

59th Session of the Commission on Status of Women (CSW)

Dialogue on "The Commission on the Status of Women as a Catalyst for Gender Mainstreaming"

Draft Statement by the CSTD Vice-Chair

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19 March, 2015

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to participate in this dialogue on behalf of Dr. Omobola Johnson, Minister of Communication Technology of Nigeria and the chairperson of the UN Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD).

Science, technology and Innovation (STI) are some of the most important driving forces of sustainable development. Due to their empowering role and their immense potential to contribute towards sustainable development agenda they deserve a special mention in all development discourse. Hence, fostering gender equality in such a crucial sector is not lonely a moral imperative, but also smart economics.

The Beijing platform for action made several references to science and technology in its role in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. As we reach the milestone of Beijing +20, it is an opportune moment to reflect upon whether fields like STI contributed enough towards women empowerment and the extent to which we achieved gender parity in fields such as STI?

But let me begin by briefly listing the ways through which CSTD integrates gender perspective within its realm of expertise. Right from its inception in 1993, CSTD has always been mindful of the gender dimensions of STI issues. In order to prepare a substantial input to the important UN summits in 1995, including the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, a Gender Working Group was constituted within the CSTD. At its very onset itself, the working group of CSTD was able to identify that gender was in fact the "missing link" in national Science & Technology programmes. In order to effectively respond to this finding, the working group recommended seven 'transformative action areas' for policy intervention. The gender working group later evolved into the Gender Advisory Board of the CSTD and focused on advising the Commission on mainstreaming gender dimensions in its overall activities.

Each year, the CSTD secretariat prepares issues papers on its priority themes related to STI, which are later discussed in-depth within the CSTD and synthesized into the report of the Secretary General and resolutions. Right from the conceptualization stage of these issue papers, the secretariat gives special focus on the gender implications of these themes. Further, attention is given on ensuring gender balance in terms of the number of expert speakers invited to the commission meetings. As a consequence, I am glad to note that in

the issues paper circulated by the CSW secretariat to support our dialogue today, the CSTD has been listed under the commissions that consistently pay attention to gender perspectives. However, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is not enough to merely draw attention to specific needs of women through our resolutions and reports. We need to constantly evaluate if the gender perspective is maintained, when recommendations in our resolutions and reports are translated into policies.

Ladies and gentlemen, while the world made remarkable strides in terms of overall educational gender parity over the last decade, considerable gender-gap continues to exist in terms of STEM education. As a result, globally on average, only 30% of researchers are women, and they remain unequally represented in almost all regions of the world within research careers. In fact, these numbers are on the decline even in many developed countries. Studies show that women are less likely to obtain sufficient education to qualify for S&T careers and are often paid less than their male counterparts with equal education. Consequently, there is an alarming under-representation of women at the senior managerial positions in science and technology fields.

As we are nearing the completion of the MDG phase, it is an enormously important concern that, despite having 'promoting gender equality and women's empowerment' as one of the eight MDGs, the gender disparity remains at large and is even worsening in certain STI fields. Hence, it is imperative that the ambitious post-2015 development agenda, currently being finalized, has sufficient firepower to address more effectively the gender gap in crucial fields such as STI. This can only be achieved if we recognize the inter-linkages between the factors or barriers that create the gender disparity in sectors such as STI.

It is therefore important to think about the barriers that cause the gender divergence in STI. These barriers include, inter alia, gender stereotyping of professions, cultural norms, inflexible working hours, lack of role models and limited access to productive resources. As you can see, many of these barriers that impede gender equality are not unique to the STI field, and they overlap across the areas of specialization of different UN entities gathered here today. This situation poses an important challenge on the extent to which the STI stakeholders can alone mitigate these challenges. These cross-cutting barriers and challenges need concerted effort and calls for 'nerve centers' that deals with these barriers in an integrated manner within the UN system and within different national governments. CSW is well positioned to take up this role within the UN system and CSW has always proved to be a catalyst of gender mainstreaming. At the same time, the functional commissions and other subsidiary bodies of ECOSOC, should continue to make efforts to apply gender lens on their own respective areas of specialization and identify specific challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment.

In this context, it is worth highlighting that the UN CSTD and the CSW have always complemented each other wherever possible. To give an example, at the request of the Economic and Social Council (through E/2010/3) and as a contribution to the 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the CSTD secretariat prepared a research publication on 'applying a gender lens to science, technology and innovation'. It derived valuable policy lessons on ways to leverage S&T in women's empowerment and in promoting gender equality. A follow-up to this publication which looks at good practices in STI policies for women with a focus on South Asia will soon be published. These studies highlights the importance of fostering gender-responsive policies particularly in sectors where women play a central role, increasing the participation of women in setting up the STI agenda and facilitating women's entrepreneurial development. Also, creation of capabilities for women is a critical step in helping women make the most of the new opportunities offered by the introduction of STI policies and interventions. Complementing these

efforts, CSW ensured that it looked into issues pertaining to STI & women. For example, the review theme of the CSW session last year dealt with the access and participation of women and girls to education, science and technology. I hope we can continue to deepen this complementarity in our future work.

Ladies and Gentlemen, finally, we should not just joint hands in addressing our challenges, it is equally important to work together on making best of the opportunities offered by our respective focus areas. For instance, Science and Technology offers immense potential for empowering women. The important question is has STI contributed towards women's empowerment, commensurate to this potential? Interestingly, this year's theme of the mobile learning week, co-hosted by UNESCO and UNWOMEN, was “leveraging technology to empower women and girls”. Plentitude of cases, where new technologies helped in empowering of women in different productive and social sectors, were discussed. But science and technology can certainly contribute a lot more towards ensuring gender quality in all dimensions of life, as envisaged in the Beijing platform for action. To give an example, with the increasing mobile phone penetration, we are fast approaching the stage of 'full connectedness' for the first time in the history of mankind. This opens up unique possibilities to fight the root causes of gender disparities that are deeply entrenched in our societies¹. In this regard, CSW should continue its catalytic role in terms of helping us identify the priority areas of intervention that will deliver the most impact in terms of women's empowerment and gender parity. The CSTD and other functional commissions could in turn channel and mobilize the efforts of relevant stakeholders in our respective realms of expertise towards such priority areas. I am sure that such collaborative, coherent and targeted efforts would certainly bear fruits.

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me conclude by wishing that this dialogue opens up new avenues of cooperation to work towards our common goals, in terms of ensuring gender equality and achieving women's empowerment, whereby realizing the bold vision of the Beijing platform for action.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

¹ This matter was highlighted by Dr. Omobola Johnson in her recent TED talk, available at <http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/Changing-Mindsets-KPIs-are-not>