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Statement

Consultative Meeting to Strengthen Partnership between the African Union , Regional Faith-based Organizations, and Communities of Traditional Leaders to Strengthen their Engagement in Prevention and Response to VAW/G, SGBV, Harmful Practice and Promotion of SRH and RR in Africa

All Protocol duly observed

On behalf of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, it is indeed a great honour and pleasure to join and welcome you to this very important consultative meeting, which seeks to consolidate and strengthen our partnership towards ending violence against women and girls, and harmful practices and promoting sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights in Africa.

Excellencies , Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to take a few minutes to set the scene and help us understand the problem we are dealing with;

- More than 50 million girls in Africa under the age of 15 years are at risk of being subjected to female genital mutilation by 2030 if no concerted action is not taken now. Investing in girls and women is a central part of Africa's Transformative Agenda 2063, which, under Aspiration 6, calls for ending all forms of gender based violence, including female genital mutilation.

- FGM - In Africa, more girls are cut between 0 and 14 years of age than any other age bracket. Prevalence rates range from 15% to over 95% for girls and women aged 15 to 49 years, with select countries in the Central and Western Africa regions accounting for a large part of the figures. About 1 in 5 girls who have undergone FGM were subjected to the procedure by a trained medical professional. In some countries, this number is as high as 3 in 4 girls. However, FGM is still predominantly performed by traditional excisors or cutters.
- According to UNICEF, Africa has the highest rate of child marriages in the world. Specifically, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates where every four in 10 girls are married before the age of 18. Within this region, the country of Niger has the highest child marriage rates, with 77% of girls married before the age of 18.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) remains one of the critical impediments to the realization of their fundamental rights including the rights to life, human dignity, peace, justice, socio- economic and political development.

With almost 18 per cent of women and girls experiencing physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner over a 12-month period, it is important to note, that pre-existing toxic social norms and gender inequalities as well as the economic and social stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, have significantly rolled back the incremental years of progress to end violence against women and girls, including the harmful practices of child marriage and female genital mutilation.

Some of the efforts to address VAWG at the macro level

African Union Member States have made collective and individual commitments to the advancement of the rights of women and girls in Africa endorsed key priority actions to address violence against women and girls.

- The African Union Campaign and negotiation of an AU Convention on Ending Violence against Women and Girls;
- African Union guidelines on the Gender Responsive Responses to COVID-19;
- The universal ratification, domestication and implementation of the Maputo Protocol on Women's Rights;

- The AU Strategy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and the development of a 10 year continental AU Strategy and
- The Action Plan on Women's Financial and Economic Inclusion of the African Women's Decade 2020-2030

The Women, Gender and Youth Directorate of the AUC in its work will continue to facilitate and coordinate the implementation of the legal instruments, declarations and political decisions that form the core of the AU's gender and youth engagement architecture; and to build stronger partnerships that will facilitate the realization of these progressive instruments.

Why are FBOs important?

The African Union recognizes that faith-based and traditional leaders are key actors in the elimination of violence against women and girls. Your position in society allows you to engage and facilitate dialogue at community, local government and member state levels to achieve far-reaching impact. As you know, gender inequalities in Africa are deeply entrenched in patriarchy, and consistently reinforced through culture, customs, traditions, values, and religious beliefs. It is therefore imperative that you become part of the preventive and response framework or mechanism at both National and Regional level.

Your role is at the micro level;

- The macro level is rosy with statutes, policies, continental programmes and initiatives but action has to happen at the community level, at the micro level
- As already mentioned FBOs have an important role in our communities as they are gatekeepers to behavioural norms.
- VAWG takes place at the micro level. This is where the marriage of young girls happen, the gender violence, the FGM, happens. It is our traditional and sometimes our faith based leaders who officiate these marriages.

The conversation for the next three days should be guided by answering this question?

➤ **HOW DO WE HELP YOU PLAY YOUR ROLE AT THE MICRO / COMMUNITY LEVEL AND PLAY IT EFFECTIVELY?**

Developing an Africa with a strong cultural identity, common heritage, shared values and ethics where women and girls play a significant role, and in which the youth, faith-based and traditional leaders are recognized as drivers of change should be the responsibility of all of us (Member States, Regional Economic Communities, Civil Society Organizations, individuals etc.).

In My key message to our FBOs today is;

➤ **BECOME A BARRIER NOT AN ENABLER TO VAWG**

I wish to urge this esteemed body of faith-based, traditional and civil society leaders gathered here today to lend your voice to the promotion of shared positive African values. It is not every day that faith-based and traditional leaders from across Africa come together to share experiences and best practices and to seek concrete solutions for the continued promotion and protection of women's rights in the continent. We therefore look forward to engaging with you in the space and effectively leveraging on your experience and influence to bring an end to violence against women.

Allow me to take this opportunity to reaffirm the African Union's commitment to strengthening partnerships and engagement on concrete decisions and actions to enhance the wellbeing of women and girls in Africa.

In conclusion

Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge our partners in the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme; the European Union and the United Nations, in particular our joint co-hosts UN Women. Your continued commitment and support to the cause of women and girls on the continent is highly appreciated. I wish to once again express appreciation to the EU and UN Women for the partnership under the Spotlight Initiative Africa Regional Programme and their support to this important convening.

I look forward to these three days with high expectations and confidence of what we will achieve. I wish you fruitful deliberations and declare the meeting officially open.

Thank You.