

Open Session on Women, Peace and Security in the context of the AU theme of the year for 2023

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Tomorrow (14 March), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1144th meeting which will be committed to its annual open session on women, peace and security (WPS). In line with AU's theme for the year 2023 – acceleration of implementing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) –, it is expected that the session will pay particular attention to integration of WPS agenda in the implementation of the AfCFTA. This session is also convened at the time of the 20th anniversary of the landmark Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women (Maputo Protocol).

Following opening remarks by Innocent Eugene Shiyo, Permanent Representative of Tanzania and Chairperson of the PSC for the month of March, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to make a statement. It is expected to pay homage to the contribution of women and AU Commission's work on WPS. Bineta Diop, AU Special Envoy on WPS, is also expected to brief the PSC. Representatives of United Nations (UN) Office to the AU (UNOAU) and UN Women may also make statements.

Since its 223rd session convened on 30 March 2010 when it decided to hold annual open sessions dedicated to the WPS theme, the PSC has institutionalised its session dedicated to

WPS agenda in Africa. The last time the PSC held a session on WPS, the 1109th session committed to commemoration of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS ([S/RES/1325](#)), the focus was on the persisting challenge faced in the fight against sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in conflict and crisis settings. One of the key outcomes of the session was PSC's request to the AU Special Envoy to 'establish a forum for knowledge sharing amongst the AU Member States and partners to leverage experience, lessons learnt and good practices in addressing sexual violence against women in conflicts and crises'. While the follow up and report on action taken in this regard is expected to take place in the session of the PSC on WPS focusing on 1325 later in the year, tomorrow's session may address it by drawing attention to the ways in which the integration of WPS within the AfCFTA implementation also enhances protection of women and girls from SGBV.

Estimates indicate that between 70% and 80% of African informal cross-border traders are women. The engagement of women in informal cross-border trading not only advances women's empowerment, but also significantly contributes to poverty reduction in the continent by presenting women the opportunity for income generation. However, women cross border traders operate their businesses under serious risks to their person and property. This is particularly the case in border areas in fragile and conflict affected territories.

The result of the lack of targeted protection measures particularly for informal traders means not only that women traders are subject to various kinds of risks but their societies are deprived of the opportunity to benefit from the full scale of the socio-economic contributions of women cross border trade. In various regions of the continent, women cross border traders face challenges emanating from the absence of proper regulatory frameworks that govern their activities. Studies indicate for example, women cross border traders in

the west African region experience multitude of challenges and insecurities due to the informal nature of their trading activities. Although the regional economic bloc, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) provides the proper platform for facilitating protected free trade in the region, this platform caters to formal sectors of trade while those engaged in informal cross border trade largely remain marginalised. Representing about 60% of informal traders in the region, women hence bear the brunt of the absence of policies that regulate their trading practices. The same is true for women informal traders in the East African Community (EAC) region, 90% of which are estimated to rely on cross border trade as their only source of income.

Due to the informal nature of their activities, women engaged in cross border trade are excluded from accessing information related to customs and border regulations. They also do not benefit from initiatives aimed at enhancing inter-state trade at national and regional levels, including in the form of access to profitable markets and credit services. In addition, the lack of sufficient awareness and uncertainties about border procedures among women informal traders exposes them to corrupt practices and manipulation.

One good example of an activity women in cross border trading are largely engaged in is Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM). In Africa, it is estimated that no less than 40% to 50% of the workforce engaged in ASM is comprised of women. Due to deeply rooted misconceptions of gender roles and constrictive legal standards that are influenced by oppressive cultural norms, women engaged in ASM are often left behind in accessing relevant equipment, technology and institutional support key for a successful engagement in the sector. As a result, majority of these women are forced to pursue informal routes for trading in mines and minerals across borders. Not only does this expose women to multi-layered risks, it also imposes an economic disadvantage to states by facilitating illegal

smuggling of mines outside of their borders.

Worse still, women cross border traders in conflict and post-conflict settings face even more serious violations that range from verbal abuse, to physical harm and sexual violence. Regulatory vacuums that result due to the situation of insecurity and instability in such settings leave women vulnerable to gender specific risks and exploitations. For instance, a 2022 report by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) indicates that at the Goma border post between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda, not only are women cross border traders subjected to indecent searches by male inspectors, but are also raped after confiscation of their goods. Poor infrastructure and absence of state presence in the northern parts of DRC also subject women cross border traders to travel long distances in insecure settings, exposing them to varying forms of sexual violence and even murder according to the report.

In the context of displacement, women living in refugee camps are also largely engaged in informal trade activities. Due to the way refugee camps are often established and the general form in which populations fleeing conflicts and instability in their country of origin tend to settle in border areas of neighbouring states, such areas often end up being hot spots for intense informal cross border trade. However, women refugees engaged in informal trade in such settings operate not only under major financial and infrastructural constraints as well as restrictions to their movements, they also conduct their business under the constant fear of being discovered by border control police provided that their informal trade is treated as illegal activity.

It is in the light of these realities that the integration of WPS in the implementation of the AfCFTA becomes a critical point of discussion for the PSC within the framework of its annual engagement on the WPS agenda. The AfCFTA Agreement already envisages under Article 27, the commitment of states

parties to improve 'the export capacity of both formal and informal service suppliers, with particular attention to micro, small and medium size women and youth service suppliers'. The Agreement further recognises the importance of gender equality in order to attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development as well as structural transformation of states parties. This focus on the provision of regulatory protection to women cross border traders in the informal sectors also enables border communities and trading societies to harvest the full scale of the socio-economic contributions of women's cross border economic and trade activities.

The AfCFTA, when fully operational, also presents multiple practical opportunities for women involved in informal cross border trade. These include the free movement of persons and goods as well as the reduction of burdensome trading costs through the elimination of tariffs for intra-Africa trade, among others. Hence, the AfCFTA framework already provides critical entry points for integration of women rights and WPS. The implementation of AfCFTA in a manner that takes into consideration the specific concerns of women engaged in cross border trading, particularly in conflict and crisis settings, largely depends on the level of commitment and political will of relevant policy actors. Tomorrow's session hence serves the PSC to urge all relevant stakeholders to factor in the importance of both gender equality and the WPS agenda for the full realisation of the objectives of the AfCFTA in its implementation.

The outcome of tomorrow's session is expected to be a Communiqué. The PSC is expected to emphasise the importance of integrating WPS into the implementation of the AfCFTA. It may emphasis how such integration helps to enhance regulatory protection to women cross border traders as a measure to foster both their equal participation in trade and their important contributions to Africa's economy. It may recall

Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 which calls for 'an Africa, whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth' to emphasise the centrality of women's full inclusion and involvement in the AfCFTA. It may further call on AU member states to take their commitments to gender equality and implementation of WPS agenda into consideration in the development of their national policies on implementation of the AfCFTA for the enhancement of cross border trade. The PSC may also note the 20th anniversary of the adoption of Maputo Protocol, urge states parties to the protocol to ensure its full implementation and call on member states that have not yet ratified the instrument to do so. The PSC may request the Special Envoy on WPS to work with the AfCFTA Secretariat and the PAPS Department both to undertake activities that document and popularise the cross border trade activities of women including those in fragile and conflict affected territories and to outline targeted proposals on how the WPS can be meaningfully integrated in the processes and implementation of the AfCFTA as part of the AU theme of the year for protection of women (informal) traders and harnessing of the contributions of their trade activities to the socio-economic advancement of their families, communities and societies.