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## **Globalization and Gender Equality: Perspectives from Africa**

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### **Salient Features of Globalization**

"Globalization is not new, but the present era has distinctive features, shrinking space, shrinking time and disappearing borders are linking people's lives more deeply, more intensely, more immediately than ever before" (1)

"Globalization offers great opportunities for human advance - but only with stronger governance" (2)

"The opportunities of globalization need to be shared more widely" (3)

"Globalization is creating new threats to human security - in rich countries and poor" (4)

"New information and communications technologies are driving globalization – but polarizing the world into the connected and the isolated" (5)

"The relentless pressures of global competition are squeezing out care, the invisible heart of human development" (6)

"National and global governance have to be reinvented - with development and equity as their core" (7)

Notes: 1 – 7 (UNDP Human Development Report, 1999)

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### **SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT**

Globalization is a vast multidimensional reality that has come to exert a major influence on the direction of society, locally and globally encompassing economic, political environmental and social aspects of living as well as the relationships between the state the market and peoples' organizations and movements across the world. Power has shifted from the state to "a new normalcy" of struggle for voice between the state, private sector and civil society.

For Africa as a region, globalization is not a new phenomenon. The continent's engagement with the rest of the world goes back long before current geopolitical formations in the Americas, Europe and Asia. One might say that the current stage is the fourth in a range that started in the period well before the slave trade era, when Africans were travelling freely to Europe, the Americas, the Middle East and Far East bringing scientific knowledge, foods, pearls, spices and other forms of material culture. The current stage is, however, characterized by a rapidity of change, fast flow of capital and information across the world in a way quite unprecedented in our time and with equally unprecedented implications for human development and human security.

The era before slave trade was one of limited exploitation of the continents resources due to low levels of technology and information flow. The era of slave trade, however, marked a major point in the unequal incorporation of the continent into a global economy that was based on exploitation of the continent's natural resources and extraction of its human capital to meet the labour and industrial development expansion of the Americas, the Middle East and the Far East. Following in the wake of slave trade was the era of colonization of the continent the occupation/demarcation details of which were finally laid down at the Berlin Conference of 1888. These artificial borders continue to present a challenge to regional integration and cross border cooperation.

From this time the situation of African women as agricultural producers and managers of the continent's food security came under peril, subjected to new forms of ownership and altered access rights. Every effort of the colonial state was directed to serve the interests of the nascent colonial economy. Thus the social, economic and political direction of African societies begun to be radically altered, albeit not without struggle

The central argument in this presentation is that throughout the period following the slave trade and colonial and post colonial era, the resources of Africa including its people and natural resources became unhinged from the empowering process of economic, social and cultural production and have since then increasingly become subordinated to the demands of the global market. During this period women and female labour have experienced great exploitation and loss of development opportunity with the result that human security and women's agency and leadership have become quite compromised in the ensuing years.

The presentation further argues that reversing the legacy of four centuries of missed development opportunity cannot be the responsibility of African women, or of Africa alone. Europe as a geopolitical and economic block should play a much more energetic role in balancing the equation for African women and African people as a whole.

The immediate colonial and post colonial period has presented African women with major obstacles to their development and have largely failed to address the difficulties and gender bias from the previous era. Frequently inadequate attention is paid to gender equality; and principles of diversity tolerance and non-discrimination are flouted.

The legacy of four centuries of exploitation has thus left African women more on the victim and disadvantage rather than the victor and advantage side of the development equation.

Yet despite these serious obstacles Africa is today engaged in veritable process of self-empowerment and a genuine democratic struggle with human security, food security and security of livelihoods at the epicentre. Citizens - women and men are engaged in scoping and fashioning the instruments of the new state that can be empowering and ethical. They are challenging the blanket approach to economic development that would give rein to the unchecked impulses of the market and they are well aware that the market is not the panacea to development.

Drawing on examples from the agriculture and food security sector the presentation bases its analysis in work done by women and constraints faced by them in food production and informal trade as concrete context for understanding the impact of the quickening pace of globalization on African economy and society.

As the road to democracy opens up in much of Africa, Europeans should assume direct responsibility and seek a new way of partnering with Africa. Europe should not shy away from its responsibility and potential role in helping Africa to create a new image and possibility for itself. Europe can take a bold step in facilitating Africa's equal participation in the global economy and in global governance.

A major powerful point of departure should be the support to African women as they seek to empower themselves and introduce new ethics of fairness and justice and of caring in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa. In this period of political transition, women's core values have the greatest potential to take Africa forward and Europe's support and renewed partnership can make this a reality.