Welcoming Address by Omar Kabbaj, President of the African Development Bank Group, at the Opening Session of the 2004 ADB Annual Meetings Symposium on “Closing the Gender Gap: Promoting Gender Equality for Growth and Development in Africa”

24 May 2004
Kampala, Uganda
Introduction

Your Excellencies,
The Executive Secretary of the United Nations Commission for Africa,
Distinguished Participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the African Development Bank Group, it is a great pleasure to welcome you all to the 2004 Annual Meetings Symposium which we are co-organizing once again with the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. We are privileged to have in our midst today our host, President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, and the Prime Minister of Mozambique, Her Excellency Mrs. Louisa Diogo.

Your Excellencies, your presence here sends a clear signal of your commitment to the theme of this symposium, namely ‘Closing the Gender Gap: Promoting Gender Equality for Growth and Development in Africa’. We indeed look forward to benefiting from your insights and wisdom on one of the great development challenges facing our continent.

Let me also thank my good friend and colleague, Mr. K.Y. Amoako, the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA). The enduring partnership between the ECA and the ADB has once again found tangible expression in this year’s Symposium. We value very highly our continuing cooperation as we work together to help African countries meet their development challenge.

I would also like to express our gratitude to our Honorable Governors and other distinguished guests who have kindly accepted our invitation to take part in the Symposium. We look forward also to learning from your extensive experiences and wide knowledge.

Your Excellencies, with your permission, I would like to briefly review the current social and economic status of women in Africa, assess the progress that our regional countries have made in promoting gender equality, and the challenges that remain. I would also like to take this
opportunity to brief you all on the various actions that the African Development Bank is taking to promote gender equality on the continent.

The Challenge of Gender Equality in Africa

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

The international community has for some time now recognized the imperative of promoting gender equality not only as a worthy goal in itself but as an essential prerequisite for achieving broad-based economic development. I am sure that many of the distinguished guests and speakers gathered here today took part in the debates and discussions at various conferences in the 1990s, leading up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995.

The Beijing Declaration, which resulted from the conference, articulated a firm commitment to the equal rights and status of women and set as its objective “to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity.” The Declaration also recognized that poverty is a major factor exacerbating gender inequality. Empowering women was therefore placed at the center of the Platform for Action that accompanied the Declaration.

Since the Beijing Declaration, these laudable objectives have been reaffirmed at various international fora and the centrality of gender equality for growth and sustainable development has been universally acknowledged. At the launching of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2001, gender equality was treated as a goal in its own right. And in launching of the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) in 2001, African leaders set the empowerment of women as a distinct objective. Many African countries have also adopted this objective as part of their national plans and programs and have established special government organizations to promote it.
Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,

In the light of the various international, regional and national commitments to promote gender equality, central questions that we need to ask ourselves are: Where do we stand in Africa on this critical matter? How far have we progressed? And what are the principal challenges facing our countries today?

All the available statistics indicate the limited progress that we have made in the continent, particularly in relation to other developing regions. Men’s income share of economic activity continues to be far greater than women’s in almost all African countries. And African women continue to have the lowest life expectancy rate and the highest illiteracy rate. Indeed, one study concludes that of the 36 countries with the lowest Gender-Related Development Index, 30 are in Africa.

Specific indicators of the status of women and girls with respect to education and health also point in the same direction. The male/female enrollment ratio at the secondary school level is worst in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 31 countries having serious gender gaps. With regard to health, most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to register high under-5 mortality rates as well as maternal mortality rates that are two to three times as high as other developing regions. This generally negative health situation is exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, with women accounting for close to 60 percent of all the people infected with the disease. The burden of taking care of sick family members and orphans as a result of the pandemic also disproportionately falls on women.

While the low indicators of women’s well-being is in part explained by the low incomes of women, studies conducted by the World Bank, the ECA, and the African Development Bank also show that gender inequity, in its many forms, also adversely affects economic growth and poverty reduction. Several research results can be cited.
• As women play a large role in agricultural production and in services, their unequal access to land and credit severely limits their contributions to output, while at the same time depriving them of an adequate livelihood and security, especially in old age;
• The limited programs that are aimed at women in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS has meant that the spread of the disease is adversely affecting their ability to make a livelihood;
• As mothers play a great role in children’s health, a mother’s illiteracy and poverty can adversely affect her young children in terms of the quality of their nutrition and their chances for survival;

Given the centrality of women to African development, the failure to address the gender dimensions clearly remains a major obstacle to our countries achieving sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction. Women undoubtedly require assistance at all levels – at the institutional, country, and community levels – in order to play their full part in the economic development of their economies and, equally important, to build the human potential of their societies.

The Achievements to Date

Your Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants

Despite the continued gender disparities that we observe across the continent, it must however, also be acknowledged that some notable strides have been made. Permit me to cite some of the most significant ones.

The adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has led to a number of concrete results on the ground. For example, a number of African countries have earmarked financial and human resources to ensure the integration of gender concerns into their development plans, while others have formulated gender policies and gender plans of action. And increasingly, the participatory approaches being adopted in an
increasing number of countries to formulate poverty reduction strategies has allowed hitherto marginalized groups to exercise their voice and influence public policy. Notable in this respect are "budget hearings" which have become routine in some countries and to which women groups have been invited to make representations.

In the field of education, the primary enrollment rates for girls have doubled in some countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, with some countries such as Botswana, Cape Verde, Gabon, Lesotho, Libya, Mauritius, and Tunisia close to or having achieved universal primary education. And while the gender disparity for education at the secondary level is still wide across the continent, the gap between female and male enrollment at secondary school level has almost disappeared in countries such as Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius and Namibia. And in some countries, women’s life expectancy has improved considerably through increased access to health facilities.

In terms of political representation, women have made important gains in parliamentary elections in a number of African countries, including Mozambique, South Africa, and the countries of North Africa, with the proportion reaching 30 percent in some. In three other countries – Ethiopia, Lesotho and South Africa – women preside over one of the houses of parliament. At the institutional level, we recently welcomed the election of Mrs. Gertrude Mongella – who is present here with us today – as the first African President of the AU Parliament, while five of the ten current AU Commissioners are women.

Clearly, while some notable gains have been made, gender inequality in access to and control of a wide range of economic, human, and social capital assets and resources remains pervasive in Sub-Saharan Africa. Our countries will therefore need to build on the gains of the recent past to address this essential concern.

The African Development Bank and Its Promotion of Gender Equality

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Permit me now to turn to the role that the African Development Bank is playing in addressing gender inequality and promoting growth and sustainable development.

Our commitment to this fundamental issue dates back to 1990 when we adopted our first policy paper on Women in Development (WID). A decade later, our new policy on gender came in force, signaling the adoption of a more holistic approach whose focus is not on women *per se* but on the broader context constituted by relations, structures and the processes that create, reinforce and sustain inequality. The *Gender Policy* seeks to provide a framework for action to ultimately achieve equal access by women to all Bank resources and the opportunities created for development by our interventions. The central policy goal is to achieve gender equality and sustainable human and economic development.

Five basic principles inform the Bank’s assistance in the area of gender and women’s empowerment:

- *First*, the application of gender analysis in the design of all Bank interventions in order to respond to the needs and priorities of both women and men.
- *Second*, the need to foster cooperative relations between women and men to enhance the impact of development interventions.
- *Third*, the recognition of the criticality of women’s economic empowerment as key to sustainable development not only for the economy but also for the education, health and social progress of their children.
- *Fourth*, an acknowledgment that women cannot be considered simply as a homogeneous group, with their position in society influenced by a host of social and economic factors; and
- *Fifth*, a strategic choice has to be exercised on the use of the mainstreaming strategy and targeted approaches as the two are not incompatible responses but a matter of strategic and operational choice depending on particular situations.

To ensure the effective implementation of its *Gender Policy*, the Bank recently launched its first *Gender Plan of Action*. The Plan elaborates actions to be executed. It also specifies
performance indicators that aim at strengthening and monitoring the Bank’s own internal effectiveness in supporting gender equality in partner countries on the one hand and in contributing to the realization of the MDGs on the other. Let me take this opportunity to thank the Nordic countries, Canada and Belgium for the generous support that these countries have provided us for our gender-related work.

In tandem with the implementation of this Plan, a number of gender tools are also being put in place. *Country Gender Profiles*, for instance, have been developed for Sierra Leone, Niger, Ethiopia and Mozambique. These serve to identify gender gaps and are used to monitor progress towards meeting gender equality targets and in measuring the effectiveness of the Bank’s interventions.

In terms of the Bank’s activities in regional member countries, a two-pronged approach is being applied. Firstly, in line with the principles espoused in the Bank’s *Gender Policy*, our targeted interventions focus on sectors or issues that are central to redress gender imbalances and empower women. Secondly, gender issues are systematically mainstreamed into the Bank’s interventions in all sectors. Let me cite a few examples:

- In the *agricultural sector*, support is given to countries to formulate gender-sensitive agricultural policies, as well as targeting women producers in Bank-financed projects and programs.
- *Education projects* seek to promote girls’ access to education at all levels and to develop gender-sensitive curricula. Other Bank education projects help to strengthen the capacities of the Ministries of Education in addressing gender issues, while others promote girls’ training in vocational skills and business-related subjects.
- *Health projects* are designed to promote integrated reproductive and maternal and child healthcare, support immunization programs against childhood diseases, and support sensitization programs in basic health education. The Bank has also stepped up its support to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It has invested more than $300 million in 47 projects in some 30 countries. It is also among the few institutions that have developed a regional approach to help in the effective control of the pandemic.
• The Bank’s new *Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Initiative*, which has as its overarching objective the accelerated access to a safe supply of water and sanitation for the whole of Africa by the year 2025, seeks to free millions of women and girls from the everyday drudgery of fetching and carrying water.

• In the *private sector*, the Bank has conducted a broad-based study into the needs of African women in small and medium-scale enterprises. The study, to be published shortly, identifies the specific financial and technical support programs required to promote and assist women entrepreneurs in Africa.

Good example of the types of interventions that the Bank supports are the *Poverty Alleviation Project* in our host country Uganda and the Senegal *Women’s Group Support Project*. The Bank’s post-evaluation of the Ugandan project shows a substantial contribution to reducing poverty among the project’s beneficiaries was made. A major achievement of the project was the expansion of microfinance services, including financial and social intermediation, to over 25,000 poor people of whom 62 percent were women, although recent studies indicate that other microfinance approaches may be more effective. In Senegal, the evaluation found significant advances in reproductive health, and in a reduction in the disparities between the salaries of women and men in the project areas. In addition, project objectives were achieved with regard to functional literacy, training in project identification and management, as well as the construction of structures aimed at alleviating the housework of women.

To enable it to carry out its work in promoting gender equality, the Bank has taken a number of steps to strengthen its own capacity. While gender mainstreaming is recognized as a collective responsibility, a dedicated group of seven gender experts work full-time on these issues and provide policy and direct operational support, thus enhancing the quality of gender mainstreaming throughout the project cycle. The Bank is also elaborating *Gender Guidelines* and *Gender Training Modules* to strengthen the capacity of Bank staff and regional member country officials to address, monitor and evaluate progress in achieving gender equality goals.

In addition, the Bank has continued to make efforts to improve the gender balance in its staffing at all levels, despite the numerical limitation that exists with respect to the pool of women
candidates. Currently, nearly a quarter of the professional staff are women, including 3 Directors and 7 managers.

**Concluding Remarks**

Your Excellencies,

Distinguished Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Permit me to conclude by stressing the importance -- indeed the necessity -- of concerted action to tackle the fundamental challenge of bringing gender equality in Africa. We need to build on the progress that has been made and commit ourselves to a basic gender policy agenda. Towards this end:

- **First**, we need to gain a keener understanding of the nature of gender disparities, and act forcefully to reduce gender-based obstacles to growth.
- **Second**, we need to exploit all available opportunities for reducing poverty, through scaling up pro-poor growth initiatives and paying particular attention to the needs of women;
- **Third**, we need to create an enabling environment for women through asset ownership, land reform policies and access to credit. For this we will require the full support and commitment of the governments of our regional member countries to formulate and drive through the requisite legal and policy reforms at national, institutional and local levels.
- **Fourth**, gender policies should be founded on reliable and accurate statistical information. Towards this end, African countries need to put in place the expertise and resources in their national statistical organizations to obtain regular, up-to-date information on African households.

What is needed perhaps above all else is the political will to translate these policies into practice in order to move the agenda forward and realize tangible results. With the renewed support and commitment of the international donor community, our development partners, and
our regional member countries, I am, however, confident that progress to close the gender gap will continue to be made.

And in this regard, I am certain that today’s Symposium will provide a new insight to Africa’s gender development agenda and help us work toward a more effective policy framework.

Let me thank you once again for honoring our invitation to take part in our Symposium and let me wish you all fruitful discussions.

I thank you for your kind attention.