

New Challenges and the Revitalized SADC Gender Plan of Action

Since the Fourth World Conference on Women held at Beijing in 1995, a well-defined Regional Plan of Action for Gender has been developed in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The challenge now is to review the Plan of Action and identify where value can be added to what has been achieved so far, and where there is a need for reprioritization and a rethinking of strategies. Action must be taken in light of the new challenges outlined in the Outcomes document after a mid-term review of progress at New York in mid 2000.

The SADC Plan of Action initially focused on six critical issues, including:

- Insufficient mechanisms at all levels to promote the advancement of women;
- Inequalities between women and men in sharing power and decision-making at all levels;
- Inequalities in economic structures and policies in all forms of productive activities at all levels;
- Lack of respect for and inadequate promotion and protection of the human rights of women and the girl-child;
- The situation of women in the context of armed conflict; and
- Gender capacity-building, training, networking and information dissemination.

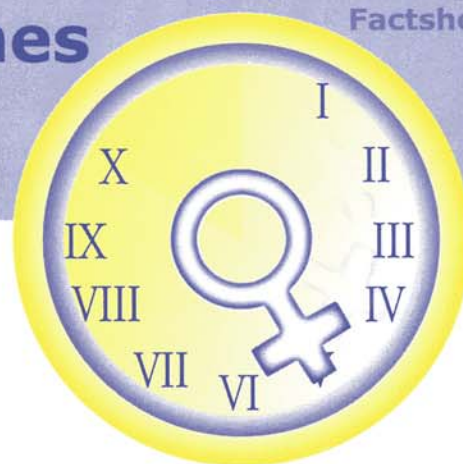
New challenges such as globalization, increasing economic disparities among and within countries, Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS), drug and substance abuse, the debt burden for most developing countries among others, make it imperative to revitalize the plan and reprioritize the allocation of resources, programmes and initiatives.

Emerging issues

Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) reverse gains and pose new challenges

The unprecedented challenges emanating from Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and the reorganization of global economies have adversely affected developing nations, especially women and children. SAPs have reversed gains that had been made in such areas as education and health, compelling the region to reconsider focusing on these two as critical. One impact of SAPs is the approach adopted by governments to macroeconomic management policies where social spending is curtailed, thereby squeezing health budgets. This in turn places a heavier burden on women and girl children as caregivers where households revert to traditional methods of care giving; this is coupled with the socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS on households and the increasing stress on women's productive and reproductive roles.

As the education and health sectors are increasingly becoming critical for most countries in the SADC region, there is a need for governments to reconsider and review the regional plan of action in consideration of



this – especially given that education has been identified as one of the key means of securing equal access to knowledge, skills, jobs and participation in decision-making. Education is one of the most increasingly accepted areas of concern in the region, with 10 countries having targeted it at a national level. This alone justifies the need for SADC to place economic issues at the top on the plan of action.

Poverty levels soar as economic performance deteriorates

SAPs have reversed the gains made before Beijing, and they have also contributed to increasing levels of poverty in the region. The incidence and impact of poverty is higher among women and children than men since women have limited access to and control over economic resources. There is a need for the region to emphasize poverty as a critical area of concern, bringing this issue to the forefront of regional action, programmes and resources. A concerted regional effort toward its eradication and elimination must be made, as eight countries in SADC have already identified poverty eradication as a priority area.

HIV/AIDS rolls back gains and stalls development

The gender and development initiatives undertaken within the framework of the SADC gender plan of action have also seen major set backs due to the Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic which has hit the region hard. SADC is among the regions that have been worst affected, with an average prevalence rate of 12 percent. This figure is significantly high, given that it has been estimated that where prevalence rates exceed 10 percent, total national income may be reduced by more than a third. This makes HIV/AIDS a serious threat to the region's development efforts, where eight of the 14 SADC countries have prevalence rates exceeding 10 percent. Whilst effort has gone into promoting gender equality and protection of women's human rights, the gains made are fast being eroded by the impact of HIV/AIDS.

Rethinking strategies and action

A number of strategies have been adopted and employed at both national and regional levels in pursuance of the goals and targets set in the regional plan of action. These need to be reviewed in the wake of the emerging challenges. The impetus for this has to be the need to maintain the gains and achievements already made and to build on them, while at the same time carving out innovative ways of responding to the new challenges.

Some of the key strategies for women's empowerment and gender equality that need review include:

● Action

There is need for gender activists to move a step forward from advocacy to action, and identify new innovative ways of working with

governments in responding to the new challenges. This includes ensuring that gender is mainstreamed in macro-economic policies and budgeting processes, and intensifying efforts at engendering governance structures. More work needs to be done to accelerate the achievement of the goal of a minimum 30% of women in politics and decision making by 2005, as highlighted in the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development through supporting efforts by regional organizations such as the SADC Parliamentary Forum. There has been more talk and less action made toward implementation. There is need for collaborative efforts and structured partnerships between civil society and also among civil society organizations.

- *Partnerships*

There is a need to rethink the nature and structure of gender partnerships in the region. More structured relationships will be more beneficial to dealing with the emergent challenges and advancing the gender agenda. More linkages must be made around initiatives to engender the African Union, SADC and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). The media should also be considered as a crucial partner for its capacity to inform and shape opinion.

- *Communications*

Gender players should learn from and work closely with communications experts in the region in order to come up with more effective strategies contributing to behavioural change, especially given the adverse effects of HIV/AIDS to development efforts in the region. This also includes mainstreaming gender in access to and utilization of communication technologies.

- *Networking and information exchange*

New challenges call for improved networking strategies at both national and regional levels. Whilst many gender players have produced key information which, if adequately and systematically shared, would help to consolidate the efforts towards meeting the emergent challenges, this has not been effectively shared. A lot of effort has gone into research and production of information at regional levels but these research efforts remain largely unknown. The information needs to be made more visible and accessible at both levels and there is a need to develop a firm regional strategy for networking and collection, production, dissemination, sharing and exchange of information and putting research into action.

- *Restructuring at the SADC Secretariat*

A new development at regional level is the restructuring exercise at the SADC Secretariat. This has implications for the gender agenda, where the Gender Unit, which is the regional structure mandated to co-ordinate the advancement of gender policy at that level, will become part of the Department of Strategic Planning, Gender and Policy Harmonization.

This has both positive and negative implications, to which gender players need to be alert. On a positive note, this can be an opportunity for the prioritization of poverty eradication and the reaffirmation of gender mainstreaming as a strategy. On the other hand, this could mean the loss of some of the institutional structures that had been established, for instance the Standing Committee of Ministers responsible for gender and women's affairs. There is a need to keenly keep pace with these developments and find strategic entry points for making interventions at national and regional levels.

Produced by Women In Development Southern Africa Awareness (WIDSAA), the gender programme of Southern African Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC). The WIDSAA programme is regional in focus and aims to be a catalyst and information service to the region's governments, parliamentarians, NGOs and agencies, the media and the public and the formulation of policy affecting women in SADC. This is done through the collection, production and dissemination of information and enabling the capacity to generate and use information. WIDSAA produced this series of seven fact-sheets with United Nations Fund for Women – Southern Africa Regional Office (UNIFEM-SARO). UNIFEM is the women's fund at the United Nations that provides financial support and technical assistance to innovative programmes promoting women's human rights, their economic and political empowerment, and gender equality.

For more information contact:

SARDC WIDSAA

15 Downie Avenue, Belgravia,

P.O. Box 5690, Harare, Zimbabwe

Tel 263-4-791141/791143 Fax 263-4-791271

Email: widsaa@sardc.net or sardc@sardc.net

Website: <http://www.sardc.net>

UNIFEM-SARO

7th Floor Takura House, Kwame Nkrumah Ave,

P.O. Box 4775, Harare, Zimbabwe

Tel 263-4-792681 Fax 263-4-704729

Email: nomcebo.manzini@undp.org

Website: <http://www.unifem.undp.org>