Addis Ababa, November, 12 2019: Participatory democracy is a relevant feature of public governance in African states. It denotes the existence of a certain systemic political, qualitative differential between states according to the nature and level of their democratic transition or strengthening.

The Universal Declaration on Democracy, which was adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Council at its 161st Session (in Cairo, 16 September 1997) stated that “The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarity, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences”, with the Great Lakes region of Africa not an exception. Since the 1990s the Great Lakes region has undergone a wave of democratic processes with varying degrees of success in each country based upon their socio-historical, systemic and cyclical peculiarities. Women's political participation across the region has also varied from country to country, with some making particularly strong progress, while others recognizing that greater focus is required in this area in accordance with international standards.

It is against this background the African Union Commission, the Office of the Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region, the Office of the Special Representative of the African Union for the Great Lakes Region and Burundi, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), in partnership with the Office of the Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security of the AU, FemWise, UN Office to the African Union (UNOAU), political leaders and civil society organizations jointly organized the Regional workshop on “Participation, Representation and Protection of Women in Electoral Processes in the Great Lakes Region” under the theme “Exchange of experiences of regional electoral institutions to ensure that Gender is a key component in electoral processes”.

This initiative is intended as a response mechanism for the active and meaningful participation of women in democratic governance and peacebuilding processes.
The objectives of the workshop are to:

1. Bring together national experts, representatives of electoral commissions, judicial authorities in charge of electoral disputes, representatives of international organizations and civil society to discuss the root causes of electoral instability in the region; the low participation of women in the electoral processes in the region, the participation and protection of women during electoral periods and the preventive mechanisms to be put in place;
2. Facilitate the exchange of good practices and the review of relevant provisions between regional electoral institutions and Great Lakes participants to ensure that gender is a key element of the electoral process and agree on a jointly approved final document under the auspices of the AU;
3. Define and implement strategies to support women candidates in the Great Lakes Region; and
4. Strengthen the civic and citizen capacities of girls and women through quality education to better prepare for the awakening of individual and collective consciences in order to promote excellent female leadership in public governance in States, including politics.

In his welcome remarks, Dr. Khabele Matlosa, the Director for Political Affairs Department at the African Union Commission thanked all participants for attending the two-day Regional Workshop over the 12-13 November 2019 in the African Union HQ.

Dr. Matlosa highlighted that the Regional Workshop is expected to improve awareness on the need to provide safe spaces for women in electoral processes before, during and after elections, including the protection and participation of women, not only as voters but also as candidates. On the program of elections in the Great Lakes region, for the next year, Dr. Matlosa said “In 2020, elections will take place in Burundi, Tanzania, and Central African Republic (CAR). Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) play an important role in gender mainstreaming, but also in stabilizing peace in the electoral and post-electoral period”.

Speaking at the opening ceremony H. E. Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma Commissioner for Political Affairs of the African Union Commission, on behalf of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, His Excellency Mr. Moussa Faki Mahamat, warmly welcomed the High Level Delegates to the African Union Headquarters. She acknowledged the importance of advancing the collaboration between the African Union and the United Nations Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary General for the Great Lakes, to strengthen the cooperation between our two institutions, and especially the increased involvement of women in peace and security processes.

Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma said that the workshop comes at the right time. “We organize elections within Africa more than any other part of the world. We have an average of 15 presidential and parliamentary elections in the continent”.

The Commissioner underlined the commitment and efforts of the African Union to have gender quality at all levels, and to promote the involvement of girls and women in participatory and inclusive democracy, human rights and peacebuilding. She urged member states to protect women during electoral periods to realize the vision of Agenda 2063 - “The Africa We Want”, and to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs). “We can do better especially for the Great Lake Region. In the long term, we can achieve the strategic objectives of the 50% participation of women” noted Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma. The Commissioner said that there is a need for mechanism for women to enter politics by underlining that “Gender is a key issue in electoral processes”.

In his address to the workshop, Mr. Huang Xia, the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes welcomed the joint AU-UN initiative of advancing the issue of women’s meaningful participation in electoral processes. "If in the past the region has been distinguished by election-related violence the current dynamic shows positive developments", said Mr. Huang Xia. He further noted that the
UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security is a critical tool for moving the gender equality agenda forward in conflict and postconflict situations.

The opening ceremony was addressed by H.E. Madame Catherine Samba Pnza, Co-Chair of AU Femwise-Africa as well as Amb. Boubacar Issa Abdourhamane, Permanent representative of The Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) to the AU and ECA, and Amb. Zachary Muburi-Muita, Executive Secretary, ICGLR.

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