



GENDER PRE-FORUM TO THE 11TH HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE ON DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND GOVERNANCE: TRENDS, PROSPECTS, AND CHALLENGES

THEME:

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS AN ANTIDOTE FOR UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT

DRAFT NARRATIVE REPORT

20 - 21 NOVEMBER 2022

COTONOU, REPUBLIC OF BENIN

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Creating a platform for conversations that attend to the realities of African women and register their contributions and recommendations for reversing UCG is critical. Due to the re-emergence of UCG in the African Continent, interlinked with security issues like the proliferation of terrorism, the enhancement of women's participation in politics and decision-making processes is not only an assurance of Africa's commitment to progress but can be a mechanism of de-escalating possible security challenges and reversing UCG in the Continent.
2. It is in light of this that the African Union Organs and Institutions that form the African Governance Platform through the AGA-APSA Secretariat convened the annual Gender Pre-Forum to the 11th High-Level Dialogue under the theme, **“Strengthening Women’s political participation as an antidote for Unconstitutional Changes of Government”** from 20 to 21 November 2022 in Cotonou, Benin.
3. The sub-themes discussed during the Forum include resurgence of UCG as a setback for women's human rights in Africa; analysis of AU and RECS' normative frameworks for the protection of women's rights during UCG; the role of women in contributing to peaceful political transitions and normalizing civil and military relationships; strategies for transformation: strengthening women's political participation as an antidote to UCG; inclusive implementation of the Accra and Malabo Declaration against UCG.
4. This narrative report captures the proceedings of the Gender-Preforum, notably moderated opening and closing session, panel discussions on the five (5) sub-themes of the Consultation, question and answer sessions where participants shared their views on the various session themes, and “Africa Talks” discussions with specific personalities.

II. ATTENDANCE

5. The two-day forum brought together participants from Gender-focused organizations working on democracy, governance, and Human Rights; AU Member States, including representatives of

National Institutions, Agencies that focus on good governance, democracy, and Human Rights; selected Think Tanks and Academic Research Institutions with experience on issues of democratic governance, peace, and security; media practitioners; artist, Cultural, and Heritage organizations; representatives of the AGP; International organizations, Development Partners, and UN Agencies; and the Diaspora.

III. OPENING SESSION

The Opening Session of the Gender-Preforum was moderated by **Ms. Makda Mikre Tessema**, AGA-APSA. Ms. Makda welcomed dignitaries and participants to the Republic of Benin to the 2022 Gender Preforum. She informed participants that the forum allows for open and frank conversations under the theme, and is an opportunity for women and men to ideate and provide solutions to the continent's challenges. She noted that the continent is facing compounding challenges. As a result, it was important to examine who has been left out of the conversations. She added that this Gender Preforum is the first onsite event marking the HLD after 2 years of virtual gathering due to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Ms Makda Mikre Tessema explained that the key drivers of UCG are corruption, lack of accountability, government failure to deliver on the promises given to the people, the lack of political will to implement the available normative frameworks, toxic gender stereotypes that limit women's participation from an elementary level such as the family, the reliance on goodwill for change in contract to pushing for actual changes and the lack of critical mass of women in demanding women's spaces. She emphasized the need to document the progress, challenges and aspirations of women in order to amplify their voices, shifting from tokenism to tangible change. She also highlighted the need to build stronger allies to address the plight of women, engaging traditional and social leaders who are at the grassroots (in direct contact with the women). With regard to the impact of UCG, she deplored the reversal of gains particularly in the areas of education when UCG occur, as well as the increased marginalisation of women from spaces of power because the beneficiaries of UCG often exclude women.

On behalf of Amb. Mbari Calixte, Head of Democracy, Elections and Constitutionalism Division, AUC, Mme. Lindiwe Khumalo, Executive Secretary, ACHPR, Chairperson of the African Governance Platform gave the opening remarks. She wished a warm welcome to all participants to the Gender

Preforum organised as part of the HLD on behalf of the leadership of the African Union and the Peace and Security Department of the African Union. She emphasised the significance of the event, especially because women continue to play a key role in good governance, security and development programmes in Africa, and expressed appreciation to the people and government of Benin for the hospitality.

Mme. Lindiwe explained that women are key for the realisation of Agenda 2063 and for the vision of a united, integrated and prosperous Africa, considering that more than 50 percent of the continent is composed of women. To achieve sustainable development, peace and security, she noted, this key segment of the continent should be involved in processes to contribute to the continent's progress. She deplored the fact that despite their numbers and contribution to the democratic processes, women's voices have been mostly excluded from several spaces. Challenges in governance, peace and security and unemployment are a clear demonstration of the gaps in taking into account the concerns and needs of women and youth.

Mme. Lindiwe explained that there are many structural challenges that undermine women's contribution. She noted, however, that the AU has established many instruments and policies to ensure that Africa harnesses its demographic dividend—taking into account women and youth. She mentioned some key instruments to promote women's empowerment as the Constitutive Act of the African Union, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality, AU Gender Policy and the Decade of the African Woman (2010 to 2022). These instruments, she stated, place women at the center and contribute to women's empowerment.'

She satisfactorily noted that significant progress has been made with regards to women's empowerment and peace building. According to her, the continent has made strides in terms of women's political representation and in the development of policies to ensure women's participation. This has been demonstrated through efforts to implement the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In line with these declarations, RECs and MS established regional strategies and National Action Plans to ensure gender parity at many levels. She also added that many African countries have established policies to ensure active participation of women in public life. She urged participants to explore the challenges women face and harness their perspectives and contribution in light of threats against democratic governance because without women's participation, we cannot achieve the Africa We Want.

Mme. Lindiwe Khumalo, Executive Secretary, ACHPR, Chairperson of the African Governance Platform proceeded to share her own welcome remarks. She began by noting it was an honour and pleasure to welcome the women of Africa and stakeholders to the Gender Pre-forum. She thanked the dignitaries and participants for coming from the five regions of Africa to lend their knowledge, insight and experiences to the discussion. She also extended her appreciation to the government of the Republic of Benin for accepting to host the dialogue, as well as Amb. Salah who has led the AGA-APSA secretariat for the organisation of the meeting and funding partners who have contributed to its success.

The AU, she stressed, has lifted to the top of its continental agenda the issue of the resurgence of UCG in Africa. “UCG are a recurring phenomenon in Africa against a backdrop of aspirational leadership and efforts to ensure the continent is free of war and conflict. Despite the efforts of the continent’s leadership, we observe this challenge that has impacted on the gains made over the years,” she noted.

Mme. Lindiwe explained that the AU has considered peace as a political priority and decades after the establishment of OAU, envisioned an Africa that is integrated, peaceful and which represents a dynamic force in the international arena. The AU, she added, has also developed a vision for Africa through Agenda 2063. This vision, she noted satisfactorily, was spearheaded by a woman, in the person of Mrs. Zuma.

Mme. Lindiwe informed participants that a series of framework documents have been developed to establish the norms by which Africa will lead its affairs. The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights reinforces the right of people to choose their own government, to assemble freely, participate in elections, rights which are enshrined in the bill of rights of the African charter. ACDEC also entrenches the need for enjoyment of all freedoms, including citizens’ rights to choose their own government and participate in the efforts of government. The Accra and Malabo Declarations have reinforced values of democracy, rule of law and governance. She emphasised that the Gender Pre-forum was an opportunity to place emphasis on the Maputo Protocol, which entrenches and demonstrates that Africa is serious about the issue of women as an important demographic, it calls on states to introduce measures to ensure the full participation of women in decision-making.

She noted that Africa's thought leaders, influential leaders have met in Cotonou to grapple with the issue of UCG. She urged the women participating in the Forum to elevate the voices of women on UCG and highlight the issues that concern women in UCG. She emphasised that the measure of success of the forum will be demonstrated through the number of decisions that are made at the HLD which would have emanated from the discussions during the Gender Pre-forum, adding that issues raised by women on behalf of women during the forum will land on the agenda of Heads of States when they meet in January 2023.

Mme. Lindiwe explained that women are key actors in co-steering Africa's future and decision. She invited participants to bring their respective contexts to bear in the discussion and thanked them for their commitment to Africa's agenda.

In conclusion, she thanked AGA for organising the Gender Pre-forum. She called on participants to give their best to contribute to the empowerment of women. Mme. Lindiwe expressed gratitude to all partners at the continental and regional level and encouraged them to support Member States to empower women. She reiterated the commitment of the African Union towards women and affirmed that the outcome of the forum will be presented at the HLD.

H.E. Dr Mèdessè Véronique Tognifodé Mewanou, Minister of Social Affairs and Microfinance of the Republic of Benin took the floor and welcomed all participants, especially the women who are attending the event from all parts of Africa. These women, she noted, represent the diversity of cultures and capacities to discuss the strengthening of political participation of women. The theme of the Gender Pre-forum, she added, was timely and calls for the contribution of all stakeholders to arrive at sustainable solutions. She welcomed participants to the land of Amazones, who, through their commitment, protected governments of their time.

H.E. Dr Mèdessè Véronique Tognifodé Mewanou explained that the empowerment of women could only be possible to the extent that women have the opportunity to participate in all aspects of development. According to her, the notion of participation is part of the general framework of democracy, human rights and gender equality. At the heart of participation is the notion of the active and meaningful inclusion of women as full citizens and decision-makers in public and private sector institutions and in political, economic and social processes.

“As we assemble here today, we are guided by a shared vision—one that envisions a future where the voices and contributions of women in the political sphere are not only recognized but actively embraced and celebrated,” she affirmed. She called for the recognition of the profound impact that women can have in fortifying the foundations of our democratic institutions, adding the need to harness this potential to safeguard against any threat to the democratic process in our nations.

According to her, the Gender Preforum serves as a testament to our unwavering commitment to fostering an environment that promotes gender equality, inclusivity, and active participation of women in all spheres of political discourse. She remarked that the Gender Preforum provides us with an invaluable platform to engage in meaningful dialogues, exchange ideas, and develop actionable strategies that will pave the way for a more equitable and just society.

Throughout the course of this conference, she further noted, delegates will have the privilege of hearing from esteemed speakers and experts who have dedicated their lives to championing the cause of women’s political empowerment. Their insights, experiences, and expertise will undoubtedly be a source of inspiration to redouble our efforts in creating an enabling environment that empowers women to assume leadership roles and contribute significantly to the democratic process.

She urged delegates to actively participate in the discussions, share their invaluable perspectives, and contribute to the formulation of comprehensive and sustainable solutions that will propel us closer to achieving our collective goal of a more inclusive and resilient political landscape. She expressed the hope that the Gender Preforum will serve as a catalyst for positive change, fostering a future where women’s political participation stands as an unwavering antidote to any threat of unconstitutional changes of government. On that note, she declared the Gender Pre-forum duly open.

IV. SESSION 1: RESURGENCE OF UNCONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES OF GOVERNMENT: UNDERSTANDING THE GENDER DIMENSION

This session sought to examine the resurgence of UCG and the impact it has on girls, women, men and boys. The session also highlighted the vulnerabilities including the power dynamics and relations, as well as the impact on human rights.

Moderator: Dr. Moses Tofa, Senior Research Associate, Africa Leadership Centre

Speakers:

- **Honorable Dr Betty Achan Ogwaro**, South Sudanese Parliamentarian
- **Mr Boubakar Yougbare**, Programs Officer, African Union CIEFFA
- **Dr Wafa Zaafrane Andoulsi**, Advisor to the National Constituent Assembly, Tunisia
- **Ms. Flora**, Technical Advisor on Social Affairs and Gender Promotion, Benin

The moderator began the session with the observation that there is a resurgence in UCG and as such, there is a need to understand the drivers and solutions. The moderator also probed the panelists on the issues of legitimacy and adverse impacts of UCG. Further, Dr Tofa asked about the issue of sanctions and what should be done when UCG occur, and the complexities and particularities when there is popular support for UCG in a country.

Honourable Dr. Betty Achan Ogwaro, in her initial remarks, spoke about the extreme suffering that women and children go through when power is taken through the guns. She cited the drivers of UCG as the failure of leadership to meet the needs of the people and highly entrenched corrupt practices that even infiltrate the Constitution. In the face of these challenges, she explained, women are the solution because in positions of power, women have demonstrated their capacity to be peaceful, tolerant and to seek consensus.

Dr Wafa Zaafrane Andoulsi informed participants that historically, repression and violation of human rights are tools that have been utilized by those who want to remain in power and dominate. It is also evident, she added, that when it comes to violation of rights, women are considered as part of the vulnerable population. However, she observed that depicting women as victims shows the gaps and inefficiencies of policies that should give women their rightful place.

Dr Wafa was of the view that in the context of UCG, women represent the potential of freedom, and there is a need to examine AU policies within a gender lens. She acknowledged that although the AU frameworks and instruments with regards to UCG are far advanced as compared to other continents, they are largely inefficient due to some challenges which she summarised in three points:

- The use of a repressive approach rather than preventive approach: Article 14 of the normative instrument of the AU on UCG place emphasis on criminal sanctions on perpetrators of UCG and the role of the peace and security sector. Experience has shown that this approach has been inefficient.
- Democracy is considered mostly in terms of the procedures and processes and as a way of access to power—rather than the substantive meaning of democracy as a system of values and governance.
- There is a disconnect between the policies of the AU with regards to UCG and the AU policy on gender, as women are not taken into account in UCG instruments. There is also a disconnect between the effort of the AU and realities at the level of states.

Dr Wafa Zaafrane emphasised that UCG is not just about power but also conscience, and that there is a lack of collective awareness about the need for citizenship. On the continent, populations do not grasp the essence and significance of citizenship, they are not aware that rights and freedoms are part of human dignity. In her view, the continent needs to solve this challenge and enlighten populations on the way forward to tackle UCG. Dr Wafa Zaafrane stressed that issues of human rights must be placed at the heart of solutions for UCG because by doing so, women will be placed at the center.

She observed that the role of women is not recognised because of cultural issues, as African societies remain largely patriarchal. There are notions about the place of women being in carrying out household chores. Addressing these misconceptions requires the support of leaders who are within our societies and know our social realities and cultural heritage. She noted that it is not enough to rely on society to acknowledge women's role in governance. Positive discrimination policies (quota, parity) are key in the learning process of society. Dr Wafa gave the example of Tunisia, which is known as a country that respects women's rights, and the fact that this status was reached due to political will. The country's first Constitution was preceded by the personal status code (which is the social constitution of the country). In 2022, more than 40 percent of female representation in the national assembly of Tunisia was achieved through the law of parity and the outcome was exceptional—women contributed to reducing tensions, framing discussions. She called for a holistic approach that takes into account social, economic and cultural aspects.

Mrs. Flora addressed the issue of the representation of women in political spaces. According to her, efforts to allocate quotas for women in political spaces and in parliament must go hand in hand with ensuring that women in political spaces are trained to be part of the critical mass that can have thorough understanding and appreciation of policies. Women in parliament especially need empowerment on how to analyse policies from a gender lens. She also pointed out that there are women in our communities who have not necessarily gone through formal education but who possess knowledge that can contribute to promoting good governance, peace and security. It is important to consult these women, empower them, and harness their knowledge and experiences.

The moderator of the session, Dr. Moses Tofa, summarised the key points of the discussions as follows:

- Drivers of UCG: Panelists were unanimous that the factors which lead to UCG are corruption, failure by political leaders to be accountable to the population, and failure to deliver on the promises given to the people.
- Insufficient political will to implement normative frameworks.
- Gender stereotypes limit women's participation.
- The lack of critical mass in the demand of women's spaces by women.
- The need for women to avoid reliance on goodwill as opposed to doing what needs to be done to make things happen.
- The need to shift from tokenism.
- The need to document and tell stories of women, particularly stories that highlight the immense contribution and participation of women.
- UCG leads to negative impacts, including the reversal of gains, particularly in the areas of education when UCG occur.
- The role of allies: there is the need to work with women in informal spaces, and engaging traditional and social leaders.

V. SESSION 2: ANALYSIS OF AU AND RECS' NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS AGAINST UCG THROUGH A GENDER LENS

This session aimed at analysing the normative and legal frameworks of the AU and the RECs through a gender lens. This included examining the different mechanisms at the regional and continental level and their impact in the protection of women's rights.

Moderator: **Dr. Andrews Atta-Asamoah**, Head, African Peace and Security Governance Programme, ISS

Speakers:

- **Ms. Ilwad Elimi Mohammad**, Women, Gender and Youth Directorate (WGDD), AUC
- **Ms. Nwaelugo Josephine Ihuoma**, CMD, PAPS
- **Ms. Nathalie Traore**, MISAHEL

Dr. Andrews Atta-Asamoah opened the session by emphasising the significance of the topic to be discussed. He remarked the upsurge of occurrences of UCG in Africa since the Lome Declaration. These coups, he states, call for the reconsideration of frameworks established by the AU to promote good governance and democracy, and the efficiencies or otherwise of these frameworks.

In her initial remark, **Ms. Ilwad Elimi** explained that the principle of parity is reflected within the AUC and in positions held within the African Union Commission. It is also reflected in Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063; Article 19 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which addresses the representation of women; Article 10 on the right to peace and Article 11 on protection-related issues.

According to her, the necessary frameworks exist but the challenge has been in the area of implementation. She noted that the AUC involves many stakeholders. The AU is a reflection of MS and acts on behalf of MS, and it engages citizens and CSOs and leaders to implement the normative frameworks. However, she emphasised that for women to contribute to solving UCG, they have to be in decision-making spaces. She noted for instance that currently, there are only two women Heads of States in Africa. She called for collaborative efforts with CSOs, partners, governments and all stakeholders willing to promote the role of women.

Ms. Ilwad explained that the AUC works with women networks, one of which is the Network of Women Leaders in Africa (2017). Where there is a situation of UCG in a country, the AUC supports this network

to ensure a solidarity mission—so that women are in decision spaces; in the case of Mali, the AUC brought together with women in Mali.

In conclusion, she emphasised that women need representation and want to be in decision-making spaces to contribute to combatting UCG, and they also require protection and assistance during conflicts, as they are most affected.

Ms. Nwaelugo Josephine, on her part, informed participants that several normative frameworks exist for women's rights and political participation at the level of RECs. Women have the right to participate in issues that affect them, the right to protection in periods of war and conflict. She however noted that caution must be exercised in the application of these protection measures, especially for women already in decision-making spaces, as these can be a hindrance to women gaining practical skills and knowledge and advancing their careers. She was of the view that continental initiatives such as the Network of Women Leaders in Africa and FEMWISE are key platforms for involving women in matters of peace and security at the continental level.

Ms. Nathalie Traore focused her intervention on the mechanisms established by ECOWAS to strengthen women's role in governance. She noted that the ECOWAS Commission has made considerable efforts to ensure that women are at the heart of socio-economic development in the region. It is this political commitment at the highest level that made it possible to adopt in 2008 an ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework commonly known as ECPF.

Ms. Nathalie Traore explained that the ECPF includes fourteen components that constitute the chain of initiatives aimed at strengthening human security and integrating conflict prevention (operational and structural), peace-building activities. ECPF Component 10, entitled Women, Peace, and Security, aims at facilitating the implementation of the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 1325; relevant provisions of the 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty, in particular Article 63; and the provisions dedicated to Women and Youths in Articles 40, 42 and 43 of the ECOWAS Additional Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. To translate these gender policy documents into operational programs, ECOWAS, through its Center for Gender Development (EGDC) adopted the ECOWAS Regional Action Plan for the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and related ones, in 2010, thanks to the financial support of UNDP.

She further noted that after adoption of this plan, in collaboration with UNOWAS and UN Women, ECOWAS supported the establishment of national action plans on Resolution 1325 in 13 ECOWAS Member States between 2010 and 2014. The ultimate goal of this plan was to accelerate the efforts of ECOWAS Member States in the implementation of international, continental and regional commitments regarding Women, Peace and Security.

Ms. Nathalie Traore affirmed that several frameworks exist for women to play a role in conflict prevention, but there is the need closely examine how is these frameworks are implemented. She remarked that women are usually not initiators of violence all over the continent—but are most vulnerable and face the impacts of displacement and GBV. She further spoke about the impact of sanctions on living conditions of women, especially with regards to vulnerability. For instance, when sanctions were imposed on Mali following UCG, it led to an increase of the cost of goods and services and also created the impression that these AU and ECOWAS are against the welfare of the country. She emphasised that women have played key roles during occurrences of UCG: in Mali, women lobbied the government and took part in mediation efforts.

She formulated the following recommendations:

- CSOs have a key role to play in addressing UCG. As such, they need training on AU mechanisms meant to tackle UCG and how they can contribute.
- There is a need to promote women's rights in contexts devoid of conflicts, so that women can be better prepared to play a role in case conflicts arise.
- Make visible the work of women at the grassroots

Plenary Discussion

A delegate sought to understand the reason why the implementation of normative frameworks and instruments is challenging at the sub-regional and regional levels. Ms. Ilwahn responded to this question by explaining that knowledge of frameworks is still a challenge. She cited the example of the Maputo Protocol, which has been ratified by 43 MS but has not been fully implemented because the Protocol is not popularized nor is it translated into African indigenous languages. She also was of the view that to encourage MS to implement AU frameworks, resources are needed. She noted for instance the fact that AU Liaison Offices are not established in all African countries. She further stressed that for a normative

framework to be implemented, women leaders must play a role. She concluded by deploring the fact that some Member States are selective about which Frameworks to implement based on what they believe is convenient for them.

Another delegate sought to know why women's participation in governance processes is still a challenge despite the existing frameworks. Ms. Nwaelugo Josephine explained that the frameworks for promoting women's participation are not enough, because when it comes to political parties and participation, women are held down by societal norms. She further noted that some Member States ratify a law with exceptions and are at liberty to decide not to domesticate these exceptions. In her view, there is a need to educate the people at the grassroots to ensure the information and knowledge about women's participation in political processes is trickled down to women in marginalised and rural areas.

VI. AFRICA TALKS—INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATION

Africa Talks was a discussion with **Ms Isemne Ahamide, CEO of Ismast Energy and president of African Women's Entrepreneurship Program (AWEP) Benin.** The session was facilitated by **Mr. Daniel Stephen,** Youth political Participation Activist and focused on the role of women in meaningful participation and empowerment.

Born in June 1980, Ismène AHAMIDE ZOUNMENO is a Specialist in Commercial Management and Renewable Energies. She joined the professional world at a very early stage, gaining four years' professional experience working for major international groups with strong expertise in the telecoms, construction, public works and renewable energy sectors, before setting out on her own as an entrepreneur 12 years ago.

Her entrepreneurial journey has been inspired by her fight for women's empowerment. In 2010 Ismène launched her NGO "Destin en Main" with the sole aim of working to empower single mothers.

Mr. Daniel Stephen opened the conversation by asking Ms. Isemne to share her journey as an entrepreneur. Ms. Isemne explained that she attended an incubation initiative in the United States, which had a positive

impact on her. Upon returning to Benin, she launched an energy company despite the social setbacks. Currently, her business is the only woman-owned business in the energy sector in Benin.

When asked about the challenges she faced prior to getting this far, Ms. Isemne noted the following:

- Women sometimes undertake ventures for subsistence but endeavour to do more.
- Men are sometimes a hindrance to women's empowerment, particularly in the rural areas where they want to maintain a subjective stance towards women. They need to be educated that an empowered woman is one that can uplift the family and educate the children.
- Funding is a challenge, as the lack of capital limits the ability of women to start their own business and even when capital is available, the rigid repayment conditions do not allow for a conducive environment to conduct business.
- Conflicting priorities particularly in the rural areas thoroughly disempower women, especially where they are expected to juggle the numerous duties in the home with a career or business.
- There is a lack of access to infrastructure, both physical structures for business and even land to establish the business.

Mr. Stephen sought to find out if Ms. Isemne intends to enter into politics, since it emerged during the earlier conversations that there is a need for a critical mass of women in politics. She responded by admitting that she does not possess the skills and competencies that are required to be in politics, but would prefer to make an impact in the area of business.

In her concluding remarks, Ms. Isemne urged women to acknowledge that they have a key role to play within the society, and to strive to overcome hurdles to their professional growth. She also encouraged women to develop the mindset of collaborating with other women, to be able to work together.

VII. SESSION 3: STRATEGIES FOR TRANSFORMATION: RETHINKING NEW PATHWAYS FOR STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AS AN ANTIDOTE TO UCG

This session sought to explore the existing strategies and mitigation measures against UCG and how to leverage women's participation in the fight against UCG. The session also examined the nexus between women's political participation and UCG and the key role that they play in enhancing peaceful political transitions.

The session was moderated by **Ms. Maimuna Diop**, AGA-SP Project.

Panelists:

- **Ms. Agueh Dossi Sekonnou**, Founder and President of the Network of Women Leaders for Development (RFLD)
- **Ibrahima Kane**, Senior Programme Advisor, Open Society Foundation
- **Ms. Vera Sompon**, Founder and Director, Sompon Social Services Baden-Württemberg

The moderator, Ms. Maimuna Diop, began by noting that women are in the majority in Africa, but are still marginalised from the positions of power. She asked panellists to identify the challenges and opportunities with regards to women's access to power, what are the existing policies in favour of women and how these policies can be implemented.

Ms. Agueh Dossi Sekonnou explained that the traditional roles of women and the toxic stereotypes in environments where women find themselves make it challenging for women to access spaces where they can be decision-makers. To make things worse, she added, there is the lack of sensitization in educational institutions about these realities. She called for a change of mindsets, citing the example of the traditional African home setting, in which the responsibilities given to boys and the girls are not the same. This, she argued, is where inequality begins.

On his part, **Mr. Ibrahima Kane** said it was important to place women's roles in Africa within the historical context of the continent. After the period of colonialism, the continent, he noted, isolated and excluded the place of the African women. The place of women has since been confined to spaces that do not contribute to their emancipation; women are placed in spaces that do not lead them to interact with

power. Furthermore, religion is a key factor of the African state which equally marginalises women and impacts on their participation.

Mr. Kane added that despite various laws that are in place to ensure parity, reaching the envisioned parity levels continues to remain an ambition. He however acknowledged the role of religion and how it can be used as a requisite vehicle to achieve the needed change. He noted that various policies already exist in favour of women's political participation, but what needs to be interrogated are the social structures that include religion. In addition, women themselves have a key role to play in their emancipation. He called on women to work hand in hand with other women. He added that education is key to changing existing narratives about women. "The systems that we have, from the curriculum to the state, need to be redesigned to suit the context of today," he stated.

Ms. Vera Sompon started by highlighting the unique perspective that the African Diaspora brings, and their capacity to deconstruct the spaces that subjugate women. She shared three factors which hinder women's participation in decision-making spaces:

- The lack of a succession plan: Women who are in politics are not grooming and ensuing succession. This worsens the plight of women because once a woman leaves a position, the gains acquired during can be undone by an office holder who does not bear the requisite institutional memory.
- A change that needs to be realised is that women are capable and they don't need permission to be in the spaces that are there.
- Understand the need to vote: women should be encouraged to go to the polls to cast their vote.

Ms. Vera further noted that the historical perspective of Africa needs to be reiterated in the conversation around women's empowerment.

Plenary Discussions

The following are key points that emerged during the question and answer session:

- Women need solidarity among themselves and the quality of their solidarity needs to be cemented.
- Women need to understand and realise the issue of complementarity.

- Women must be positive role models and be intentional as women leaders, it is important to mentor other girls and women as part of building the critical mass.

VIII. SESSION 4: INCLUSIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ACCRA AND MALABO DECLARATIONS AGAINST UCG—PUTTING WOMEN AT THE CENTRE

This session was aimed at reflecting on the Accra Declaration and the Malabo Decisions against UCG and the role that women can play in the implementation of these decisions at the national, regional and continental levels. The session was moderated by **Mr Kevin Tchatcho**, PRCD Unit, AUC.

Speakers:

- **Amb Mbari Calixte**, Head of Democracy, Elections and Constitutionalism Division, AUC.
- **Prof Jackline Oduol**, Professor, Kenyan Politician and Women's Rights advocate.
- **Ms Clara Anyangwe**, UN Women Representative.

Amb. Mbari Calixte reiterated the various normative frameworks that are available through the AU which are intended to safeguard and combat the scourge of UCG. He noted that UCG is a multipronged issue that impacts society as a whole but it has a more critical impact on women. The role of the AU, he stressed, should not be equalled with that of the authority of a Member State. The AU relies on the doctrine of non-interference with its Member States and once that principle is violated, the relationship between Member States and the African Union would be fundamentally changed.

In terms of recommendations, he stated that the creation of curricula on the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) would contribute to strengthening the rule of law and promoting a culture of democracy and good governance within Member States.

Panelists were of the view that the recognition of the diaspora as the 6th region is recognition of their position and their attachment to the continent. In addition, this enables the continent to harness their strength and capacity to contribute to the activities taking place on the continent.

Ms. Clara Anyangwe urged women to be at the heart of the implementation of gender-friendly policies and programmes that are intended for their benefit. She mentioned that looking at the example of Burundi, it has been seen that when women drive a movement, it excels. She also encouraged collaboration with other entities, for example the Council of Traditional Leaders in Africa.

Furthermore, Ms. Clara noted that women can be at the center of the Accra and Malabo declaration if an enabling environment is created for women and if we are conscious of the ecosystem (state institutions, peer review mechanisms, constitutional review bodies, mutating patriarchal systems in which this has to take place.

Prof Jackline Oduol, Professor, Kenyan Politician and Women's Rights advocate warned that women should not be comfortable with the current situation but should move on to achieve their potential. According to her, women can tap the numerical strength of women to gain political power. She urged women to approach political leadership with an in-depth understanding of the dynamics and difference between politics and governance. She deplored the fact that the current understanding of political leadership is a means to get power for our own ends. She further called for a shift policy direction from engaging in individual self-reliance of women to the collective empowerment of women. Women initially moved in solidarity and this constitutes political power to make their voices heard.

Prof. Jackline Oduol urged the relevant institutions to translate and popularise normative frameworks on UCG such as the Accra and Malabo Declarations into African indigenous languages of African Union Member States.

Presentation and Adoption of the Outcome Statement of the Gender Pre Forum to the 11th HLD Dialogue

- The Lead Rapporteur. Ms Ady Namaran Coulibaly presented the draft outcome statement of the Gender Preforum to the 11th High-Level Dialogue.

IX. CLOSING REMARKS AND OFFICIAL CLOSING

The closing remarks for the Gender Preforum was made by H.E. Veronique TOGNIFODE, Minister of Social Affairs and Microfinance of the Republic of Benin. She expressed gratitude for Benin being selected to host the Consultations. According to her, the event has been very fruitful, as it shed light on the capacity of women across the continent and how that contributes to development.

H.E. Veronique Tognifode noted that as we draw to a close on this momentous occasion, it is with a profound sense of hope and determination that we reflect on the discussions that have transpired during this conference. She remarked that the Gender Preforum delved deep into the crucial topic of “Strengthening Women’s Political Participation as an Antidote for Unconstitutional Changes of Government.” During the forum, she added, our collective endeavors have shed light on the pivotal role that women play in fostering resilient democratic systems and safeguarding against the perils of unconstitutional shifts in power.

Throughout history, she explained, women have proven themselves to be the bedrock of progress, resilience, and stability. Their tenacity, empathy, and unwavering dedication to the cause of justice and equality have exemplified the essence of true leadership. Today, she continued, we reaffirm our commitment to harnessing the power of women’s political participation as a formidable shield against any threat to the democratic fabric of our nations.

She called for the translation of the insights and resolutions forged in this conference into tangible actions. She urged AU Member States to strive to create an enabling environment that nurtures and empowers women to actively engage in political processes at all levels. By amplifying their voices, providing equitable opportunities, and fostering inclusive policies, she stressed, we pave the way for a more just and equitable society.

“Let us not forget that the fight for gender equality and women’s political empowerment is a fight for the very soul of our democratic values. It is a fight for a future where every individual, regardless of gender, has an equal stake in shaping the destiny of our nations,” she emphasized. She called on citizens of African countries to stand united in our commitment to break down the barriers that impede women from assuming leadership roles and to build a world where their contributions are not only acknowledged but celebrated.

H.E. Veronique Tognifode delegates to carry forth the spirit of collaboration and determination that has permeated the forum as they depart to their various countries. She urged delegates to be the catalysts for change in their respective communities, advocating tirelessly for the political empowerment of women and ensuring that their voices resonate loud and clear in the corridors of power.

She affirmed that together, we can pave the way for a future where unconstitutional changes of government become a thing of the past, where democracy flourishes, and where the invaluable contributions of women in political spheres are rightfully recognized and celebrated. In conclusion, she expressed gratitude to delegates for their unwavering commitment, passion, and dedication to this noble cause. She further affirmed the commitment of the Government of Benin to promote good governance, women’s rights and women’s political participation.

On that note, she declared the Gender Pre-forum officially closed.