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STATEMENT BY

H.E. MR. MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT

CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION

At the Opening Ceremony of the 4th African Union High Level Panel on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment on "Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth: Empowering Young Women and Girls"

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

29 June 2017

**Excellencies, African Union Ministers in Charge of Gender and Women’s Affairs,
African Union Ministers Responsible for Youth Affairs,
African Union Ministers responsible for Foreign Affairs,
Commissioners of the African Union Commission,
Heads of African Union Organs and Specialized Agencies,
Members of the Pan-African Women’s Organisation (PAWO),
Members of the Permanent Representatives Council (PRC),
Representative of Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms,
Members of the Permanent Missions here in Addis Ababa,
United Nations Agencies here present,
Representatives of Development Partners,
Representatives of Civil Society Organisations,
Representatives of the 6th Region of Africa - the Diaspora,
Representatives of the Private Sector,
Young Africans,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the 4th High Level Panel on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment under the theme “Harnessing the Demographic Dividend through Investments in Youth: Empowering Young Women and Girls”, and to the African Union headquarters. I extend a special warm welcome to all the young people who are present here today and those who are following the proceedings through social media platforms. Specifically, I wish to appreciate you for honouring my invitation to participate in this 4th High Level Panel on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment on the margins of the 29th AU Summit.

Equally, I also express my profound gratitude to H.E. Mr. Nana Akufo-Addo, President of the Republic of Ghana, for accepting the nomination of H.E. Mr. Alpha Conde, the Chairperson of the African Union and President of the Republic of Guinea to be appointed as the African Union Gender Champion. His Excellency’s leadership in advocating for gender equality and women’s empowerment in Africa is extremely valuable in providing the necessary impetus required to accelerate the implementation of our gender commitments at the highest level of African government.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I proceed, I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to the African icons, renowned for their leadership and activism in the arena of gender equality and women’s’ empowerment who have recently passed. Their passing is a great loss to the continent. May their souls rest in peace:

1. Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, Executive Director of the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA), he was not only a champion for the well-being and defender of the rights of women and young people, he also supported, with other partners, the development of the AU’s Roadmap on Demographic Dividends;
2. Mrs. Haja Jeanne Martin Cisse, one of the founders and the first Secretary General of the Pan-African Women’s Organisation (PAWO), which is now a Specialized Agency of the AU;
3. Amb. Fatoumata Sire Diakite, a champion of women’s rights, a child rights activist and trade unionist whose struggle for the advancement of women was recognized not only in Africa, but globally.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to deliver my first keynote address to the High Level Panel on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment since I assumed office as the Chairperson of the African Union Commission. I stand on the shoulders of my predecessor, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, who laid a solid foundation for me, as her successor, by making gender equality and women's empowerment central to the AU development agenda.

I and my administration are energized by the building blocks provided for us to start our work, and look forward to placing further building blocks on this foundation in order to make this laudable developmental agenda a lived reality for the African people.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Security and stability are critical fundamentals for any society to realize economic development.

Both these conditions have direct and long term effects on the creation of a safe and stable environment for state and non-state actors to collaborate actively in achieving vibrant economies that provide the basis for the development of our people. Therefore, the incidence of conflict in some parts of our continent is a major concern. This is why very early in my tenure, I resolved to undertake a number of high-level visits to countries in conflict to observe for myself the impact on our people, but also to explore with member state authorities the opportunities that exist for ending conflicts and silencing the guns in the continent. During these visits, I visited refugee camps and witnessed unspeakable suffering of our people. I observed first-hand that conflict, war and guns disproportionately affect women and girls. I saw for myself the fear and despair in the eyes of women and children in these camps. These scenes will forever mark me, and have served to reinforce my personal commitment to ensure that conflict in our continent must stop. As Chairperson of the Commission this will remain one of my top priorities.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Gender equality and empowerment cannot be achieved without the equal, full and effective participation of women and young people at all levels of decision-making. It is true that Africa has continued to make significant strides in the pursuit for gender equality and empowerment of women in political sphere as well as in public and private sectors. African policy-makers and high-level decision-makers have become increasingly sensitized to ensuring that women's voices and contributions are heard and integrated into policy-making at national level. In this regard, I would like to recognize and commend the demonstrable efforts of our member states in progressively improving women's representation in all arms of government. The increasing degrees of gender representation has and continues to lead to greater legitimacy of our governments and the quality of their decision-making. As this trend increases across our continent, we will live to be witnesses of the huge dividends of the empowerment and inclusion of women in civic affairs

Having acknowledged this encouraging trend, I also must reflect on the various challenges still face women and girls in part of our continent. You may recall that on 14 January 2017, during my inaugural speech as the newly elected Chairperson of the AUC, I made a commitment to you to make women –

who constitute half of the African sky and young people – who are the bearers of our future – the heart of our project to promote peace, development and the African renaissance. I especially made a clarion call for investment to be made in young women and adolescent girls. I highlighted my recognition of the reality that women and girls face more difficulties and barriers than young men and boys. These challenges, if not robustly dealt with, pose a real risk of reversing the gains made in the empowerment of women in Africa. These challenges include , violence against women and girls, harmful traditional practices, unequal pay for equal work for women, exclusion of women from economic opportunities, legal impediments to land ownership and to inheritance, poor health maternal health services and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

These challenges are real and will form the focus of our attention as we implement Agenda 2063, the Africa that we want.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Africa's greatest resource is young people. We are told that 50 percent of Africa's population are below the age of 30 majority of whom are women. How we meet their needs and aspirations will define our common future. We must not leave behind young people, in the collective pursuit of shaping the Africa we want.

The African Union has recognized the critical role of the youth which is why the theme for 2017 is "Harnessing the democratic dividend through investment in youth". If the majority of the youth demographic comprises of girl children, then we must accept that women and girls are the critical voice and primary actors for building the foundations of a prosperous Africa that is at peace with itself.

The attainment of these goals will require strategic partnerships based on the principles of dialogue, burden sharing, and complementarity. It is in this spirit that I look forward to, the 5th Africa-EU Summit due to take place in November 2017. It is my hope that this will be a critical opportunity for African and European Leaders to come up with concrete actions and strategies to respond to the need of our youth in the two continent.

It is also my hope and expectation that a large part of the agenda and discussions will be directed at considering options for addressing challenges that undermine the empowerment and removing barriers to development of the girl child in Africa.

In the same spirit of partnership, may I mention that AUC, in collaboration with UNWOMEN and the Government of Germany, have recently launched a "Women Leaders Forum for Africa's Transformation", which aims to harness the wealth of African women's experiences of leadership to enhance their contributions to transformation and stability on the continent, towards the effective realization of Africa's Agenda 2063 on sustainable Development Goals. I hope you will support the Network and ensure that young women are fully and effectively integrated in the affairs of the Network so that they take ownership of the transformation agenda of the AU.

Further still, I also look forward to meeting the members of the Bureau of the STC on Gender and Women's Empowerment, PAWO and CSO leaders to share further thoughts on results that can be expected from this meeting and many other partnership efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

This 4th High Level Panel very timely as it aims to provide you all with yet another opportunity for more robust shaping of our gender agenda, amidst challenges women and girls face in the continent. I hope this High Level Panel will also enable you to freely and effectively participate, advocate and strategically engage more on policy implementation on how to invest in young women and girls to harness the demographic dividend in Africa.

On that note, I hope that the meeting will address some of the following pertinent issues affecting our young people and I list just a few critical ones to catalyze your further discussions

1. **First, finding creative and practical ways of harnessing gender dividends:** Recognizing that Africa has a growing population with a high percentage of young female and that the continent will only begin to enjoy full benefit of development through the contributions of young people, when young women and girls are empowered, I hope this Panel will recommend and define clear strategies to harness Africa's gender dividend.
2. **Secondly, tackling high levels of youth unemployment:** Between now and 2050, it is projected that Sub-Saharan Africa with the fastest population growth rate will have the highest youth population in the world. Whilst the youth bulge is not responsible for creating youth employment challenge in Africa, there are structural issues specific to individual countries that need to be addressed. The lack of decent work for many young people, especially young women, have in most cases compelled them to enter risky and demeaning jobs, including being victimised through trafficking, early or forced marriages as an option out of poverty.
3. **Thirdly, Gender-based discrimination and segregation:** I also expect the HLP to propose strategic actions for implementing gender and youth friendly regulatory frameworks and smarter policies to remove structural (social, cultural and professional) barriers on women and youth.
Fourthly, Skilling Africa: The development of a nation is dependent on the quality of its labour force. Young people and women require appropriate education, training and skills development as job creators and not seekers, especially in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). I challenge the HLP to explore strategies in which Africa can make skill development more affordable to its young people, adaptable to the continent's need and remain globally relevant.
4. **Fifthly, Reversing migration:** In recent time, many of our young people have risked their lives on dangerous boat trips out of Africa in the quest for opportunities abroad. As a continent, we need to address the root causes of the irregular population movements so as to reverse the migration trend. Our just- concluded mission to The Gambia, following the successful peaceful transition, negotiated by the AU and the ECOWAS under the leadership of H.E. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and the AU, bears testament to the fact unless we address these underlying structural concerns of irregular population movement, our continent will continue to be the supplier of illegal economic migrants abroad.
5. **And finally, Countering violent extremism:** Cognizant of the main factors that provide fertile grounds for extremists to recruit young people in violent extremism such as widespread poverty, forced displacement, food insecurity and political marginalization, the HLP should consider

suggesting practical steps that Africa need to take to engage young people to counter such challenges.

These issues are not exhaustive of all the concerns of the continent, but form some of the high-level priorities that merit attention during this event.

Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

In closing, I wish to reaffirm my commitment to work together with all of you to advance gender equality and women's empowerment, and ensure that women and youth, especially young women and girls are at the centre of the development agenda of the African Union.

I congratulate the AUC Team that has organized this event and I look forward to the concrete outcomes of this meeting, and more importantly to learn how these outcomes will be actualized.

I wish you fruitful deliberations in your collective efforts to harness the demographic dividends of women and girls in Africa.

I thank you.