

# Ministerial Level Meeting on 'Women, Peace, Culture and Gender Inclusivity in Africa'

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Tomorrow (22 March) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 987th session at a ministerial level. The agenda of this virtual open session is 'women, peace, culture and gender inclusivity in Africa'. The session is convened in line with PSC's annual indicative programme and in the context of its previous decisions that it shall hold open sessions on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, in March of each year.

Cabinet Secretary Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kenya, Raychelle Awuor Omamo, is expected to make the opening remarks as the Chairperson of the PSC at ministerial level for March 2021. The Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, and the Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Amira Elfadil Mohammed, are also scheduled to make statements. Respective Chairs of the eight Regional Economic Communities (RECs) will also be making statements. Presentations are also expected from Madam Bineta Diop, AU Special Envoy on Women Peace and Security, and the representative of UN Women.

This is the first time that the PSC convenes a ministerial level meeting since it decided to have the women, peace and security (WPS) theme as a standing agenda item in 2010. The convening of this session at ministerial level also signifies the importance that Kenya attaches to this theme. According to Council's information note, the overall objective of the session is to provide an open platform for discussing how to build a "gender-inclusive culture of peace in Africa".

Such framing of tomorrow's session agenda is in part inspired by the AU theme of the year – "Arts, Culture and Heritage: Levers for Building the Africa We Want". In part, it is also a recognition that deeply ingrained social and cultural views remain to be major course of the challenges that women and girls continue to face, as exemplified by the unprecedented spike in gender-based violence during the COVID19 pandemic in many countries on the continent. It is worth recalling Council's request at its 951st meeting for Member States to take measures that could ensure the protection of women and girls who suffered violence due to covid-19 related abuses. The upcoming session presents the opportunity for Council to follow up on steps taken by Member States to ensure justice and fight impunity in this regard.

Tomorrow's session thus serves as a platform for critical reflection on addressing the challenges for gender inclusivity in the realm of peace and security and the ways for advancing gender-inclusive culture of peace in Africa. One major source of impediment for gender inclusivity is the persistence of the association of politics and power with masculinity. Despite encouraging developments in representation of women in politics, in much of Africa politics, fuelled by the persistence of the association of politics and power with masculinity, remains dominated by men, who are often much older than the average age in Africa. In this context, the way politics is organised and mobilised as well as the continuing hold of patriarchal conceptions of power not only allows the persistence of women's inequality but also enables cultural traits of domination and violence in society but also inhibits gender inclusivity. The resultant absence or weakness of gender- inclusive culture of peace both exposes women and girls to domination and violence even in times of relative peace and makes them vulnerable to becoming targets of violence in conflict situations.

Beyond the realm of politics, there remain harmful cultural

practices that severely impede gender equality and the participation of women and girls in other areas of social and public life of society as well. Among these practices that Commissioner Mohammed is expected to highlight include child marriage and female genital mutilation. It is to be recalled that the PSC in its 789th session lamented that child marriage, which disproportionately affects girls with very negative effects on their personal growth, health, education and other opportunities, constitutes serious violation of human rights and Africa has the highest levels of child marriage with 4 out of every 10 girls in Africa married before the age of 18. Without properly addressing the underlying causes of women's oppression which are usually embedded in such cultural practices, it will not be possible to ensure women's effective contribution to peace and security and the overall development of their communities.

As highlighted in the concept note for tomorrow's session, such harmful cultural practices and conditions of violence against women and girls become particularly acute in times of crises and conflicts. Accordingly, in times of crises and conflicts, gender based and sexual violence becomes a major source of threat to women and girls. Against this background, tomorrow's session also serves to revisit PSC's previous pronouncements condemning the use of sexual violence as an instrument of war, which continues to be reported in various conflict situations.

In the face of the persistence of the foregoing challenges, the theme of the year as framed for purposes of tomorrow's session can serve to shed light on the adverse consequences of these challenges not only on the ability of women and girls to live and aspire for a life free from the burdens of harmful cultural practices and threats of violence but also the social and economic costs to society.

Considering some of the positive experiences in the inclusion of women in the political, social and economic realms, it

would be of interest for members of the PSC to highlight the use of the arts and culture as levers for the promotion of gender-inclusive culture of peace in Africa, In this respect, one measure that can easily be pursued is the inclusion of the promotion of gender-inclusive culture of peace in the activities that the AU and AU member states relating to the theme of the year. It may also interest Council to reflect on the role of African women both in preserving and maintaining African cultural heritages and in promoting positive social changes, with a view to enhance their active role in the use of African indigenous knowledge and traditions for prevention and early-warning as well as for peaceful settlement of disputes.

In order to draw lessons from good practices relating to WPS, Council may also note some successful efforts such as the utilisation of one-stop centres during the conflict in South Sudan; the use of DNA testing for identifying perpetrators and victims of violence against women in Rwanda; and the creation of “peace huts” where women contribute to elections through discussion in Liberia. The session is also expected to offer the opportunity for RECs to share their sub-regional experiences regarding culture and women’s rights, particularly as it relates to peace and security and development.

In terms of inclusion of women in peace processes, past PSC sessions on WPS have repeatedly emphasised the importance of integrating women and girls into peace and security initiatives, in a systematic and sustainable manner. The need for inclusion of women in national defence and security forces, as well as their deployment in peace support operations has also been emphasised at various PSC meetings. One of the crucial points raised at PSC’s 951st session was the importance of increasing women’s participation in AU peacekeeping missions and peace support operations as well as in all AU initiatives including the AU Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development (AUPCRD) Centre.

Tomorrow's session presents an opportunity to discuss further mechanisms through which increased representation of women in peace support operations as well as in prevention, mediation and peace-making initiatives could be realised. Ensuring that women assume leadership positions at various levels of decision-making at the national level is essential, as a pool from which women can be recruited. Additionally, there is a need for the creation of gender sensitive conditions of work in peacekeeping operations and in mediation and peace negotiation as critical measure for attracting women and ensuring their effective participation in these processes. Peace agreements and other peace supporting initiatives should also have components that are cognizant of and address the disproportionate impacts of conflicts on women. One example is the assignment of explicit mandate for peace support operations or mechanisms such as the AU Special Envoy, for monitoring, tracking, documenting, analysing and reporting on SGBV as basis for designing evidence-based responses for addressing the disproportionate impact of conflicts for women and girls.

The PSC is expected to issue an outcome document, although the form that the outcome takes was not known at the time of going for publication. It is expected to call on the AU and AU member states to ensure that the activities on the AU are designed to promote gender inclusive culture of peace and enhance delivery on women's rights to and participation in peace processes in Africa. In terms of addressing harmful cultural practices, the PSC may call on AU member states to take targeted measures and to this end use the requirements of the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. As part of the promotion of gender-inclusive culture of peace, the PSC may also call on the AU and AU member states to address patriarchal conceptions and practices of politics and power, including by making the women agenda as a priority policy issue in the social, economic and governance realms and supporting women rights groups. Related to this is the need to

address, sexual and gender-based violence in conflict situations and the need in this respect for the PSC to task the Special Envoy to report on such violence and implement its decision from the 862nd session to dedicate an annual open session to conflict-related sexual violence. Council may also reiterate its call on Member States which have not yet done so, to adopt national action plans (NAPs) for the proper implementation of UNSC Res1325/2000 and its decision from its 833rd session calling for the urgent development of guidelines on mainstreaming the experiences of women and girls, particularly those in the refugee and IDP camps, in the AU policies, strategies, processes and initiatives relating to conflict prevention and resolution. It may also call on AU member states to ensure the representation of women at various levels of decision-making and women's participation in electoral processes as a basis for enhancing their enhanced participation in peace processes.