

Indian Ocean Rim Association
Mahé Consensus on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment
24 - 25 August 2015, Mahé, Seychelles

We, representatives from governments, members of chambers of commerce, civil society and business leaders from Member States and Dialogue Partners of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (hereinafter referred to as "IORA"), Australia, Bangladesh, Union of the Comoros, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Sultanate of Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, United Arab Emirates and Dialogue Partners France, United Kingdom and United States of America, attended the event, "Mobilizing Markets and Commitments to Gender Equality in the Indian Ocean Rim Region" in Mahé, Seychelles on 24-25 August 2015 to reinvigorate our commitment to advance gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the Indian Ocean Rim region.

We recognise the critical role that women play in achieving economic prosperity in IORA Member States and in the region as a whole, and that excluding or limiting women's participation in the workforce results in a heavy loss to the overall productivity of these economies. Higher female earnings and autonomy lead to greater investment in children's health and education, which results in longer term economic growth. Further, the realisation of economic empowerment is important to women themselves.

We further recognise that most of the women in IORA Member States are engaged in the informal economy, with little or no job or income security and a lack of social protection, such as maternity benefits and health care. We acknowledge women's active contribution to their economies both in paid and unpaid work.

We are also aware of the negative impact that violence against women, including domestic violence, has on women's ability to participate in all areas of economic life.

We acknowledge and value women's contribution to peace and security, recognising that sustainable peace and stability are key ingredients for advancing economic prosperity.

We believe that in order to progress women's economic empowerment, we must create an enabling environment in which women and girls can reach their full economic potential. This requires a full partnership approach between the private and public sectors.

We welcome the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) developed in partnership by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, which are designed for use by businesses to promote gender equality in the workplace, market and community.

We recall and reaffirm past commitments made by IORA to advance gender equality, notably, the adoption of women's and girls' empowerment as a cross cutting theme in all IORA work at the 2013 Council of Ministers meeting. In 2014, two gender events were convened in India and Malaysia. At the Malaysian event, six key messages to IORA Ministers were endorsed by participants with the intention of galvanising political will for practical measures to advance women's and girls' empowerment in Member States. Most recently, recognition that "*the prosperity of the region will only be realised fully by investing in the empowerment of women*" was expressed in the 2014 IORA Economic Declaration.

We welcome and reaffirm the commitments made on gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (July 2015). This includes a recommitment to adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation and transformative actions for the promotion of gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment at all levels, to ensuring women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, and to eliminate gender-based violence and discrimination in all its forms.

The Addis Agenda also recognises that women and girls still lack access to key services, including financial services, which are critical to social inclusion and sustained economic growth. It recognises that early, sustained investments in women and girls, through access to health, education and essential services like energy, drinking water and sanitation, provide a starting point on which we can build. Promoting financial inclusion, support for women as micro, small and medium business owners, women in agriculture, and equal access to a range of financial and trade instruments will be key to unlocking more profound and effective participation for women in the formal economy. The world cannot march forward if we leave half of the population behind.

We look forward to the adoption of a set of global sustainable development goals that address inequalities and promote the empowerment of women and girls. We recognise the role of women as agents for change as being crucial to delivering on the ambition of the new agenda.

Recommended actions

To further strengthen our commitment to progressing women's empowerment in our region, we recommend IORA Member States take the following actions:

1. Develop laws, policies and practices which promote equal opportunity employment and non-discrimination in formal and informal sectors. This could include: anti-discrimination in recruitment, employment and promotion practices; addressing sexual harassment; equity in pay and conditions; targets for women on boards; flexible work practices for women and men; and access to maternity benefits and affordable childcare.
2. Review and address the barriers which limit women's economic participation, such as access to financial resources and markets, skills and capacity building, and innovation and technology.
3. Invest in education for women and girls, including technical training and skills development. This could include access to professional development opportunities and scholarships, offering incentives for women to enter non-traditional jobs and providing gender-sensitive study and training options.
4. Support women business leaders, women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses in supply chains. This could be done by expanding business relationships with women-owned enterprises and women entrepreneurs, and encouraging women to establish and participate in business networks. Other initiatives could include offering training to woman on business strategies,

marketing and management; awareness raising of financial products targeting women entrepreneurs and business owners; and encouraging chambers of commerce to work with women-owned companies; and foster the growth of initiatives that engage men in advocacy to realise gender equality.

5. Strongly encourage companies working in IORA Member States and in the Indian Ocean region to integrate the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) or other internationally-recognised gender standards into their business policies and practices, and to measure and report on progress.
6. Adopt a holistic and multi-dimensional approach to gender equality. This should include as a minimum:
 - developing gender responsive government policies and programmes and promote gender mainstreaming across all sectors;
 - strengthening evidence and data collection to inform policies and decision-making. Importantly, ensuring data and statistics are disaggregated by sex and age;
 - ensuring gender parity in education; and
 - providing well-funded health programmes for women and girls.

Additional elements to strengthen the approach could include:

- undertaking gender analysis to identify key problems and to measure progress;
 - increasing women's decision-making and political participation; and
 - where possible, taking steps to challenge those social norms and practices which perpetuate gender inequality, including all forms of violence against women and girls; and
 - developing and resourcing robust implementation plans – and implementing those plans.
7. Establish an IORA Core Group on Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the first instance, with a view to the Core Group being elevated to a Working Group by way of an amendment to the IORA Charter. The Working Group's mandate should include responsibility for tracking and supporting efforts to integrate women's empowerment into all of IORA's work. This Working Group could identify and implement targeted gender activities as approved by the IORA Chair and Secretariat, and in collaboration with Member States and Dialogue Partners. It could develop links with other IORA Working Groups to mainstream women's Working Group to report on the progress of their work at each annual IORA Council of Ministers meeting.

We acknowledge that while women's economic empowerment is critical for economies to prosper, it is also a foundational element of gender equality, which is a fundamental human right.