

DIRECTORATE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION

Press Release No: /2020

Date: 11 August 2020

Venue: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The African Women Leaders Network – a movement for the transformation of Africa

The year 2020 began on a high note for the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN). As the world was preparing to mark 25 years since the Fourth World Conference on Women, AWLN sought to commemorate the anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action with the launch of 25 National Chapters across Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate gendered impacts has challenged AWLN to quickly become the torchbearer of African women's indomitable spirit to ensure the "gains made are not reversed", as AWLN Champion and UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed emphasized during a May 2020 virtual consultation on COVID-19 Responses.

AWLN was launched at the UN Headquarters in New York in June 2017, under the auspices of the African Union Commission (AUC) and the United Nations (UN) through the Office of the AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security and UN Women. Three years after it was established, the network comprises over 500 African women across generations and sectors. Its ambition is to create a continent-wide force of women leaders who contribute to Africa's transformation in line with Africa Agenda 2063 and the Global Sustainable Development Agenda 2030. This effort has six key pillars: governance and political participation, peace and security, finance and women's entrepreneurship, youth leadership, agriculture, and social mobilization. AUC Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat acknowledged these cross-cutting priorities and African women's roles as farmers, entrepreneurs, traders, scientists, and leaders in many other sectors that form the backbone of our economies.

The pandemic has exposed and amplified critical gender gaps in ways that provide us with important opportunities to lead constructive response. Even before the pandemic, African women's contributions to their countries' socioeconomic development were unrecognized and undervalued, although they constitute 72% of the agricultural labour force, 70% of the informal sector and over 70% of the frontline health care workforce. These women, in these sectors are vital to recovery and need to be intentionally targeted in recovery measures.

Another area of focus is women's and adolescent girls' reproductive health, where services have been deprioritized as a result of the public health emergency. These services remain vital, and are especially important in view of the sharp spike in reports of domestic and gender-based violence, and the huge increase in child marriages and early pregnancy among girls due to school closure. The fact that, in Ethiopia, women's groups have prevented 500 child marriages since the pandemic started, shows that reversing these trends is possible.

In addition, issues of access to adequate protective equipment, which is vital for frontline health and care workers, and of access to relevant information on public health issues must be addressed. In Africa, 70% of the population still do not have access to the internet and the digital divide is most acutely experienced by women and girls.

Compounding gender discrimination and the diversion of funds from programmes on women's empowerment are also impacting negatively on women's contributions to peace and security. Yet, women's solidarity and resilience are a unique social capital that should be used as a resource and engaged actively in peacebuilding processes. Elections – the springboard from which women can be propelled into political leadership – are now under threat as governments enforce emergency measures on movement or curtail free speech in response to a new "infodemic". In countries planning for elections, governments must ensure free and fair participation of women under the new circumstances, including as members of election monitoring mechanisms.

The African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) Global Consultation held last May 2020 considered these and other critical issues for prioritization and translation into immediate action. No woman or girl should suffer violence in silence; every girl child must have access to education and other vital tools for the modern marketplace; the care economy driven by women and girls must be recognized and adequately valued; and women leaders including young female leadership, must be present at the decision-making table to engage in the planning and implementation of key priorities with a gender lens, for example, in planning COVID-19 response mechanisms. In this regard, funds should not be diverted from pre-agreed projects and activities.

In 2001, African Union Heads of State and Government pledged to set a target of allocating at least 15% of their annual budgets to improve the health sector. As of 2019, available data shows that only three countries had met this target. AU Member States must recommit to upholding women's rights in compliance with their agreed international and regional instruments, namely the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women; and UN and AU guidelines for activating gender responsive strategies to address the COVID-19 pandemic and rebuild better after the crisis. The African Union and UN Women stand ready to support the Member States in their efforts to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment with AWLN.

Through its National Chapters, AWLN is mobilizing women towards a continental movement that will elevate the status of women's leadership in Africa. In the words of AWLN Patron and former President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, "now is the time to recognise that developmental transformation and true peace cannot come without fundamental change in who is leading and the ways of leading." African women leaders at all levels can make this happen and become a force to reckon with.

This article is authored by Bineta Diop, African Union Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security and UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka.

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