

## **Women's Empowerment: Rights Activists Demand Better Policies**

By Buya Jammeh

Women's right activists at a women's reproductive health conference in March called on governments to introduce better policies in order to boost their economic status and end their daily struggle to survive. The conference held at the Church Center for the United Nations was part of activities marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Preethi Sundaraam, policy officer at the International Planned Parenthood Federation, warned that the absence of regulation could force women to continue accept lower wages, and limit access to health care and support for maternity and childcare. She added that this lack of regulation could also make women in their workplace vulnerable to discrimination and sexual assault and rape. Sundaraam indicated that there are many young women in the informal economy who are marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, physical disabilities and immigration status. Maternal mortality continues to be the leading cause of death for young women every year, with 47,000 deaths from unsafe births, according to Sundaraam.

"The more schooling girls have," Sundaraam said, "the better their future earnings will be as girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before the age of eighteen without access to essential reproductive health services such as family planning." She stressed the need for continued advocacy for women's economic rights, since otherwise they cannot achieve gender equality and sustainable development. She affirms that policy and advocacy attention and consistent efforts at national level are needed to make a lasting difference in the lives of young women.

According to Sundaraam, young women mostly work in the unregulated informal economy in which 83 percent of the workers are women. Working in the informal economy is more insecure and precarious, affecting young women's sexual and reproductive health. Speaking about her organization's efforts to tackle these problems, Sundaraam said that her organization the International Planned Parenthood Federation is partnering with thirty different factories in major urban areas where make sure that women have better working conditions.

Abiodun M. Badru, First Assistant Secretary General of the National Association of Nigerian Nurses and Midwives expressed the need for gender-friendly work places for women. She said women in Africa lack special sanitary facilities. ( a situation that causes urinary tract infections.)---Not clear. Women are exposed to what she called "work hazards" with no compensation. She called on trade unions to increase their advocacy of policy to safeguard the rights of women in the informal economy and to work for a tax justice system.

Prateek Awasti, program analyst at the Adolescents and Youth Technical Division of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) declared: "Youthful population and aging is something that we are seeing now than ever before and that defines our time. Not only do we have two billion young people in the world but we have the entire young population of Africa moving forward. We have for the first time more people living in the urban areas than in rural areas that is phenomenal." According to Awasti 1.3 million people enter the world's cities every week, a mass movement which has implications for housing, health care, and education. Most of this migration, he explained, occurs in cities with the least resources to deal with them.