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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
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“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and
further actions and initiatives**

Statement submitted by African Centre for Community and Development, 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.



Statement

Factors affecting the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in sub-Saharan Africa and some policy proposals

This article explores socioeconomic, cultural and general livelihood issues preventing equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in sub-Saharan Africa by drawing on local examples and academic research while proposing some policy areas to mitigate the challenges and improve regional well-being, equality and poverty alleviation.

Three years after the fifty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which took place at United Nations Headquarters in New York from 2 to 13 March 2009, there are still pertinent factors affecting the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, in general, and caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, in particular. These factors are due to socioeconomic, political and sometimes complex cultural and environmental issues affecting general access to assets, issues that affect women more acutely. Despite some improvements in sub-Saharan African economies, the region is still affected by chronic poverty, diseases, malnutrition, illiteracy and food insecurity, as revealed in the *Africa Human Development Report 2012: Towards a Food Secure Future*. The following points and their implications are vital for policy proposals that can reduce the gaps between men and women and facilitate the more inclusive and equitable development necessary to fight poverty and other issues, such as malnutrition, hunger, food insecurity and equal sharing of responsibilities between men and women, and to speed up the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

- During the period 2006-2008, some 218 million Africans (1 in 4) were undernourished. Chronic malnutrition fell by only 2 per cent between 1990 and 2010 and is expected to fall by just 1 per cent in the next decade.
- A total of 93 per cent of African agriculture is rain-fed, meaning that it is exposed to fallout such as climate change, desertification, acid rain and sporadic rainfall.
- There is low access to entitlements and poor capability in various sectors, including poor access to land, especially by women, and poor access to food, education and economic and political choices.
- Industrial development is slow, even though there have been some gains in the extractive sectors.
- The region is affected by low agricultural productivity and remains a net importer of food.
- The rise in oil prices, speculation on food, the rise in global food prices in 2007-2008 and 2010-2011 and the provision of subsidies to farmers in developed regions have had dire consequences for competition, general well-being, food security and even labour productivity in the region.
- Imbalances between rural and urban areas are still widespread, especially in countries where social services are delivered to city centres as a matter of priority.

- Poor soils and unsustainable farming methods affect productivity and consumption levels in Africa.
- Low levels of education affect the number of people leaving or staying in poverty. In many instances, women are the most hit.
- Africa is witnessing high population growth without a commensurate increase in infrastructure, such as roads and hospitals, leaving a significant chunk of people in poverty and the informal economy.
- Poor legal frameworks, conservative stereotypes and some traditional practices have left women marginalized, discriminated, overworked, ill and poor.

The points listed above have various implications for the capabilities set aside by people to survive, including subpopulations such as children and women. These challenges affect the well-being and general dignity of these categories and the development of the region. Some of the implications of those challenges are set out below.

- Malnutrition has negative consequences for labour productivity. Poorly nourished people, including women, have low nutrient levels and spend less time working. Arguably, were they fortified by nutrients, they would have more time available and could diversify their incomes or spend high-quality time on caregiving. As caregiving is generally considered a woman's job, this puts a strain on the women responsible for meeting most domestic work needs. Iron deficiency, for example, leads to anaemia and death during pregnancy, while 58 million African children consume less than the required minimum amount of iodine as a result of their high dependency on low-nutrient root staples and cereals.
- Rain-fed agriculture is affected by climate change, such as acid rain, seasonal variations, global warming and desertification, all of which impact negatively on crop yields. Low crop yields reduce the amount and quality of food that farmers can obtain from their farms, meaning that they eat less or sell nothing. Low incomes affect the number of children, including girls and women, who can go to school or hospital or who can obtain HIV/AIDS drugs in a region with deep-rooted dogma and stereotypes leading to discrimination against women.
- Low crop productivity means that Africa has remained a net importer of food, negatively affecting the balance of payments. The provision of subsidies to farmers in developed countries has arguably prevented fair competition between small-scale African farmers and their global colleagues, embedding farmer poverty.
- Small-scale agriculture is also affected by poor soils and high external inputs that further degrade the soil, increase the cost for farmers and reduce their profit margins. High external inputs find their way into the groundwater, making it undrinkable and making women trek far distances to harvest water for the family.
- High oil prices and the switch to commercial biofuel are affecting food distribution, food security, labour productivity and dignity in Africa.

- Poor access to entitlements affects the economic choices of women. Some are driven to prostitution because there are no alternatives, thereby increasing HIV/AIDS levels in uneducated communities with low condom use.
- Low industrial development affects the general skill base of the region. Because agricultural products cannot be transformed, producers and consumers cannot benefit from the value chains and alternative employment, as everyone is dependent on primary resources affected by the pressures on land, economies and humans. Most extractive industries are labour-intensive and do not employ women.
- Infrastructural lapses between rural and urban areas have kept the rural poor cut off from social services such as roads, schools and hospitals. The lack of roads means that farmers cannot sell in cities and suffer high post-harvest losses when transporting their goods to cities. The lack of schools accentuates early childhood marriages of girls, meaning that many girls remain poor and vulnerable. Rural farmers' lack of knowledge of market prices leaves them duped by middlemen and poor.
- The lack of effective laws regulating domestic behaviour, stereotypes and unsustainable traditional practices leaves women marginalized with no legal redress. The current laws govern inheritance and land access and play a role in keeping both men and women poor. When poor women overwork, they fall ill and may die and leave children who cannot take care of themselves, thereby ensuring the persistence of a bleak cycle of deprivation.

Despite these challenges, sub-Saharan Africa and Africa in general are witnessing high economic growth rates. The region grew by 5.4 per cent in 2010, 5.2 per cent in 2011 and is projected to grow by 5 per cent in 2012. From 2000 to 2010, Burundi and Rwanda witnessed a five-year increase in their expected years of schooling, while life expectancy at birth in the whole region increased by five years from 2000 to 2011. This enabling environment indicates that holistic policy proposals can mitigate the challenges facing equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in sub-Saharan Africa. Some such policy proposals are set out below.

- Information and training centres should be created to empower women to claim their rights, engage in other income diversification activities and reduce their reliance on rain-fed agriculture.
- There should be an increase in industrialization and the development of technology and tools targeting women, which will create a skill base among women, drive them into other professions, create high income levels and lead to an emerging middle class.
- Education will create awareness and highlight alternative energy sources, such as domestic biofuel production. This will reduce wood dependency and improve access to energy from biogas and to lighting needed for other intangible work carried out by women, such as weaving and basketry, thereby improving the gross domestic product.
- Community radios should be created through organizations in consultative status with the United Nations in order to disseminate policies and tested

practices and to highlight policy and social gaps. Radios are still widely used in Africa.

- Adapting legal frameworks so as to empower women will better their status and economic choices. This can work only if Governments ratify conventions, exert separation of powers and educate people against negative cultural values.

Challenges affecting equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men exist in sub-Saharan Africa, engineered by high illiteracy and poverty levels, harmful traditional practices, low access to assets and food insecurity, among others. This article has demonstrated that more inclusive systems, education and agricultural and legal reforms, among others, will reduce the gaps and create a more dynamic environment for well-being in fast-growing sub-Saharan Africa.
