

**World Economic Forum – Africa Summit  
The Voice of Women: Are You Listening?  
June 2005 – Cape Town**



"Women are the backbone of Africa and the Millennium Development Goals cannot be reached without addressing their problems and making them part of the solution."  
*Hilde Johnson, Minister of International Development of Norway*

During the first evening of the Summit, there were country and issue specific dinners held for all participants. The smallest dinner event saw 40 women and 4 men attend the "Woman Dinner". In her introduction, Jeya Wilson, Director, Business Partnerships, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), New York, opened the discussion by asking who it is that should be listening to the voice of women on the African continent.

Out of this, emerged four key themes:

- Why is it that women's voices are not being heard and whose responsibility is it to ensure that they are?
- What can women, who hold positions of power, do to raise the profile of their gender in Africa?
- How can the greater representation of women be facilitated across all spheres of public life in Africa?
- How can women transfer power from the domestic to the political workplace?

Wilson claimed that development in Africa, especially the Millennium Development Goals, will be impossible without the empowerment of women. Nicky Newton-King, Deputy Chief Executive Officer, JSE Securities Exchange South Africa, agreed and said that although women have rights in most African countries, their voices are still marginalized. Kadi Sesay, Minister of Trade and Industry of Sierra Leone, recommended that women should talk among themselves and force women's issues on to the agendas of all mainstream gatherings. Lisa Dreier, Associate Director, Policy and Governance Initiatives, World Economic Forum, suggested that greater representation of women could be achieved within the numerous World Economic Forum events. It was noted by many of the participants present that this same issue is raised at every WEF event and yet there was very little progress made in increasing the participation of women at the WEF events. Susan Bazilli of the International Women's Rights Project commented that the role of women is so critical to development in Africa that to hold the Summit without a gender analysis of education, HIV/AIDS, health, infrastructure, that there was a real loss of opportunity to address these issues and determine recommendations for implementation along with the other key Commission for Africa recommendations. She commented, "it is not that the voices of women are not listened to, rather that they are not heard and taken seriously. In fact, the WEF was not even listening to its own report, 'Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap', where it stated that 'Countries that do not capitalize on the full potential of one half of their societies are misallocating their human resources and undermining their competitive potential'.

Gugu Moloi, Chief Executive Officer, Umgeni Water, South Africa, challenged all participants to act within their own spheres of influence in raising the profile of women throughout Africa. "Before I complain, I need to ask myself what I can do. We are all in positions of power. We can transform our own organizations and sensitize them, not only to women's issues but also to wider social ills," Moloi said. Hilde F. Johnson, Minister of International Development of Norway, reiterated this

by encouraging those present to give voice to women at the grassroots level who, she said, have wisdom and can participate "if allowed to do so."

The need for increased representation of women was introduced by Kristine J. Pearson, Executive Director, Freeplay Foundation, South Africa, who said there is "systemic under-representation" of women in all areas of African life. Noting there was only one woman on the Opening Plenary panel of the Africa Economic Summit 2005, Newton-King said that "deliberate change" has to be entrenched to bring about increased female representation. "We must encourage organizations to consciously think about transformation and inclusivity at all times," she said.

In proposing the need for political influence, Sesay argued that women want to hold political power and need to find methods of transferring their domestic power into the political arena. "Why do I want to be a wing, when I can be the main body of the bird?" she asked. Johnson indicated that in Norway, 50% of government positions are held by women, but that such representation is lagging in the business world.

Simba H. Makoni, Managing Director, Makonsult, Zimbabwe, expressed concern that what were being contextualized as women's issues were actually wider social issues and that "sub-optimal" results will be achieved if these issues are tackled only from a women's perspective. This was in response to Johnson's call for increased exposure around the "feminization" of HIV and AIDS, in which she claimed that girls between the ages of 15-24 years in Malawi are five times more likely to be infected by HIV than boys of the same age. Makoni said such statements deal with the symptom of the disease, and not the cause. HIV and AIDS, he said, is a social problem affecting both men and women that needs to be tackled in a holistic manner. Newton-King concluded the discussion by saying that a deliberate increase of female representation by the World Economic Forum and other organizations will ensure that women's issues are put on the agenda and that their real causes will be effectively discussed and resolved.