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**OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL ENVOY
OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION
ON WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY**

Women, Peace and Security (WPS) in the face of COVID-19

Dear WPS Africa Family,

Warm Greetings.

Wherever you are, I know the immense uncertainty created by the current COVID-19 pandemic is affecting you deeply, as it continues to cause havoc in all our countries. I pray that you and all your dear ones are safe and healthy in these dire times.

Indeed, the world is faced with an unprecedented health, economic and societal crisis. In Africa, as of today, [fifty-two \(52\)](#)¹ countries out of fifty-five (55) African Union Member States have reported cases of the lethal virus, and governments are putting in place urgent measures recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), the African Centres for Disease Control (African CDC) and national health authorities, to fight the spread of the disease and protect individuals and communities. As the virus continues to hold the world in its grip, there is growing evidence that women and girls are at risk in specific, gendered ways. We must highlight some of these for urgent action.

First, there are widespread reports of increasing [domestic violence](#)², gender-based violence and sexual offences, as families are confined due to quarantine and [lockdown measures](#)³. Women are forced to remain at home in spite of the risks to their lives, yet, legislation in many countries provide that the violence perpetrator must be the one to

¹ <https://africacdc.org/download/outbreak-brief-number-13-covid-19-pandemic-14-april-2020>

² Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic.

<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/4/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>

³ <https://theeditorngr.com/87000-incidents-of-gender-based-violence-reported-in-south-africa-since-the-21-day-national-lockdown/>

leave. I therefore call for more vigilance and actions to continue protecting our women and girls. Our homes are meant to be, and must remain, safe places for women and families.

Second, globally, women make up 70% of the workers in the health sector⁴, although the numbers decrease in leadership positions. Often, women are also the primary caretakers in their communities. This puts them at the forefront of battling the crisis, thus exposing them to high risk of infection and fatalities, particularly as personal protective equipment (PPE) remain scarce.

Third, as COVID-19 continues to spread, it poses even more severe threat in conflict zones. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), H.E. Moussa Faki, emphasized the urgency to 'Silence the Guns' through a call on [belligerents](#) to stop fighting⁵: *"It is a moral and humanitarian obligation for all warring parties, wherever they may be in Africa, to immediately stop fighting to facilitate the measures being taken by Member States and other actors to combat and defeat the coronavirus pandemic."*

At the global level, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, similarly called on all warring factions in the world to [declare a ceasefire](#): *"It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives."*⁶

Yet, recent events in the [Lake Chad and Sahel regions](#) point to an escalation of violence by Boko Haram⁷, while populations in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) continue to suffer from attacks by armed groups⁸. It is well documented that women and girls suffer in particularly tragic and life-changing ways, from violence during conflicts. Therefore, if the coronavirus strikes in conflict zones, the consequences will be dire. The WHO Executive Director, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, during the launch of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, stated: *"People and communities that are already uprooted due to conflict, displacement, the climate crisis or other diseases outbreaks are the ones we must urgently prioritize."*⁹

⁴ Boniol, M., Mclsaac, M., Xu, L., Wuliji, T., Diallo, K. et al. (2019). Gender equity in the health workforce: analysis of 104 countries. Health Workforce Working Paper. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311314/WHO-HIS-HWF-Gender-WP1-2019.1-eng.pdf?ua=1>

⁵ AU Chairperson call for silencing the Guns in Covid period.

<https://www.google.com/search?q=AU+chairperson+call+for+silencing+the+Guns+in+covid+period&aq=AU&aq=c&chrome=1.69i57j69i59j0l4j46j69i59.4137j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

⁶ COVID-19: UN chief calls for global ceasefire to focus on 'the true fight of our lives.'

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/01>

⁸ AFP. <https://www.24newsd.tv/28-Mar-2020>

⁹ <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-remarks-launch-of-appeal-global-humanitarian-response-plan---25-march-2020>

In the context of conflict, therefore, our call for action must be to ensure that as we focus on and bring all our energy to the battle against COVID-19, we still keep a clear lens on peacekeeping operations. Fighting the virus must not distract us from the zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse, nor must it allow impunity for violations of that policy. Twenty years after the adoption of the landmark Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for special measures to protect women and girls from conflict-related sexual violence, this should surely not be the case.

While no cases have been reported yet in refugee and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) camps and settlements, countries harboring refugee populations have already registered COVID-19 affected patients. In containment efforts, it is important, as indicated by the [African Union](#) and the [UNHCR High Commissioner](#), that all vulnerable populations are catered for. The High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi, said: *“Allowing full access to health services, including for the most marginalized members of the community, is the best way to protect us all. Everyone on this planet – including refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people – should be able to access health facilities and services.”*¹⁰

Fourth, as the calls and solidarity for debt relief mount, any relief offered must help lift the disproportionate poverty burden from the shoulders and backs of women. New budgets must prioritize ending inequality between women and men - an urgent prerequisite for the survival and progress of all human beings in a ‘post’-COVID-19 world. This is also particularly significant as the continent observes a new decade of financial and economic inclusion of African women.

The COVID-19 crisis is a security threat that calls for our utmost mobilization and solidarity. It is in this regard that I am writing to call upon everyone to combine our energies and resources towards defeating this common enemy. In the coming days, I wish to reach out to you, to hear and disseminate your various efforts, undertakings, and innovative ways, for immediate and durable solutions, in the fight against this invisible but deadly virus. We recognize the various initiatives by women-led organizations around the [continent](#)¹¹. We look forward to sharing and scaling up more efforts by the Women, Peace and Security family in Africa, particularly in this year that the African Union has dedicated to “Silencing the Guns; Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa’s Development”. It is only together that we will triumph over COVID-19.

¹⁰ Filippo Grandi: UN Refugee Agency steps up COVID-19 preparedness, prevention and response measures. Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020>.

¹¹.<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/3/ending-violence-against-women-in-the-context-of-covid-19>

Stay safe and stay healthy.

Addis Ababa, 16 April 2020

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