

World Bank Africa Region Management Retreat
Statement by Bineta Diop, Executive Director of Femmes Africa Solidarité
Reducing the vulnerability of women and promoting resilience

Thank you to the World Bank Africa Region for this invitation and for the opportunity to share perspectives from the field on gender and development and the work that my organization, Femmes Africa Solidarité, is doing in Africa to reduce the vulnerability of women and to promote resilience.

Africa's economic growth rate is considered one of the world's fastest growing, but this growth is not reflected in the lives of everyday people. I must applaud the measures that have been taken by the Bank to invest in human development. In 1996 when I formed FAS, I was here in D.C. and I approached an employee at the Africa Desk to discuss the security issues facing women in Africa. He looked at me and said to me, "Madam, when I'm building a road, where do your women's issues come in?" Things have since changed and now the Bank recognizes as priority, the support to girls' education, women's health, and women's access to credit, land, agricultural services, jobs, and infrastructure. Indeed, "countries that create better opportunities and conditions for women and girls can raise productivity, improve outcomes for children, make institutions more representative, and advance development prospects for all."¹

I am going to speak from mostly a conflict and post-conflict perspective, which is the focus of my organization's work, and a majority of African countries can be found in these categories. At FAS, we use United Nations Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security as the guiding framework for our work because Resolution 1325 approaches the issue of women in conflict and post-conflict in a holistic manner by focusing on Participation, Protection and Prevention – the 3P's.

In our analysis of the indicators of the root causes of conflict, one glaring issue that we highlight is bad economic and political governance, which effectively also means the absence of women in governance mechanisms. This is a denial of their rights – their rights to **participate** and their rights to be involved; I also note their rights to **protection**, but what we see instead is that their bodies are being used as battlefields and weapons of war; we also see that policies and programs that

¹ 2012 World Bank World Development Report on Gender and Development

can **prevent** and address the inequality gap between men and women are not being implemented.

Using this framework of the 3Ps, let me highlight some areas of focus that can contribute to narrowing the gender disparities that exist, and which negatively impact the social and economic development of African countries. These include: women's health including reproductive health, education for girls and adult literacy, women's economic empowerment, and women's political participation.

I will tell you a story – when I visited refugee camps in Chad and along the Darfur border with Mary Robinson, we met and spoke with women and grandmothers. They were attending the camp school with their children. We spoke to them and asked them what they wanted and why they were in school. They wanted education for their children and grandchildren in order for them to play a role in the future of their society and for themselves, they stated that they wanted to be literate because if they could write their own name, they could participate politically and fully exercise their right to vote without assistance.

When I facilitated the participation of women in the Sun City peace negotiations, one of the issues that the women identified as a major threat to peace and development was the sexual violence perpetuated against women and which continues to this day. It was difficult to ignore the extensive infrastructural damage on the country, but being close to the women, I was mostly struck by the damaging impact on them physically and mentally. There is an urgent need for these women who are affected to be reconstructed and to have their dignity restored and I commend the work that Dr. Denis Mukwege is doing in DRC to repair the bodies of rape victims. We now hear reports of rape against boys and men. In the absence of justice mechanisms, rape empowers the perpetrators rather than shaming them.

When we talk about post-conflict reconstruction, the Bank should ensure that women are included in national and regional action plans. In negotiations, you should advocate that governments focus on policies that are friendly to women and that they allocate the necessary funds to programs that create access for women in the economic and political spheres, to help reduce the vulnerability of women in society.

A forward looking quota system in government brings women in large numbers in leadership positions, which is essential for them to have their voices heard, but as in any situation with quotas, it is important that the women brought in are relevant and that they contribute meaningfully to the issues that empower women. This means that there is oftentimes need for capacity building to adequately prepare women to ensure that gender issues are mainstreamed in the various policies. However, women should not go it alone. Capacity building for women should also include men because the aim is for men to work with women to advance development prospects for both women and men.

Through economic empowerment and technology training in our Women Led Businesses programme, which focuses on small to medium-sized enterprises run by women, we have proven that women who have been victims of conflict can rebuild and be successful. We teach women entrepreneurs computer skills, how to develop a successful business plan, and how to network effectively. We also pair them with successful African businesswomen who serve as mentors. However, we have found out that despite the successes of our training, the larger challenges continue to create obstacles and prevent women from reaching their full potential. These include limited access to land, limited access to capital, and socio-cultural and gender-specific obstacles.

In addressing all these challenges linked to women's health including reproductive health, education for girls and adult literacy, women's economic empowerment, and women's political participation, we need the full engagement of governments to bring about widespread change through pro gender policies that allow women to fully contribute to the development of their countries. The World Bank should also make it a priority to hear from women directly about their concerns. I would therefore propose that the World Bank field offices have Open Days where they invite women from the community to engage in discussion with Bank staff in an open and transparent manner, challenges facing women and possible solutions to address those challenges.

I hope that the World Bank will become a champion of gender issues and continue to work with African governments and civil society to advance the status of women in African countries.

Thank you.