

# Statement by the Secretary General at the ACP celebration of International Women's Day, 5 March 2015, Brussels

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Thank you for the opportunity to address you on this auspicious occasion – the celebration of international women's day. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Secretariat for organising this event, in particular, the Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs and Human Development, Mme. Michèle Dominique Raymond, who has taken the lead in organising this event for the past 4 years.

But above all, I wish to thank all of you for having honoured us by your presence, and particular mention needs to be made of guest speakers and invited guests to be here with us this afternoon.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

International Women's Day, which falls on 8 March is a global day celebrating the economic, political and social achievements of women past, present and future.

In many parts of the world, deeply ingrained cultural and religious attitudes that relegate women to the status of second class citizen are still prevalent. The battle for women's rights in those societies has to be fought at a much deeper and fundamental level; that is another battle front altogether.

For the purpose of my remarks to you today, I would like to focus more on societies, such as those that represent the origin of most of the people gathered here, that have crossed the intellectual barrier to gender equality, but where we need to push the frontiers further to knock down the last invisible barriers.

**Ladies and gentlemen,**

Over several centuries, women have made fundamental contributions **as** in to the industrial revolution as factory workers and care givers; they looked after homes, children and held together their societies as men went off to war.

Women were pioneers in education, publishing and the nursing profession; they were at the forefront of the civil rights movement in the USA and the independence movements in much of the developing world.

Even in present times, they produce half the food requirements of developing countries.

Ester Boserup's pioneering "Women's Role in Economic Development" brought greater attention to the importance of women's role in agricultural economies and the lack of appreciation of this reality in development projects.

The starting point therefore, for any discussion about the rights of women should be the acknowledgement that is not about according women any new rights or privileges; it is rather about ceding to them what has always been theirs, but has been denied to them, and in some cases, outrightly stolen from them.

Ellen Battelle Dietrick, one of the leaders of the US suffragist movement, in a statement attributed to her in 1902, stated, and I quote *"the steps toward the emancipation of women are first intellectual, then industrial, lastly legal and political. Great strides in the first two of these stages already have been made of millions of women who do not yet perceive that it is surely carrying them towards the last."* End of quote.

In this statement, Ellen Dietrick aptly summed up the challenge for women's rights. First is the recognition of their inalienable rights as members of the human race. The second was to ensure their right to work, and the third is to break down the legal and political barriers that stand in the way of full female emancipation.

In all these areas, there have been great strides in several countries over the years. The fetters or tethers that confined women to the home or to certain economic sectors are falling off.

Yet we all recognise that while, theoretically at least, women in democratic societies are generally free to pursue their aspirations without legal or political hindrances, the fight for women's rights has entered a new phase; to finally unlock opportunities for women in all walks of life. The issue is no longer about the appropriate legislation that entrench gender equality, women's rights or human rights in general.

We have seen that even in those advanced democracies where these fundamental requirements are no longer an issue, there remains some vestiges of past practices and attitudes that prevent the attainment of gender equality in a substantive way.

Some barriers remain, the so called glass ceiling, which prevent women from reaching the summit in professional, political and economic pursuits.

### **My dear friends and colleagues,**

The unfortunate truth is that men still hold those keys to the institutional, traditional and religious hindrances that are still holding women back. For instance, it has long been recognised that even here in Europe, women are underrepresented on corporate boards and senior executive positions of private and public sector companies despite the large number of highly qualified females.

I recall that in order to encourage governments to give him female nominees for Commission posts, President of the European Commission Jean Claude Juncker promised EU Governments that he would appoint all women nominees to high-profile posts. This is a good example of 'he for she.'

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

A number of ACP countries have seen a gradual rise in the number of women elected to public office. Perhaps the best example is Rwanda, which is the only country in the world that has more female than male legislators, and half of the country's 14 Justices of the Supreme Court are women.

However, even in situations where the representation of women in decision making positions and processes has been improved, there is still need to ensure that their weight in numbers is translated into outcomes that further improve the situation of women generally.

The message we must repeatedly proclaim is that men need to stand up for women. I am glad to state that a number of men are doing just that. Allow me to submit that the ACP Group has consistently aimed for balanced gender representation in top level posts of the Secretariat.

I have noticed this trend in ACP regional organisations as well. However, I would like to think that the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat stands out for having a Secretary-General and the Deputy Secretaries-General all being female.

### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

In countries that have already crossed the intellectual frontier to women's rights, some of the remaining challenges are the following:

- **Decision-making:** women, women-issues and concerns are not always taken into account in decision-making at the national and sub-national and household levels, despite the presence of some women politicians and decision-makers in some countries.

Under certain circumstances and in some 'traditional norms', decision-making for issues such as land and investment for example, remains largely the domain of men. This continues to be a general problem that affects developed and developing countries equally. It needs to be addressed.

- **Remuneration:** The global focus on educating girls and women has resulted in better education of women in general and better chances of them being employed. But, even in cases where women are educated to college or university level. This is partly linked to the type of jobs they do, and their role as primary care-givers in their families and communities.

This is despite global efforts to redress this imbalance. In many developing countries, women are also more likely than men to have difficulty accessing traditional credit facilities especially for investment or business purposes. More women than men work part-time and in precarious jobs or in the informal economic sector where their contribution is poorly documented and inadequately remunerated. Family-work balance is difficult for many working women in cities and in the rural areas. Pay discrimination has been recognised as a pervasive problem in the corporate world.

It is such an issue that at this year's Oscars in the US, prominent actors drew attention to gender pay discrimination in the movie industry.

**Health:** Women are generally primary care-givers for their children and families' health in general. They tend to live longer than men, but not necessarily healthier lives. The British Medical Journal, The Lancet, in February published a commentary that describes the socioeconomic, biologic and health systems connections between women's health and the current Ebola epidemic

- First, the worsening of suboptimal access to reproductive and maternal health care in the most affected countries is posing a major threat to the lives of mothers and infants.
- Second, women are the primary caregivers in their homes, communities, and health facilities and, as such, assist most infected individuals, which puts them at an increased risk of contracting the virus.
- Moreover, traditional burial practices, typically performed by women, can also place them at higher risk. Finally, there is evidence of sexual transmission of Ebola after individuals recover from the infection.

Since women have little control over sexual behavior including abstinence or protected sex, this represents an additional source of increased exposure to the virus.

- **Knowledge:** Women have traditionally shouldered the burden for the care and socialisation of children, passing on traditional knowledge and culture. This important contribution is never capitalised or quantified, and therefore, never captured in national accounts, which focuses only on measurable financial transactions and assets. Further, women's knowledge is not always tapped for the benefit of the society, especially at the grassroots level, in the design or implementation of development programmes.
- **Violence:** this is an issue which is still on-going with more women than men falling victims to different forms of violence and abuse both in cities and in rural areas, including domestic violence and abuse; this is despite global efforts to raise awareness – sexual abuse of women is sometimes still considered part of cultural norms or taboo to talk about in public, with poor structures both in the health and legal fields to adequately address such issues.

### **My dear friends,**

In an effort to contribute to better understanding about the role of women, the ACP Secretariat in 2014 undertook a study the results of which were published under the title "ACP Women in Development". The study focussed on the role women play in achieving human sustainable development, shedding light on the contribution of women and women organisations at the grassroots level.

This is only the starting point and a guideline, which I hope will assist the Secretariat in mainstreaming women's rights into all its development approaches.

### **Ladies and gentlemen**

The ACP Secretariat and I are committed to making a contribution to promote and support the emergence and recognition of women as leaders and champions of positive changes in their respective countries, organisations, communities and areas of expertise.

Let us join in celebrating women's achievements and continue the fight for greater empowerment.

I thank you for kind attention.

**Patrick I. Gomes**  
**ACP Secretary General**

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