

African leaders make critics eat their words

THIS time African leaders have bitten the bullet and put their critics to shame by scoring a world-first as regards equal representation of women and men (gender mainstreaming) in the affairs of the African Union (AU).

For, nowhere else in the world, whether at national, regional, continental, or even global level – has such a decision been taken – that the top echelons of an inter-governmental organisation, shall have a 50 percent representation of women and men. This is equal opportunity in practice.

At their Inaugural Session in Durban, South Africa, in July 2002, the heads of state and government of the Union made the following historic and unprecedented decisions:

That the commission of the AU, the secretariat which will drive the Union's agenda, will have 10 commissioners. As regards the gender composition of these commissioners, Article 6 of the statutes of the commission stipulates that "at least one commissioner from each region shall be a woman".

The 10 commissioners to staff the commission will come from the five regions of the Union. The region that produces the chairperson will provide the chairperson and only one commissioner; the region that produces the deputy chairperson will also provide the deputy chairperson and only one commissioner. The other four regions are entitled to two commissioners each.

Concerning the modalities for selection of the commissioners, the leaders decided that there will be a pre-selection process at the regional level. The candidates selected at the regional level will form part of the continental pool, from which the 10 commissioners to serve in the commission will be selected. In this regard, again the statutes of the commission are quite clear that, while the pre-selection process at the regional level shall be on the basis of a nomination process

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BY AKVAABA ADDAI-SEBO

and modalities agreed to by the region, the end result must be that "each region shall nominate two candidates including a woman for each portfolio".

In seeking clarification on this decision, I approached the interim chairperson of the commission, Amara Essy and also the head of the Gender and Development Division, Mary Maboreke. Essy said: "The gauntlet has been thrown down. Quite clearly, therefore, there is the need for a multi-tiered process to begin immediately. First, there is the need to disseminate this information as widely as possible, to the farthest reaches of the world, to ensure that no eligible individual is unaware of these decisions.

"Second, it is imperative that eligible women and men act on the information before national and regional positions are taken on the matter.

"Third, there is the need for eligible Africans to rise up to the challenge: we should not continue to criticise from the sidelines; let's give our expertise and experience to the continent that has invested so much into us. We cannot afford the *laissez faire* attitude of business as usual. Let's get out there and make a difference by seizing the challenge, time and opportunity."

Maboreke said: "We cannot afford to be found wanting at this crucial historic juncture. We have to rise to the challenge and ensure that competent and

credible women and men are found to lead our continental organisation at this vital stage.

There is no room for passengers in this endeavour. Too often we have complained that the continental body excludes popular participation. Now we have an opportunity to change this.

One of the crucial differences between the Organisation of African Unity and the AU is that the AU is conceived as a connection of the peoples – not just leaders of Africa.

The AU is an opportunity for a dynamic, mutually reinforcing partnership between not only the member states of the AU and their various peoples, but also between the general populace, government and civil society for the betterment of our continent. Our destiny is in our hands.

We no longer have to wait for an invitation to participate. We own the process. We have the right – and, indeed, the obligation – to knock on all doors, demanding entry and the right to participate.

But that right carries with it responsibilities too – the duty to act responsibly, to realise that we are part of the whole, and our actions – or inactions – matter a great deal.

So we have to come out en masse, from everywhere, and participate. We need competent women and men of Africa to lead us in this new dispensation. While issues of political legitimacy cannot be entirely

ignored, the most important consideration by far will be whether we have the competence, the credibility and the commitment to lead our continent through Africa's century."

Yes, it may be true that African women, like women the world over, still lag behind their male counterparts in many critical spheres – education, employment, remuneration, promotion opportunities, decision-making, to name a few. However, if Africa's foreign ministers who constitute the executive council of the Union live up to the challenge – and make judicious use of the window of opportunity that has been created by the leaders, the 21st Century shall truly belong to all her children, girls and boys alike.

Africa shall therefore benefit from this release of all the incredible potential that resides in all her human resources – the women and men of Africa, both at home and abroad.

One of the impediments that is likely to be faced in implementing the decision of the leaders is not being able to identify enough eligible women to make up the 50 percent gender representation.

The qualifications for the post of commissioner require someone who has had considerable progressive executive experience at a sufficiently high level whether at the national or regional level. As we are all aware, however, in the majority of cases the cultural, social, educational disparities that women suffer usually translate into inequalities at other crucial levels, and generally result in women's absence from the decision-making arena, especially at top levels.

In other words, women who are invisible at that national level can hardly be expected to be present and visible at the regional and continental levels. In this way, discrimination becomes the basis and justification for other manifold discriminations.