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Organization of African Unity

**CONFERENCE ON AFRICAN WOMEN AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:
INVESTING IN OUR FUTURE**

**Introductory Statement by H.E. Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,
Secretary General of the OAU to the Heads of
State and Government Forum**

Africa Hall,
Addis Ababa

01 May, 1998

- **Your Excellencies, the Heads of State and Government,**
- **Your Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations,**
- **Mr. K.Y. Amoako, UN Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa.**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen.**

I would like to welcome you all to this Forum of Heads of State and Government being held within the framework of the Conference on *"African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future."* I would like, in particular, to welcome President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso, President Festus Mogae of the Republic of Botswana, Ato Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Mr. Ahmed Ouyahia, Head of Government of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Prof. J.E. Atta-Millis, Vice-President of Ghana, Dr. Specioza Mwandira Kazibwe, Vice President of Uganda and Mr. Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations. I wish also to recognize the presence of Mr. Sadok Fayala, Secretary of State who represents President Ben Ali of Tunisia who has also been invited to attend this Forum.

Their participation in this important Conference is a clear demonstration of their personal commitment and that of their respective countries to the issue of gender equality and to the promotion of the role of women in development in our Continent.

The planning of the Conference to take place on the occasion of the 40th Anniversary of the ECA is, indeed, significant not only to the ECA but to the entire Continent that is increasingly taking the issue of gender equality into the mainstream of the continental development efforts. We, at the OAU, consider both the Conference and the Anniversary as a significant convergence in our endeavours, in collaboration with the Economic Commission for Africa, to address the pressing socio-economic challenges facing our Continent. OAU's full participation in this Conference and the celebrations marking the Anniversary is a clear manifestation of our commitment to work closely with the ECA for the benefit of the Continent and to further strengthen the cooperation and collaboration between our two institutions.

A concrete expression of this new spirit of cooperation is the fact that only three days ago, pursuant to a decision of the OAU Council of Ministers in Harare last year and following consultations with the Executive Secretary of the ECA Mr. K.Y. Amoako, I established an African Women's Committee on Peace and Development. This joint initiative by the OAU

and the ECA is aimed at bringing women into the mainstream of the Continent's efforts aimed at preventing, managing and resolving conflicts on the one hand and at ensuring the full and active participation of women at every stage of development process on the other.

I am confident that the Committee will play an important role in strengthening Africa's capacity to confront the scourge of conflicts. No other segment of our people have a greater stake in and a greater commitment to peace than the women. Statistics on the victims of conflicts in our Continent are glaringly self evident. As mothers, as wives and as daughters, the women of this Continent and their children have been the greatest victims of wars and human catastrophes that have afflicted Africa. The genocide in Rwanda, the never-ending conflict in Somalia, the conflicts in Burundi, Southern Sudan, the tragedy that had engulfed Liberia and Sierra Leone, the wars that raged in former Zaire and the Republic of the Congo, and in a number of other conflict situations, it is the women and the children who have had a disproportionate share of suffering and grief. At the same time however, experience in all these situations have also demonstrated the determination of the women to struggle relentlessly for peace despite formidable odds and clear and present danger to themselves. It is therefore only logical to expect that the African Women's Committee for Peace and Development will bring into the fore, the sensitivity, commitment and innovative ideas in search for peace, stability and security

in Africa. Peace however, is not only the absence of war. That is why the Committee will also advise both the OAU and the ECA on issues relating to economic and social development.

It is evident that in order for the Committee to function effectively, it requires resources. When I had the occasion to launch this Committee three days ago, I informed the Conference that the OAU is making an immediate initial contribution of US\$100,000.00 from the OAU Peace Fund to the envisaged special trust fund. I now wish to make use of the opportunity of the presence, in our midst, of some African leaders, to appeal to them and through them to all the African governments, the business community and other institutions, as well as to all our partners abroad who share our concerns and vision, to support this Committee by providing it with the much needed financial assistance and other resources.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The relevance and significance of this Conference cannot be over-emphasized. It is rewarding that this Forum brings together selected Heads of State and Government, other African leaders and representatives of women from all over the Continent. This gives a unique character to this encounter which should be fully used to push forward the struggle for the

empowerment of women in the political, economic and social domains. The African women have been at the centre of Africa's liberation struggle for political independence and economic emancipation. The African women have continued to be the symbol of our collective struggle for the dignity and prosperity of our Continent and for a durable peace and security. They have been in the forefront of our efforts in nation building and in fostering unity and understanding among our peoples.

Our societies are still confronted with serious problems as a result of the many obstacles placed on the women. The handicaps faced by African women are well known to us whether in the education, health, or legal domain. It is clear that we need to address all these issues. Conferences of this nature help in sensitizing our Continent to the challenges that lie ahead. We need to work towards the provision of better education and health facilities for women, especially those in the rural areas. Above all, we need to vigorously address the legal impediments that stand in the way of development and progress of women in the Continent.

Over the years, we have collectively and individually, at national, sub-regional and regional levels discussed all these issues. We know the problems that are facing the African Woman. In some cases we have identified the solutions to these problems. Regrettably, quite often there remains a gap between our declarations of commitment and intentions

and concrete action. We must endeavour to overcome this gap. We must go beyond declarations and principles of intent to commit ourselves both politically and in terms of resources to concretely address these issues. With political will and determination and commitment on the part of our governments and our Leaders, and the mobilization of the civil society, we should be able to make a major difference in our pursuit for gender equality in the Continent.

We, in Africa, must recognize the fact that full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at national, sub-regional, regional and indeed, international levels is crucial if our Continent is to get out of the morass of poverty and under-development.

Furthermore, at a time when our Continent is passing through an important transition characterized by political and economic reforms, it is important to stress that the consolidation of democracy and its institutions, the respect for human rights, the fight against corruption which in some cases has reached scandalous proportions in some of our societies - all these require the full involvement and indeed the vanguard role of the African Woman whose resilience and tenacity is a matter of record. Thus, only with the full respect for and observance of the human and political rights of the women population of our Continent can we really be on the sure path of an

sure path of an unambiguous movement towards the second liberation of Africa - the freedom from economic deprivation and all other injustices that continue to bedevil our societies.

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wish to point out that in a little more than one month from now, the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government will be meeting in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso from June 8 - 10. I am confident that the important outcome of this Conference will not be lost sight of by African leaders when they assemble. I shall work closely with the Executive Secretary of the ECA to see how best this can be achieved. In this I am sure, we can count on the full support of the incoming Chairman of the OAU, President Compaore.

I thank you for your kind attention.