

**For immediate release**  
**Activists celebrate SADC adoption of Gender Protocol**

17 August 2008, Johannesburg; Gender activists across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) commend Heads of State for their adoption of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development at the SADC Summit which closed today. Celebrating the climax of a campaign launched in 2005, the Southern Africa Protocol Alliance<sup>[1]</sup> applauds leaders' for finally adopting this instrument after three years of negotiations.

Although a range of items featured on the agenda, it is the Protocol on Gender and Development that if implemented stands to make immediate differences in the lives of the region's women. The Protocol contains 23 targets, which together outline a clear roadmap for the region's leaders to move towards gender equality.

Key targets in the Protocol include ensuring that provisions for gender equality are contained in all constitutions and include affirmative action clauses; halving gender violence, abolishing the legal minority status of women, and achieving at least 50% representation of women in decision-making positions by 2015. The Protocol calls for stepping up prevention, treatment and support of the affected and infected with HIV and AIDS, and to have access to Post Exposure Prophylaxis in the event of sexual assault. A series of provisions relate to ensuring women participate equally in land ownership; trade and entrepreneurship, including equal access to state procurement opportunities.

Over 60 representatives of gender justice organisations met parallel to the Summit under the banner "the time is now," to conduct final lobbying efforts encouraging leaders to adopt the Gender Protocol, as well as develop strategies and action plans on how to take the Protocol forward. Opened by Minister in the South African Presidency Dr Essop Pahad, the 14-16 August meeting brought together over 42 organisations from 14 countries, which are all committed to supporting governments commitment to the 23 targets outlined in the Protocol. "Our work begins just as soon as our leaders sign the dotted line," the activists said.

Women represent the majority of the poor, the unemployed and the dispossessed in Southern Africa. On average, women constitute less than one in five of those in political decision-making and even less in the private sector. There are no women heads of state. The passing of the Protocol is a timely and much-needed move by leaders to equalise opportunities.

Activists are disappointed that key provisions, which some countries already recognise within national legal frameworks, such as marital rape, cohabitation and the rights of vulnerable groups, have been excluded; that some commitments have been changed from "ensuring" to "endeavouring" and that the contradictions between customary law and constitutional provisions for gender equality are not explicitly addressed.

Nevertheless, in his opening statement, Minister Pahad pointed out that the Protocol represents a *minimum* set of standards that takes the region well beyond the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development, which had only one specific target. It incorporates and enhances all the existing commitments in regional and international gender instruments by giving them specific time frames. As Pahad pointed out, even if the region achieves these minimum standards in the region, it will have come a long way in ensuring an environment in which both gender can achieve their maximum potential.

Noting with concern the crisis in Zimbabwe the Alliance said that none of the provisions in the Gender Protocol could be realised unless peace, democracy and good governance are restored in this SADC member state. The Alliance called on SADC to ensure a speedy and democratic resolution to the crisis there that has led to the suffering of millions, especially women and children.

The launch of the Free Trade Area will bring many prospects. Yet for women to benefit from increased opportunities through the production and marketing of goods and provision of services, they need access to capital, advanced technical skills, and legal protection creating environments that encourage women's participation in entrepreneurship and business. For the impact of privatisation and decreasing government revenues to be minimised, there must be recognition of the dual role that women play in the home and in the workplace.

For gender activists and government, the passing of the Protocol is not at end, but the beginning of a process that must include the quick ratification and domestication of the Protocol. The Protocol requires that governments report bi-annually at the Summit on progress, and launch public awareness campaigns demonstrating the vital link between equal representation and participation of women and men in decision-making positions, democracy, good governance and citizen participation. During their two-day meeting, the Alliance drafted a detailed action plan, including organising issue-based cluster groups and devising mechanisms to shadow and monitor governments' progress. This will include issuing a bi-annual report on progress towards achieving the commitments outlined within the Protocol. The challenge now is putting in place the structures and strategies within each of signing nations over the next seven years. The Gender Protocol could make a real difference to gender equality in SADC. Yet for this to happen, political will and leadership, backed up by the needed financial resources allocated through national budgets, are key.

**For more information:**

Deborah Walter

[editor@genderlinks.org.za](mailto:editor@genderlinks.org.za)

Tel: +27 (0)73 132 7032

[http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page.php?p\\_id=265](http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page.php?p_id=265)