



Mrs Rawlings outlines success story of DWM at Crans Montana forum

The former First Lady, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, Saturday addressed the extraordinary session of the ongoing Crans Montana Forum on Africa in Brussels where she shared with them some of the successes and challenges of the 31st December Women's Movement.

She noted: "One of its major strides has been the mobilisation of women and youth as a strong foundation of its existence and work."

Below is the full address

ADDRESS BY NANA KONADU AGYEMAN RAWLINGS, FORMER FIRST LADY OF GHANA AND PRESIDENT OF THE 31ST DECEMBER WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AT EXTRAORDINARY SESSION OF THE CRANS MONTANA FORUM ON AFRICA – BRUSSELS, SATURDAY APRIL 10, 2010

The Chairman, Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen. Let me start by expressing my gratitude and heartfelt thanks to Crans Montana Forum for offering me the opportunity to address this extraordinary session.

When I first saw details of the programme I immediately decided to speak on the subject of 'Reaching out to youth and in particular Girls – support for their involvement in societal affairs and governance.'

My choice was based on the ideals of the 31st December Women's Movement, which I founded in 1982 to empower women. After deep thought, however, I have decided to rather share the experiences and achievements of the Movement with you, because I believe the aims and objectives of the movement and the programme of work defines the topic very clearly.

The 31st December Women's Movement is a development oriented organisation that was started in 1982 when Ghana was going through a revolution – a revolution that was to stop the economic, social and political decay of our country Ghana.

The 31st December Women's Movement was meant to address the issues that affected women's development and to make women an absolute part of the new concept of participatory decision-making democracy.

We operated and continue to do so based on the Four pointers of the UN -
ECONOMIC
SOCIAL
POLITICAL
CULTURAL

We believed in developing women in totality by using a multi-faceted approach.

There were national problems that affected women directly but there were also issues of institutionalised and customary discrimination against women.

The Movement was born to deal with issues that were inimical to women's development while taking part in the euphoria that had engulfed the country where everyone wanted to be part of the solution for Ghana's development from the doldrums into which it had sunk.

It was an uphill task but the 31st December Women's Movement contributed to developing management capacity in a considerable number of women in Ghana and other African countries through its activities, thus enhancing the quality of the nation's human resource and National Development.

Our programmes have offered many ordinary women the opportunity to develop project proposals, justify these, negotiate resources and implement them. The confidence and skills-building impacts that this experience offers them cannot be under-valued. These women have been encouraged to present their initiatives to larger bodies beyond local circles that they know, to bigger forums

involving members of the movement, national bodies and even international audiences.

Political Participation

Women who were active in the movement became more visible in their communities as they displayed leadership qualities. At some point, some of our members were nominated as mayors of local government authorities or district chief executives and many have been elected into Parliament and appointed as Ministers and Deputy Ministers.

The women who were given these positions gave exemplary performances. By their visibility and hard work women from the movement were nominated onto the district assemblies as appointed members, when the government appreciated the need to establish a quota for women to ensure their participation in local decision-making. These women contributed to making women's concerns heard and felt in local governance and in turn communicated these issues to their members and communities. Through such participation, they also gained skills in committee work, political education, presentation, consensus building and networking.

Other members went on to offer themselves for election and won seats and even at the national level as parliamentarians. Some are serving second and third terms. In this regard, the movement has stimulated political participation for women.

Increased Access to and sharing of information

The Movement sought to make critical information on health, life trends, civic awareness, HIV/AIDs, legal rights and other concerns critical to its members and through them to ordinary women in communities. Through these efforts, women in all districts in the country gained increased access to vital information. They became informed and could apply this information to their lives and their families – thus enhancing human resource quality at the micro level. However, they also became sources of information to others, providing relevant knowledge in both informal and formal settings. In the process our women gained other skills such as becoming effective communicators, facilitators and resource persons for local communities.

Apart from the above, the 31st December Women's Movement has been the subject of considerable research both by Ghanaian and foreign researchers. The Movement's project management experiences have been shared, with the lessons learned being made available to other women's groups and development organisations.

The 31st December Movement has in its effort to back its work up with relevant and factual information, commissioned research itself. It has in this regard sought collaboration with university researchers, consultants and experts in various fields. While the movement has been the beneficiary these partners also gained by enhancing their academic achievements, acquiring access to critical information for teaching and research purposes and contributing to knowledge.

Increased Opportunities for Formal Management Training

On several occasions, the movement undertook to sponsor its district and regional level officials as well as executives at various programmes. Some of these were tailor-made for the movement; others were generic programmes offered by management development institutions like the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), MDPI, which offered our women the opportunity to exchange ideas and experiences with women and men from other associations and organisations.

Occasionally, there were opportunities for international programmes. Through these means, the movement exposed women with the capability to the opportunities to gain skills for personal and organisational effectiveness. While we acknowledge that these skills were intended primarily for use in the development of the movement, the individuals who benefited from them would deploy them in the other aspects of their lives as leaders – within school settings (many members were teachers); in their religious denominations, communities, other economic occupations such as market associations and family circumstances.

Such skills and knowledge were passed onto other women through local level programmes, at which our members were resource persons and facilitators.

Achievements and Constraints

The main goal of the DWM, which has been in existence since 1982, is to develop and empower women while promoting gender equality, sensitivity and overall development.

With its large presence in all the districts of the country the Movement's membership cuts across

ethnic, political age and religious lines.

One of its major strides has been the mobilisation of women and youth as a strong foundation of its existence and work. That unity brought the expected strength.

Behind this idea is the strong conviction that a strategic and operationalised partnership between the DWM and various rural communities it served can lead to greater district and regional self-sufficiency in all the areas that we attempted intervention.

DWM set and run workplace and community early childhood development centres across the country. These centres provide pre-school training facilities for children as well as made it convenient for mothers to leave their children in good care as they go about their duties and economic activities.

The DWM is also known for the many income generation projects ranging from oil processing, cassava processing, beads, pottery making, etc depending on what resources were available in the area.

Members were made to own these projects/activities and helped in reshaping their lives as they earned income and became more independent. Some of these products were exported due to its value added, which earned some foreign exchange for the women/community.

In collaboration with the UNFPA, the Movement implemented projects in family planning, health, adolescent repro health as well as HIV/AIDS. These programmes went on very well with great impact due to the medium of interactive drama, which is loved by many Ghanaians especially children and youth.

On the environment, there were vast reforestation projects in the savannah areas as well as fast growing trees at the beaches in the south.

The Movement's contribution to rural community and social development is unprecedented from a single NGO point of view.

Other areas of great impact include supporting women morally, materially and financially to participate in unit, town, district assembly and other elections as has been mentioned. DWM is always looking for opportunities to leverage the entrepreneurial spirit in ways that bring new economic vigour to their activities. The movement provided a revolving line of credit for working capital through an ADB project in very small amounts to rural women for their businesses. It helped them a long way to expand and sometimes just sustain their business. Recovery rate for the loan was 97 per cent.

In all of these, the social upliftment and visibility of women were prime. Women can now speak for themselves, know their rights and are able to challenge the things that affect their circumstances. Without claiming ownership, the DWM played a very important role in the promulgation of the marriage and intestate succession laws, which are to the benefit of women (wives). The issue of justice as a prerequisite for effective and sound development was central in all our endeavours. Programmes were implemented to this effect especially in conflict areas at home and abroad.

Summary of Achievements

The Movement contributed to national economic development in many ways through its diverse activities throughout the country. It provided a forum and base for more effective lobbying, advocating and campaigning on different issues including education and training, resource mobilisation, advocacy, information sharing as well as participated in many of the United Nations processes.

Constraints

All these success stories did not come on a silver platter. There were difficulties (and even worse now). The major constraints are that of inadequate funding for all our projects and in achieving our major goals. Funding from both domestic and international sources is always a problem. As we did not work in isolation from other organisations, local and foreign, we realised that planning and the proper coordination of projects and activities at the community and district levels always hindered progress. The very high illiteracy levels of our women did not allow the desired pace of development and progress.

Women's organisations have not built the effective networking/linkages that enhances the collective use of material and human resources at the operational levels.

Lately political differences and lack of respect for the other have drawn women further away from themselves.

Monitoring and Evaluation is a major drawback to feed results backs into planning. Until we as leaders and representatives of women make a conscious effort to tackle these issues headlong, the littlest of success will elude us. There are so many women's organisations now, each trying to re-invent the wheel wasting material and time resources and always confusing the beneficiary groups. We can only have access to maintain and build on the assets we have if we work in unison, plan and implement programmes to achieve set goals – the common beneficiary.

We cannot find long term financing for our development projects if we do not present one and a continuous programme but ad-hoc and conflicting projects.

Conclusions

Ladies and gentlemen, women's groups such as the 31st December Women's Movement whose members are politically active are also seen a threat to some political movements and face persecution. Indeed between 2000 and 2008 we lost several of our schools and small-scale projects due to a concerted effort to break our front.

It is significant to note that rather than demoralise our membership they worked within the grassroots to further consolidate the strength and power of womanhood. Many developed small-scale projects on the quiet and the economic benefit spread to whole communities.

Today our women are making great strides across Ghana and several have won government positions on merit. In January I was elected Vice-Chairman of the ruling National Democratic Congress party, an endorsement of the work our group has done to improve the wealth of womanhood.

Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the Crans Montana Forum should use this new medium to establish the Crans Montana "Year of the Youth Initiative" which the following objectives.

To create massive awareness of the plight and rights of the youth in the light of the upcoming Year of the Youth

To challenge governments to review policies and actions in the light of guidelines provided in the Beijing Declaration, the UN World Programme of Action for the Youth and the African Youth Charter

And to charge the youth in developing countries to challenge their governments too review their policies and actions in the light of the guidelines mentioned above

We need an attitudinal change from our governments and this forum should set the agenda as some of us have the requisite experience and success stories to push such a serious project forward.

My vision is to see women become an absolute part of nation building and national development even as they empower themselves always to have the ability to make a choice in whatever they do. But my mission is to help break the cycle of poverty in and around the vulnerable communities in the rural and urban poor areas as much a possible.

I am happy to be here and to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you.

Thank you.

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