

INTRODUCTION TO THE CONGO ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION ON GENDER EQUALITY AND GENDER JUSTICE (EQUITY)

By

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The Charter of the United Nations was the first international instrument to recognize women's rights with men, i.e. gender equality, and has created the impulse in providing a legal codification of these rights in national laws and policies. The World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna provided the solid basis that clearly acknowledged women's rights are human rights and the Conference emphasized the need for governments and the United Nations to make it their priority to ensure full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life at national, regional and international levels and the elimination of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex. It also underscored the fundamental importance of integrating full participation of women in the development process, which was a reiteration of the Rio Declaration under Agenda 21 Chapter 24.

Gender equality and women's rights to sustainable economic and social development are contained in all recent world conferences and summits, in particular the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995. This has become the blueprint of a framework for translating the provisions and positive forces of human rights law for women into concrete actions. Within this framework is stipulated in Paragraph 25 (to) "Encourage men to participate fully in all actions towards equality." This should be considered in the light of Paragraph I which emphasized the principle of shared power and responsibility between women and men at home, in the workplace and in the wider national and international communities.

To further clarify these concepts and principles, ECOSOC adopted agreed conclusions in 1997 to promote a coordinated and coherent policy of gender mainstreaming and addressed specific recommendations. It also decided in 2001 to include a regular review of how gender mainstreaming is being implemented.

With a background of international instruments, norms, guidelines and processes for the full implementation and fulfilment of gender equality, why are we far from achieving this goal, notably in economic, social and cultural rights.

The following are some indications of protection and promotion gender gaps::

First, a gender perspective is not so much about targeting attention on women as it is to the structures and processes within different sectors which are critical in highlighting imbalances. It is in this context that one can identify the gaps and discriminatory practices which have caused differing rates and levels of socio-economic impact to women and men. For example, eradication of poverty will remain rhetoric if the present consultation process on perceptions, priorities and needs continue to exclude or negatively affect women.

Second, issues of representation and access to decision-making and to control over resources continue to be dominated by men because institutions and national legislations do not address or inadequately address these imbalances. Our lives continue to be controlled principally by the male paradigm of a vertical hierarchical power .

Third, culture and religion are entrenched in behavioral patterns and mental attitudes, which are exacerbated by stereotyping and sometimes stigmatising the economic and social roles based on gender, thus creating a vicious cycle of discriminatory practices favouring male domination. One such practice is the deprivation of women's rights to land, property and inheritance. Such deprivation of rights to assets are added obstacles to their rights to access credit and other rights to development such as education and training and in turn, creates for them a situation of dependency or unsustainable economic, social and cultural autonomy.

Fourth, macro economic policies are purported to be gender neutral but are in fact generally gender blind. Current policies are actually reinforcing the exclusion of women in economic development. The non-recognition and undervaluing of household work and other domestic and agricultural work create an unfavourable bias towards women in employment because they are first to suffer precarity, unemployment and opportunistic retrenchment practices. The non-valuation of women's work has also had negative consequences to the income women earn which range between 20% to 60% below men's income worldwide.

Fifth, these factors are being exacerbated by women's increasing activity in the informal economy, which has led to the feminization of poverty. The double role of women in production and reproduction are rarely taken into macro economic policies. If taken, mostly at micro level, this double role is considered a personal responsibility rather than of the society.

Sixth, balancing work and family life has been the biggest challenge to women in terms of inequalities and forms of discrimination against them. This is based on the perception that women are unable to achieve an adequate and equal performance at work due to their primary commitment to family and domestic life. This stereotype concept is today obsolete for women are participating longer in economic activities and they represent over 40% of the global labour force according to ILO. They continue to work even after childbearing age to contribute to family income or as sole breadwinners in singleheaded households or simply as their right to personal development.

What is the challenge before us? In what way could we shift the role of men and boys towards advancing women's economic, social and cultural rights?

How can we promote a better understanding and assessment of gender roles and related structural inequalities such as the roles associated with being male or female in public and private life and the responsibilities assigned to them? The following are some proposals:

1. Valuate and officially recognise unremunerated activities undertaken by women mostly emanating from the socialization processes, which is brought about by the traditional division of labour of income generated outside the household by men and the unpaid work within the household by women;
2. Provide access to and control over resources and decision-making opportunities;
3. Analyse changing patterns of production and reproduction and their demographic and socio-economic repercussions;
4. Eliminate the stereotyping of unequal power relations and expectations;
5. Reduce the digital divide that exacerbate the gender divide because of language, educational and skills deficits and assymetric economic power.

We specifically recommend the following:

1. Adopt another model that would enhance the quality of their lives through a rights-based approach to partnership and to the different way of thinking, doing and caring between men and women. This would entail their active involvement in harmonizing and reconciling work and family responsibilities on a shared basis;
2. Men should share the responsibilities of care giving to relieve the disproportionate burden which affects women's ability to access and retain work and to girls being forced to drop out of school;
3. Increase attention to the role of men in preventing HIV infection among women and girls, especially given the asymmetric power relations and women's subordination and vulnerability to discrimination;
4. Challenge the traditional division of labour and stereotypical images and expectations of men as breadwinners or heads of household and fulltime employment;
5. Encourage, accept, and learn from women's organizational and negotiating skills and acknowledge women's capacity to manage budgets;
6. Promote men's parenting role which would give women and girls equal time and opportunity to have a choice of home work or income-generating activities;
7. Dismantle the system of the traditional notion of the division of labour and provide an enabling environment for equal opportunity, choice and access of women to personal and sustainable development;
8. Work together towards gender equality through policy measures and other actions aimed at overcoming inequalities in rights to land ownership, access to property and inheritance rights;
9. Discourage adherence to ideas of inferiority or superiority between sexes brought about by peer pressures, socialization processes and belief systems which are perpetuated by stereotyping roles that exacerbate inequalities and violence against women.
10. Finally, I advance the notion that gender equality could never be achieved unless there is a change of attitudes towards power and superiority of men over women, especially in culture, armed conflicts and caste systems, harmful traditional practices and religious subordination..

If we want a change, we recommend a holistic strategy to:

- ❖ educate women to change the image of themselves and build their capacity to empower themselves and increase their number in scientific and non-traditional and technical fields;
- ❖ promote respect for fundamental human rights through human rights education notably on CEDAW as well as other human rights treaties and their indivisibility, interconnectedness and interdependence in the fulfilment of the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, right to human and sustainable environmental development;
- ❖ analyse legislation to identify and fill in the gender justice gaps, e.g. torture, ethnic cleansing, human trafficking, sexual harassment as forms of institutionalised gender violence;
- ❖ lobby and network for a strong and adequately financed women's agency;
- ❖ undertake training in confidence building and introduce proactive temporary measures such as quotas to increase participation of women in political and economic decision-making;
- ❖ promote gender budgeting to identify gender-based social costs and safety nets and care facilities;

- ❖ undertake comparative studies on measuring unpaid work and its contributions to macro economic growth and development;
- ❖ promote national and international statistics disaggregated by sex, age and status as a system applied to all gathering of information and data
- ❖ develop gender equality as a core concept of decent work (job classifications and evaluation of wage structures based on ILO Convention 100 on Equal Remuneration and 110 on Equality in employment and occupation
- ❖ build an ICT information network data of proven best practices;
- ❖ developing mentoring and training programmes in leadership development and entrepreneurship
- ❖ encourage women's world credit and banking institutions
- ❖ lobby the Human Rights Council for a Special Rapporteur on Gender Justice to review national legislations to identify gender-based protection gaps
