



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

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to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”

### Statement submitted by African Women’s Development and Communication Network, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## **Statement**

### **African women rekindling the Beijing fire of revolution at Beijing+25 and beyond**

Globally, there is recognition that advancing gender equality and women's rights is central and critical to inclusive and sustainable development. However, gender equality still remains the greatest human rights challenge of our time. Despite gradual progress in different countries, such as affirmative action practices and enactment of gender-responsive laws that promote and protect the rights of women and girls, no country has achieved gender equality. Women and girls in Africa continue to experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.

In September 1995, thousands of women and men from around the world met in Beijing, China for the pivotal Fourth World Conference on Women, which culminated in the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Beijing Conference was instrumental in formulating this globally adopted framework with its 12 critical areas of concern on gender equality and women's empowerment. During this historic process, African women took pride in having pushed for the girl-child agenda. Many have described the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as being a progressive policy framework and blueprint for advancing gender equality and women's rights – notwithstanding, emerging priorities beyond the 12 critical areas of concern.

In 2020, as the world marks 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, there is enough evidence that shows a lot still needs to be done regardless of the notable gains achieved so far. The Beijing+25 review processes at national, regional, and global levels are providing opportunities for feminists and women's rights advocates to not only take stock but also pause, deeply reflect, and boldly demand that governments as the primary duty bearers confront the persistent obstacles, challenges, and backlash on existing gains hindering accelerated implementation of women's rights commitments.

The African Women's Development and Communication Network takes note that in many countries, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action continues to accelerate activism within the women's movement. Since its adoption, there is definitely a tangible shift within the African women's movement, including vocal recognition that women matter as well as notable participation of women in leadership across different sectors, albeit slowly. For instance, globally, Rwanda has the largest share of women in decision-making at 61 per cent. The gains are commendable, including the establishment of gender ministries; however, a critical analysis shows that these gains are under threat.

### **Drawbacks to achieving freedom from all forms of discrimination**

Twenty-five years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, African women continue to face multiple structural and systemic barriers in the social, economic, and political spheres, including being disproportionately concentrated in low-wage categories, precarious, and unpaid care labour. Women's contributions to the economic sector are not recognized and counted in gross domestic product. Yet, women do the bulk of the labour in the informal sector, the agricultural sector, and the care economy, which drives the formal sector.

Structural inequalities still persist in many countries, coupled with misogyny, and increasing injustices against women and girls in a context where religion, politics, and culture interface to oppress women, notwithstanding the reeling effects of

neo-colonialism that prevent the full achievement of women's rights and gender equality.

It is therefore imperative to note that with the changing and rising trends of inequalities and repression, women's empowerment becomes a greater urgency.

### **The rhetoric must end!**

The irony envisioned in the regional development projection across the globe and in Africa in particular negates the reality of gender inequality as is outlined in national demographic presentations annually. While countries purport to be making tremendous strides towards for instance economic development, gender equality lags behind. The slow pace of progress is unacceptable. The women's (feminist) movement is deeply concerned that there is seemingly a lack of serious commitment in ending this rhetoric.

### **Key asks by African women's (feminist) movement**

- Why is it that 25 years since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the world is still largely (90 per cent) patriarchal?
- Why is tangibly resourcing women's rights movements in Africa still a mirage?
- Why are so many women in all their diversities still being left behind in the design, implementation, monitoring, and reporting of their own development, despite the collective vision and commitment of the development agendas, notably Agenda 2063, the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, and even the Maputo Protocol?

The 2019 Equal Measures 2030 Sustainable Development Goal Gender Index, covering 129 countries and 95 per cent of the world's population of girls and women revealed that no country in the world has reached the "last mile" on gender equality. With just 11 years to go until 2030, nearly 40 per cent of the world's women and girls (1.4 billion) live in countries that are not meeting the gender targets. Sub-Saharan Africa is the lowest-ranking region in the Sustainable Development Goal Gender Index. Even the highest-scoring countries with high gross domestic product have more to do, particularly on complex issues such as climate change, gender budgeting and public services, equal representation in leadership, gender pay gaps, and gender-based violence.

A screening of bilateral funding for women's rights organizations in 2015–16 revealed that around 40 per cent of the Official Development Assistance had some focus on gender equality, but less than 0.5 per cent supported women's rights organizations. This is because investments in sustaining women's networks and movements is rarely seen as key to achieving gender equality. Yet, achieving gender equality commitments require the mobilization of resources to finance such key actors beyond public services delivery.

Beyond data – In a world where sufficiently gender-disaggregated data is not available, gender inequality is compounded by other factors. Women and girls in low-income countries around the world experience multiple discrimination on the basis of age, income, ethnic or religious identity, geographic location, sexual orientation and gender identity, disability, immigration status, or HIV status, among other factors. Measuring progress based on national statistical data with huge data gaps runs the risk of failing to identify and address pockets of extreme forms of inequality and masks the fact that multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination affect some groups of women and girls more than others. Age is another crucial, often overlooked dimension on which data should be disaggregated. Age-aggregated data show that women and girls in different age groups experience vulnerabilities in different ways:

adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence, for example, and older women are more likely than older men to live in poverty, ill health, and with limited access to protective resources.

Diversity and intersectionality – Every voice deserves to be heard. Women are not homogeneous and interventions should squarely address and celebrate their diversity. Women with disabilities, for instance, face multiple dimensions of discrimination, especially in finding and retaining employment. Data for 51 countries shows that only 20 per cent of women with disabilities are employed, compared to 53 per cent of men with disabilities and 30 per cent of women without disabilities.

Breaking silos – The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action brought together women across the continent from all walks of life to shift power 25 years ago. It is critical to galvanize the power of this declaration by breaking barriers and working across movements. More can be achieved by working collaboratively and recognizing that women’s rights are not sectoral. A collective fight is needed to assert sexual and reproductive rights, to have the power to decide, to be represented, participate meaningfully, and lead in all aspects that affect women in both private and public spaces, including questioning the extractive nature of multinational companies, calling for the right to land, right to information and protection from cyberbullying and for environmental and climate justice. All these are struggles for women’s rights and gender equality that intersect and should not be convoluted or siloed but looked at critically and prioritized as outlined in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 25 years ago.

**African women’s rights advocates and feminists call for accountability to commitments on women’s rights and gender equality**

Lastly but most importantly, there is a need to ensure accountability by governments in resourcing and translating women’s rights and gender equality commitments made over the years in their full totality to address the realities faced by women and girls such as poverty, gender-based violence, the burden of unpaid care work, unemployment, multiple discrimination, and as the worst victims of bad governance, conflict and economic instability.

