



Celebration of the International Women's Day March 8, 2021

Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world

Speech by Madame Dao Macoura, President of Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa (REFELA)



More than 25 years ago on September 4, 1995, the Beijing Declaration was adopted, through which the governments of the member states of the United Nations pledged to, quote, *“to achieve equal rights and the intrinsic dignity of men and women (...); to guarantee the full realization of the rights of women and girls as an inalienable, integral, and indivisible part of all human rights and all fundamental freedoms”*, end of quote.

Declaration mentions in paragraph 11 the following, and I quote: *“We are convinced that the empowerment of women and their full participation on an equal footing in all spheres of social life, including decision-making and their access to power, are the essential conditions for equality, development, and peace”*, end of quote. This declaration, adopted more than 25 years ago, remains very relevant today.

Admittedly, progress has been made in recent decades in Africa, in particular in terms of access for young girls to education, and also in terms of decline of marriage of minors (which are still prevalent unfortunately), and in terms of a better management of reproductive health. We are nonetheless still far from the mark when it comes to the full participation of women on an equal footing in all areas of social life, including access to power.

It is for this reason that this concern has again been taken up in the Sustainable Development Goal number 5 of the 2030 Agenda adopted in 2015 which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls in the world by 2030.

Despite Beijing's commitments, and despite the adoption of Sustainable Development Goal 5, progress on gender equality remains limited. A briefing note produced by UN-Women in April 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on women warns that the limited progress made in recent years on the front of gender equality risks being wiped out due to the impact of the pandemic. There has been an upsurge in violence against women and girls following the lockdown measures, which also had a very negative impact on the feeding of families, a responsibility that mostly rests in Africa on the shoulders of women.

We realize that it is not so much on declarations of principle or on the expression of wills, I would even say on goodwill, that progress in terms of gender equality will depend, but on the resolute action of women determined to correct the injustice done to women in this regard, with the support of men for whom this situation is not acceptable.

It is for this reason that in March 2011 in Tangier, Morocco, locally elected women from Africa took responsibility for networking across the entire African continent, and for creating the Network of Elected Women, in order to bring the message of the Beijing Declaration on gender equality to local and regional governments in Africa.

Indeed, it is at the level of local governance that this effort for equality must be made, because it is at this level that this effort takes on a concrete character. Laws and regulations adopted at the national level are necessary to put in place an institutional and legal environment favorable to gender equality, but it is above all at the level of local authorities, in everyday life, that equality must be manifested, through equal access to school, to work, to economic opportunities, to the right to enjoy public liberties, security of use of public space, and to political and to administrative functions within said communities. This is the reason why with our colleagues from the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), we have undertaken to draw up a Charter of local and regional authorities for gender equality in Africa, which will be submitted to UCLG Africa for adoption during its general assembly scheduled to take place during the Africities Summit from April 26 to April 30, 2022 in Kisumu, Kenya.

We take a certain pride in the fact that REFELA is the only network in the world that structures the action of women mayors and local elected officials across an entire continent. We are pleased to note that this continental network is now relayed to the different countries of Africa where 30 national chapters of REFELA now operate, which represents 55% of the countries of the continent. We are targeting full coverage of the continent within 3 years, by 2024. We point out that thanks to the action of REFELA, locally elected women now represent 30% of the members of the Executive Committee of UCLG Africa, the governing body of the continental organization of local and regional governments of Africa .

We are also proud to have initiated three campaigns to which more and more African cities and territories are adhering, and which are at the heart of the concerns of elected women on the continent: The campaign of African cities without children living in the street, launched in 2018 – sponsored by Her Royal Highness Princess Lalla Meryem, the sister of the King of Morocco - , and to which 54 cities in Africa have already signed up; The Campaign of cities with zero

tolerance in the face of violence against women and girls, launched in 2019, which to date has 22 member cities; and the African Cities Campaign for Women's Economic Empowerment, launched in 2020 and to which 35 cities have already signed up.

We are convinced that with the promotion of female leadership in the political and administrative bodies of local and regional governments, the effective implementation of the three REFELA campaigns is one of the concrete responses to build an egalitarian future in Africa in the world of Covid-19. It is for this reason that we once again issue a solemn appeal to the leaders of national and local governments in Africa and outside Africa to promote female leadership in local and regional governments, as well as support for REFELA campaigns. It is in this way that REFELA intends to help keep the Beijing Declaration of 1995 alive, and to participate in the achievement of sustainable development goal number 5 of the 2030 Agenda. We are of the opinion that during this Decade of Action for the achievement of Agenda 2030, the issue of gender equality and the emancipation of women and girls must be placed at the top of the policy priorities of local authorities as well as national governments and the international community. REFELA resolutely supports the action of UN-Women and of all national governments and partners determined to initiate resolute action in favor of gender equality and the emancipation of women during this Decade of action. REFELA urges its members to redouble their efforts to continue advocating for a greater role for women in the governing and administrative bodies of local and regional governments in Africa. It is at the cost of this effort that an egalitarian future can be envisioned in Africa in the world of Covid-19.

On behalf of the Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa, I wish all women in Africa and elsewhere a happy anniversary on the occasion of the celebration of World Women's Day on March 8, 2021.