

OPENING REMARKS BY H.E. DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM,
OAU SECRETARY-GENERAL,
AT THE TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF THE INTER AFRICAN
COMMITTEE ON TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE
HEALTH OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN (IAC)

11-15, APRIL, 1994
AFRICA HALL, ADDIS ABABA

Madam President of the IAC,
Distinguished First Ladies
Distinguished Minister of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Permit me on behalf of the OAU and on my own behalf to welcome you all to Addis Ababa where you have come to participate in this triennial Conference of the Inter-African Committee. I wish in particular to extend my warm welcome to the First Ladies of Ghana, and Guinea who are here/present and seize this opportunity to commend them for their personal commitment to the cause which is defended by IAC. I am informed that since your last meeting much has happened both in respect of the status of the IAC itself and in the matter of greater awareness of the issues of Traditional Practices as well as in terms of greater support for the activities of the IAC.

The OAU is pleased to be participating in this Conference conscious as we are of its lofty objectives.

I would like to congratulate the Inter-African Committee for its tireless efforts since its inception in 1984 firstly to make the sensitive issue of traditional practices affecting the health of African women and children an African issue and secondly to have gained the support for and interest of various sections of the international community in their activities.

The OAU appreciates the IAC's constant sensitization activities which have been targeted at Ministries of Health, at meetings of the World Health Assembly, at National governments and various other meetings. In view of the establishment of 26 national committees in African countries we would like to believe that men, women and children at the grassroot levels have benefited from the sensitization activities. We are pleased to note the efforts of these national Committees in the areas of training seminars and various projects. In particular, we are pleased that some of these national committees have succeeded in getting the recognition of the national Governments and in some cases some have succeeded in drafting legislation against some of the practices which, hopefully would be adopted and included in national constitutions.

The focus of the sensitization, research and training activities of the IAC, namely, practices related to child birth, female circumcision, nutritional taboos and fattening of women and premature marriages are all areas of great concern to all of us here as parents or future parents.

Many of these practices have taken on a more sinister dimension when one considers that some of the victims of these practices may become exposed to the Aids virus.

There is abundant evidence from sources such as WHO, UNICEF and other institutions to support the inimical effects of some of these practices particularly female circumcision, scarification and child marriages in respect of the vulnerable groups.

We are aware that in some cases, the efforts of the IAC to address some of these issues have been thwarted and frustrated.

In spite of these frustrations, however, it is gratifying to note that more and more men and women are now openly discussing these issues, which, a few years back were strictly taboo. We are confident that the situation will continue to improve and

that more men and women will join the ranks of those who are working tirelessly to eradicate these practices. In this respect, I would like to remind this Conference of the Concensus of Dakar adopted by the OAU International Conference on Assistance to African Children, held on 25-27, November, 1992. The Concensus committed Member States of the OAU to ensuring the protection of the female child from all forms of harmful traditional practices and the elimination of such practices as female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage.

The OAU has supported and will continue to support, collaborate and cooperate with the IAC in its activities. The most recent evidence of cooperation was the granting of observer status to the IAC during the fifty-ninth meeting of the OAU Council of Ministers in January this year. The interest and support of the OAU to the activities of the IAC is part and parcel of OAU's efforts and commitment to the enhancement of Women and Children's role in the African societies.

In addition, a memorandum of understanding for facilitating cooperation between the IAC and the OAU in undertaking certain activities aimed at the eradication of traditional practices harmful to the health of African Women and Children and the promotion of positive traditional practices is being studied by the OAU Secretariat and we are confident that the memorandum will be finalized soon.

In conclusion let me say that the OAU is pleased to have been associated with some of the arrangements that have contributed to the holding of this Conference. We shall follow closely the deliberations of the Conference and we are confident that relevant recommendations will emanate from this Conference which will make yet a further contribution against the surges of harmful traditional practices.

I wish this Conference every success.

Thank you.