

KEY NOTE ADDRESS BY THE MINISTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND
SANITATION HON.BETH MUGO, EGH MP,
GENDER AND ENVIRONMENT FORUM HELD ON 15TH FEBRUARY
2009 AT UNEP HQS,GIGIRI, NAIROBI

- H.E Hon. Paul Kagame, the President of the republic of Rwanda,
- Mr. Achim Steiner, the Executive Director, United Nations Environment Programme,
- Rejoice Mabudafasi, Chairperson, Network of Women Ministers and Leaders for Environment,
- Hon. Ministers present;
- Permanent secretaty; Ministry of public health
- All protocols observed,

Your Excellency, Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to be here and exchange with you today some thoughts on the topic of Gender and Environment. On behalf of myself and the Government of Kenya, I wish to take this opportunity to welcome you all especially those coming from outside Kenya.

I also invite you to take time after the conference and savour the scenic beauty of our country, our wildlife and the warm hospitality of the Kenyan people. The topic of Gender and Environment is far more than Gender mainstreaming and is based on two principles: one, that gender mediates the interaction of people and the environment and secondly, gender roles, responsibilities, expectations, norms and the division of labour shape all forms of human relationship with the environment.

It is therefore very clear that Gender differences and inequalities influence the extent and nature of almost every form of environmental encounter, use and impact. As we discuss the environment it is important to always remember that all life and its sustenance are dependent on the environment, and this must be taken into

consideration even as we pursue economic development. To emphasize this point, I wish to quote the former secretary general of UN; Kofi Annan who said and I quote: "Our goal must be to meet the economic needs of the present without compromising the ability of the planet to provide for the needs of future generations".

If development is to have a viable future, it must take into account not only of the central principle of "equity between the generations "but also the principle of equity within this generation and thus between men and women."

Previously, there have been various fora whose overarching theme has been gender and environment. Reports from these meetings indicate that the key issues in gender and environment are: poverty, household food security, reproductive rights and healthcare, housing, natural resources management, access to water, land reforms and land right, development, urbanization, science and technology, migration and displacement. All the above contribute to the gender differences that are evident in accountability and action for the environment.

Discussing the gender perspective in regard to environment is of particular importance to me, not because I am a woman and a strong advocate of women's empowerment, but because women and men by virtue of their social roles and status are differently affected by environmental degradation. Women bear the brunt of the effects of environmental degradation and climate change.

Climate changes are also expected to be differently distributed among different regions, generations, age groups, income groups, occupations and gender. Human development experts predict that climate change is likely to magnify existing patterns of gender inequalities.

Your Excellency, Ladies and Gentlemen In their everyday lives, women in the developing countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America do play an especially important role with regard to the environment.

Firstly, it is women that are particularly hit by environmental degradation. Due to their status within society,

the division of labour between men and women and the traditional rules governing inheritance and land ownership, women often have no control or ownership of land resources despite being the largest users of land.

As the environment changes, the rights and opportunities of women are in practice being further eroded in many ways, thus they are more likely to be the victims. For example, when water is scarce or of poor quality or when they have to travel long distances to gather firewood, they expose themselves to different kind of dangers and insecurity including rape.

Women at work, employed in most cases as unskilled or low skilled labour, are also exposed to health hazards for example from the environmentally harmful substances used in production such as pesticides.

Secondly, the tragedy is that women then become the perpetrators when accessible sources of energy, fertile soil and water become scarcer and as a consequence are overexploited.

The consequences of such a development are often quite paradoxical: when women till their fields, graze their livestock or collect fuel and water, they increasingly become victims of the environmental changes as they walk longer distances and for more hours for a mere head load of fuel wood or jerry can of water.

In addition they are often forced to act in ways that conflict with their own interest in conserving the environment over the long term. This leads to a vicious circle in which environmental degradation becomes both the cause and result of poverty. Consequently, poverty reduction and the protection of the environment and natural resources must be pursued together as part of a "win-win" strategy. Further the impact of environmental degradation on the economic and social wellbeing of women is profound.

While women and girls are preoccupied with fetching fuel wood and water over long distances, they are missing out on opportunities for education and gainful employment.

This contributes to the vicious circle in which poverty aggravates environmental degradation and advancing environmental deterioration results in greater poverty. Therefore in most developing countries environmental degradation is closely linked to the struggle for survival.

Your Excellency, At this juncture, I wish to give an example of very successful projects being implemented by the Green Belt Movement; a local Non Governmental Organization founded by our very own world renown environmentalist and Nobel Peace Laureate, Professor Wangari Maathai.

This organization aims at increasing forest cover and addressing poverty among women. In this project, Women are encouraged to plant trees and are supported to grow tree seedlings which they sell to the project. They as a result get a means of livelihood for themselves and their families while conserving the environment.

Thirdly, In Africa women constitute 70 % of the workforce in the agricultural sector. As weather patterns change it will become increasingly difficult for women to provide food for their families. Poor harvests lead to malnutrition of the family for which they are responsible and often to the serious under nutrition of the women themselves, as they are often the ones who eat only after the men of the family have eaten.

In Kenya alone Malnutrition is the underlying cause of 55% of childhood deaths. Further over 50% of women are anaemic a condition that adversely influences birth outcomes. Such figures can be mirrored in many developing countries worldwide.

In addition climate change related disasters like all disasters impact more adversely the socially and economically weaker groups in society which largely consists of women. Women and children are 14 times more likely to die than men during a disaster.

This is an unfortunate fact considering women are the most important agents of change at the household and community levels. Involvement of women in decision making can therefore contribute to curbing the impact of environment related disasters.

Fourthly, women have a great deal of untapped potential in them. However their influence on the formation of political will and on the process of political decision-making continues to be minimal.

The fact that political decisions often fail to take into account women's interests and needs; they are prevented from contributing valuable skills, knowledge and experience.

It is therefore important that women, youth and children are actively involved in the environment debate. Their perspectives and experiences must inform policy, program design and implementation at the global, national and local level.

Further, we need women voices at global deliberations on environment as they can make a difference; they are very knowledgeable in adaptation and natural resource management, conflict resolution and peace building.

As the Minister for Public health and sanitation, I will have failed in my duty if I do not expound the relationship between the environment and health. As you are aware proper environmental management is the key to avoiding a quarter of all preventable illnesses, which are directly caused by environmental factors.

The environment influences our health in many ways such as through exposure to physical, chemical and biological risk factors. According to WHO, 13 million deaths annually are due to preventable causes such as diarrhoea. Preventing environmental risks could save as many as four million lives a year among children mostly in developing countries. We must therefore conserve our environment if we are going to improve our health and wellbeing.

Your Excellency, Ladies and gentlemen,

Gender equality is an objective of international efforts in its own right and must be incorporated into all areas of policy by means of gender mainstreaming; this was laid down at the World Conference on Women in Beijing and several other such conferences. As women have a great potential for practising sustainable management of natural resources, they are important partners in conservation of the environment.

Unfortunately, biases in educational and training systems render them less equipped than their male counterparts to understand, cope with and anticipate environmental changes and resource conditions. We must support the response capability of vulnerable groups by strengthening their assets; social, natural, physical, human and financial.

We must therefore have gender responsive policy making by having more women in decision making levels as they will be more protective on the environment.

We must have disaggregated data on the effects of environmental degradation on men and women. In addition women must be involved in the processes of planning implementing, monitoring and evaluation of all policies and programs. Women's perspective and experiences must be put into account as indeed environmental issues are not gender neutral.

I wish to conclude my address by stating that the perceptions of the environment and the state of the environment are shaped by gender. Most governments and international institutions agree in principal that gender equality and women's empowerment are essential components for achievement of goals in all areas of development including environment and millennium Development Goals.

We must therefore go beyond words and rhetoric and translate political pronouncements into political will and concrete actions. I wish you fruitful discussions and an enjoyable stay in Nairobi.

Thank you!