COVID-19, Women, Peace and Security Agenda and Multilateralism.

In 2015, the world transitioned from Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), providing a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet. Consequently, the United Nations (UN) joined hands with governments, regional organizations, and civil society to implement the ambitious 2030 development agenda. In the same vein, Africa framed its transformation framework, Agenda 2063 "The Africa We Want", putting women and youth at the center of the agenda. By adopting both Agenda 2030 and Agenda 2063, world leaders recognized the urgency to change the way the world is governed and to address together major issues faced by Humanity, including climate change, inequalities, and the priority to address the needs of the new generation.

World leaders further recognized that reforms needed to be at the center of efforts in order to meet the new challenges. The African Union and the United Nations are undertaking reforms at continental and global levels to address long-entrenched imbalances, which impeded on the world’s ability to deliver on the peace and development agenda, and re-centered multilateralism as the key element to achieve progress.

In the last three to four years, multilateralism has been under threat as evidenced in the global trading and economic management system, due in part to populism and isolationist policies in some countries. This has also affected global peace and security. Despite this, Africa has continued to demonstrate its commitment to multilateralism, grounding its actions on mutually beneficial cooperation in addressing the complex challenges of peace, security and development.

Suddenly, in 2020, the world is facing an unprecedented health, economic and societal crisis arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. This crisis has brought to light deep-seated disparities in the world and glaring challenges that can lead to social unrest and insecurity. In addition, COVID-19 has demonstrated the weakness of the global financial system, impacting everyone and all pieces of the inter-connected chain, while the digital divide makes it near impossible for millions of boys and girls to access computers, new technology, thus educational and learning tools.

Key multilateral instruments at the core of advancing the rights of women and girls include the Beijing platform for action and the landmark United Nations Security
Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (WPS), promoting the participation and leadership of women in peace, security, humanitarian and development decisions making processes.

2020 was meant to be a year to commemorate these key instruments, review the achievements made so far on gender equality and women empowerment and the challenges women still faced in conflict zones. In the middle of that, an invisible enemy emerged, and we need all to defeat it and redress inequalities.

While more men than women face fatality linked to the pandemic, women remain disproportionately at risk of the mid and long term effects including from the reallocation of health resources that traditionally supported women.¹ Palliatives provided to manage the economic shock may not suffice. With 93% of employed women working in the informal sector, the long-term impact of the pandemic will be felt disproportionately by women who generally earn less and have limited access to adequate social protection.²

Additionally, the COVID19 pandemic has heightened a shadow pandemic: domestic and sexual violence against women and girls. Widespread reports of increasing domestic violence³, gender based violence and sexual offences, as families are confined due to quarantine and lockdown measures.⁴ Women are forced to remain at home despite the risks to their lives, yet, legislation in many countries provide that the violence perpetrator must be the one to leave. Homes are meant and must remain safe places for women and families.

Further, the potential of large-scale spreading of COVID-19 poses even more severe threat in conflict zones. The African Union Commission (AUC) Chairperson stressed the urgency to ‘Silence the Guns’ through a call on belligerents to stop fighting⁵. At the global level, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, similarly, called on all warring factions in the world to declare a ceasefire.⁶

¹ https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/stories/has-covid-19-disrupted-essential-health-services-women-and-children
² https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/explainer/covid19/en/index.html?gclid=Cj0KCQjwy8f6BRC7ARI sAPIXOhEZclYlUt_NW4Ha7-c6Ggl6dTXCu7238REFD2MUlTMNgfkbvJcDgaAiC6EALw_wcB#portfolioModal5
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&oq=AU&aq=chrome.1.69i57j69i59j0l4j46j69i59.4137j0j8&s=chrome_1.69i57j69i59j0l4j46j69i59.4137j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8
Despite many challenges, Women are at the frontlines of the response actions, as health workers and essential social workers. Women’s led organizations that are dealing with peace, security and development, like the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN), a platform born within the partnership between UN and AU, are playing a key role in developing policies, strategies and guidelines for gender responsive actions to combat COVID-19 and in post COVID-19 recovery.

Although the world has slowed down, it is time for all to sustain efforts to bring transformative change as inscribed in Agenda 2063, Agenda 2030 and the Addis Ababa Action Agenda for Financing for Development. The international community has the responsibility to step up to the crisis in unity and galvanize multilateral action to build resilient response planning focused on human security; protecting the achievements made up to this point and strengthening the necessary structures in the areas of health, fighting poverty and widening inequalities and ensuring women’s rights and gender equality.

Africa is a continent of young people. Almost 60% of Africa’s population in 2019 is under the age of 25, making Africa the world’s youngest continent, with some Eight Hundred million young people. They can be a force for instability and social unrest or a force for positive change. It is thus imperative for the world to tap into their potential in the post COVID-19 recovery responses, and ensure they become part of the solutions and their talents and ingenuity and innovation be recognized. In the same vein, providing young women skills and jobs will strengthen Africa’s human capital development.

Re-centering multilateralism in our response plans to COVID-19 further calls on global solidarity for debt relief. Any relief offered must help to 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.

As the Security Council has many times adopted resolutions highlighting the nexus between WPS, humanitarian and development, it is time to follow the United Nations General Assembly Resolution on Global solidarity to fight the coronavirus disease 2019 as well as the AU PSC statement on COVID-19 to recognize the pandemic as a security threat9

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The world has hit a reset point in the face of the pandemic. We have a collective responsibility to come together to in the “Ubuntu spirit” and build on the gains already made in the SDGs agenda to address the health, social, economic, security and gender challenges rising alongside the pandemic. Now is the time to demonstrate transformative leadership – as many women world leaders have done. Now is the time to come in unity and solidarity and overcome this world crisis.

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