthening institutions like*

*parliaments, local authorities, trade unions, the justice system and the media.”*

This is a fundamental step toward transforming mainstream institutions to demonstrate leadership, technical capacity and accountability to support gender equality and women’s rights. Institutions of governance need to be made more gender-sensitive and their capacities built to address gender within these multidimensional facets.

That is why UNIFEM has prioritized, for more than a decade, investing in Africa’s regional organizations, to support their capacity to respond to gender equality and women’s human rights priorities in their work. We have worked with SADC, IGAD, ECOWAS and many others, to support them to incorporate gender equality units, work with networks of women parliamentarians, and advocate for women’s representation in peace negotiations. SADC has now institutionalized a Gender Department as a result of work done by UNIFEM and the advocacy from civil society over a long period of time. We are now building on that example to support the AU in building the capacities for its organs, programmes and divisions to promote women’s human rights and gender equality

UNIFEM has also prioritized – along with many other partners – linking constituencies for women’s rights to political processes and building their capacity to advocate for the institutional changes needed for women leaders to have an influence. The fact that Rwanda now has the highest percentage of women in parliament in the world is a fact that Africa should be proud of and must build on. The fact that the African Union has a woman – Gertrude Mongella – as the head of the African Parliament is also an achievement.

Achieving equality of leadership between men and women at all levels – from the village council to the negotiating table – remains an elusive goal worldwide, despite the promises of the Beijing Platform for Action, the Millennium Summit

and the Millennium Development Goals. The support generated in response to the Commission report needs to prioritize building women's leadership at all levels, positioning Africa to take a leadership role in the world to demonstrate how women can work in equal partnership with men to reverse decades of poverty and exclusion.

## **Peace and Security**

The report recommends that co-ordination and financing of post conflict peace building and development must be improved to prevent states emerging from violent conflict from sliding back into it. UNIFEM's recent support to women from the North and the South of the Sudan, leading to their common platform presented to the Oslo Donor's conference in March, builds on our many years of experience from Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia to DRC, in facilitating agreements between women from different sides of a conflict to draw strength from their collective action. The Sudanese women have demanded that 80% of aid to Sudan should directly and indirectly benefit women and they hold their governments and the international community accountable to the realization of their demands.

Up until June 2000, the situation of Burundi women and girls had been completely ignored in negotiations for peace in that country. But by July of that year, UNIFEM succeeded in bringing Burundi's 19 negotiating parties to accept the need for women's involvement in the peace process, leading to the first All Party Burundi Women's Peace Conference. Twenty three of Burundi women's recommendations, made to the facilitator, Nelson Mandela, were included in the final peace accord. A precedent was set and the entire peace agreement benefited. However, as we have seen in Burundi, violence and conflict returns quickly if the post-conflict reconstruction process fails to address seriously both

the causes and the consequences of conflict, and to put in place policies of inclusion and incentives for future conflict prevention (Noeleen Heyzer, 2004).

### **Partnerships**

The acknowledgement that the developed world shares the responsibility of bringing Africa out of poverty is an important building block for us. More important though is the need to recognize that the importance of inclusiveness of women and their networks and their potential is shared responsibility by all partners.

Strengthening the capacities and voices of gender equality advocates claiming their rights and monitor progress on commitments made on the commission report is an essential element in implementing the recommendations. Key partners in efforts related to this should include gender units/departments within the regional and sub regional bodies, Ministries of Women's Affairs, gender equality networks within government ministries, women Parliamentarians, as well as national, regional and global women's rights networks.

Another important potential partnership to highlight is the one between Africans in the diaspora and those on the continent. UNIFEM has launched the Digital Diaspora Initiative – that seeks to link Diaspora Africans who have done well in the information, communication and technology or ICT field with rural women in Africa to bring the benefits of this new technology to their livelihood initiatives. We have begun to see positive results from Rwandans in the Diaspora going back to support Rwandan women entrepreneurs in the ICT business sector not only to enable them to use the internet to access markets and information, but they are also now launching a Venture Capital Fund to enable the women to raise the much needed capital to upscale their businesses. Such initiatives need more support and should be extended to more countries.

## **Where will the money come from – resources**

*“Increasing transparency of revenues and budgets”* as recommended by the report must focus on supporting the capacity of governments and partners to be accountable by ensuring that revenue collection and budgeting is sensitive to gender. Gender-responsive budgeting has supported new interlocutors to enter the budgeting process in Uganda and Tanzania, it has assisted women to better understand the gender equality dimensions of Poverty Reduction Strategies in Mozambique and Senegal.

As the architecture of development assistance changes, tools of accountability like gender responsive budgeting, sex disaggregated data and better information upon which to base gender-responsive policies are essential; building the capacity of African institutions to generate and use such information is fundamental to more transparent, accountable and effective governance.

## **Conclusion**

As the women of the world gathered to review the Beijing Platform for Action in March 2005, the message was clear – there has been a lot of talk and policy commitment – but what is needed now is action. The message is still the same as we discuss this Commission report – what is needed is real action to implement the recommendations. There are a number of factors that will determine success, and key to these is the advocacy by civil society organizations. Civil society organizations represent the voices of the poor, many of whom are women. The organizations that represent women including women’s NGOs, National Machineries and even at the level of the UN, UNIFEM

have over the years been suffering from diminishing funding. This has to change if we are to make meaningful progress in addressing the challenges in Africa.

Despite tragedy and hardship, despite conflict, exclusion, economic exploitation, violence and the ravages of HIV/AIDS (which increasingly acquires a female face), women's issues have made progress over the last decade. Women in many settings are showing a new confidence and sense of entitlement. We are moving on. We will not be stopped. The question is, will the international community make it easy for women, or more difficult? Will governments recognise that they have a stake in women's empowerment and equality, and act accordingly? In this area, global interests, national interests, individual interests and human rights coincide. It is time for some serious action.

Thank you.