



**REMARKS BY DR. JOYCE M. MUTINDA (PhD), CHAIRPERSON  
OF THE NATIONAL GENDER AND EQUALITY COMMISSION  
DURING THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE PAN-AFRICAN  
FEMINISTS RETREAT, NAIROBI, OCTOBER 12, 2021**

**Salutations**

**All Protocols Observed**

**Good Afternoon!**

I am delighted to join you today at the beginning of the Pan-African Feminist Retreat whose theme is, ***Rekindling the Pan-African Feminism Spirit: An Inclusive, Just, Sustainable and Transformative Society Post- COVID 19.*** I note, with appreciation, that the main goal of this retreat is for African feminists, gender and women's rights activists to meet, reflect and share their experiences with a view to learning from each other and charting the way forward on collaboration and strengthening the feminist movement not only in Africa but also globally as the world recovers from COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused too many losses that include: loss of life, loss of good health, loss of livelihood, loss of stability, loss of community, loss of funding, loss of hope and sense of purpose. BUT the pandemic has NOT taken our resilience and conviction to an equal and just world for everyone. In fact, the pandemic has reaffirmed the resilience of African women. As the world recovers from the pandemic, African feminists, gender and women rights activists should work towards ensuring that women and girls do not lose the gains that they had before the onset of the pandemic in 2020.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It is about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving

to empower all women to realize their full rights. It is about levelling the playing field between genders and ensuring that women and girls have the same opportunities in life available to boys and men.

Feminism is about learning and understanding the ways that inequality affects women and men, and remembering that we are all in this together. ***True equality leaves no one behind.*** Acknowledging how different forms of discrimination intersect with and amplify gender-based discrimination is a critical way to ensure all women reap the benefits of women's rights.

I am in agreement with Audre Lorde, (an American Woman Feminist writer) who once said, ***“I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own”*** This quotation should guide us during this retreat as we seek to strengthen the feminist movement.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Women's rights can only be realized fully if there is an enabling legal framework that is implemented fully by all the stakeholders. At the global and regional levels, the legal instruments include international Conventions and Protocols while at the national level there are Constitutions and various pieces of legislation.

According to the UN WOMEN, the African continent has demonstrated commitment to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women through signing and ratification of the relevant international Conventions. For example, almost all African countries have signed and ratified the ***Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)***. At the regional level, more than half of the African countries have signed and ratified the African Union's ***Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (The Maputo Protocol)***. It is however worth noting that the reporting that is required for conventions and protocols is still wanting begging the question, “Does implementation take place?”

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

On 15<sup>th</sup> October 2010, in Nairobi, the African Union declared 2010–2020 as the **African Women's Decade** whose aim was to **advance gender equality**. On 19<sup>th</sup> December

2011 the United Nations declared 11<sup>th</sup> October of each year to be **the International Day of the Girl Child**. This year, the theme for the International Day of the Girl Child was: “**Digital Generation our Generation.**” The AU Women’s Decade ended on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2020. During the decade we also continued to celebrate the UN International Day of the Girl Child. What are the gains for this decade? During this retreat I challenge each one of us to document the gains that have been made by women in the various African countries. It would be useful to document Africa-wide gains in every sector: Political, Economic and Social and use this documentation to further the feminist agenda during and after the COVID 19 pandemic.

Some of the glaring gains for women in leadership are evident in women’s representation in the membership of African Union Commission. At the beginning of February 2021, the African Union (AU) held the 38th Ordinary Session of its Executive Council. One of the agenda items was to elect members of the AU Commission. These were the first commission elections since the Union’s reform process that began in 2017. The reform process was deemed urgent and necessary given the role the AU is expected to play in achieving Africa’s Agenda 2063. During these elections, H.E Moussa Faki Mahamat from Chad was re-elected as the Chairperson. H.E. Dr. Monique Nsanzabaganwa from Rwanda was elected the Deputy-Chairperson. She became the first woman deputy chairperson of the Africa Union Commission. Four Commissioners were also elected. Two of these commissioners were women while the other two were men. This translates into 50% women and 50% men and implies that the Commission’s composition is reflective of the AU’s objective to achieve gender equality in leadership. This objective is in tandem with **Aspiration 6 of the Union’s Agenda 2063**. This is really a great step towards representation of women in leadership, which we should all celebrate. However, as we celebrate women’s gains in the leadership of the Africa Union Commission we should take stock of the Global Gender Gap Rankings for our various African countries.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report of March 2021 indicated that a few African countries are moving well towards closing of Gender Gap while majority of the countries require more effort to close the yawning Gender Gaps. Out of the 156

countries that were assessed, the first African Country: Namimbia was ranked No. 6 globally. Other African countries rankings were as follows:

| <b>Country</b>    | <b>Global Rank</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Namimbia -     | 06                 |
| 2. Rwanda -       | 07                 |
| 3. South Africa - | 18                 |
| 4. Burundi -      | 26                 |
| 5. Zimbabwe -     | 47                 |
| 6. Zambia -       | 56                 |
| 7. Madagascar -   | 57                 |
| 8. Uganda -       | 66                 |
| 9. Cape Verde -   | 68                 |
| 10. Botswana -    | 71                 |
| 11. Tanzania -    | 82                 |
| 12. Lesotho -     | 92                 |
| 13. Kenya -       | 95                 |
| 14. Cameroon -    | 96                 |
| 15. Ethiopia -    | 97                 |

These rankings indicate that there is a lot of work to be done by African feminists if gender equality is to be realized in Africa.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In order to safeguard women's rights in the various legal instruments, there is a need to have organizations that are mandated to play oversight roles. Such organizations do exist in some African Countries where they are referred to as either Gender or Equal Opportunities organizations/Commissions. For example, ***Zimbabwe Gender Commission; Uganda Equal Opportunities Commission; Commission for Gender Equality, South Africa and The National Gender and Equality Commission, Kenya.***

It is worth noting that some African countries do not have such organizations. I wish to advise that we urge our respective governments to establish such organizations. In my

view, there is a need now, more than ever before, for such organizations to collaborate with each other and get the necessary backing from feminists in order to close the gender gaps in all African countries.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Allow me to share with you some salient features of the oversight bodies that I have just talked about. A good number of these bodies are enshrined in the country's constitution meaning that they enjoy security of tenure. They are independent and this allows them room to interact with both state and non-state actors on gender-sensitive accountability measures. Gender-sensitive accountability requires that the decisions of public actors can be regularly assessed from the perspective of women's and men's needs and interests and that gender equality is one of the standards against which the performance of decision-makers is assessed.

For example, The National Gender and Equality Commission (NGEC) is a Constitutional Commission established by the National Gender and Equality Commission Act. No.15 of 2011 pursuant to Article 59 (4) & (5) of the Constitution of Kenya, 2010. The Commission's mandate is to promote gender equality and freedom from discrimination for all people in Kenya with a focus on Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which include: women, children, youth, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), older members of society, minorities and marginalized groups. On August 30, 2021, the NGEC celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary since its establishment. Within this period of ten years, it has realized the following achievements among others:

- a) Review and issuance of memoranda on 320 legal instruments mainly on gender matters to the East African Community, Parliament and County assemblies;
- b) Issued 300 advisories mainly to various organizations and institutions mainly on compliance with existing legal provisions on gender matters.
- c) Facilitated and followed up the development of Gender Policies on various aspects/sectors in the country. For example:
  - i) National Policy on Gender and Development, 2019
  - ii) Gender policies for various counties.

- d) Facilitated the development of *The Maputo Protocol Score-card* to assist in reporting progress on implementation of the Protocol.

These achievements have been realized amidst various challenges key among them being inadequate funding in the wake of great demand for services at the local level. There has also been a challenge of enforcing compliance with gender requirements that are provided for in the existing legislation. The Commission has had to rely heavily on the Judiciary to enforce compliance.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The impacts of crises are never gender-neutral, and COVID-19 is no exception. Economic insecurity is not just about loss of jobs and income today. It has a snowball effect on the lives of women and girls for years to come. Impacts on education and employment have long lasting consequences that, if unaddressed, will reverse hard-won gains in gender equality.

According to UN WOMEN, estimates show that an additional 11 million girls may leave school by the end of the COVID-19 crisis; evidence from previous crises suggests that many will not return. A widening education gender gap has serious implications for women, including a significant reduction in what they earn and how, and an increase in child pregnancy and child marriage.

Lack of education and economic insecurity also increase the risk of gender-based violence. Without sufficient economic resources, women are unable to escape abusive partners and face a greater threat of sexual exploitation and trafficking. These consequences won't disappear when the pandemic subsides: women are likely to experience long-term setbacks in work force participation and income. Impacts on pensions and savings will have implications for women's economic security far down the road.

The fallout will be most severe for the most vulnerable women among us, those who are rarely in the headlines: migrant workers, refugees, marginalized racial and ethnic groups, single-parent households, youth and the world's poorest. Those who have recently escaped extreme poverty will likely fall back into it.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would also like to reiterate one of the recommendations made by FEMENT in their African Feminist Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Statement of July 2020, which

acknowledges that all African Constitutions guarantee the fundamental right to equality and that this needs to underpin the vision and direction of any policy including economic and social policy around COVID-19 response and recovery. This necessarily means policy interventions and budgetary allocations that seek to reinforce rights for those most marginalized by current policies and thus more heavily affected by COVID-19 impacts including women broadly but also intersecting axes of structural marginalization including economic status/class, disability, HIV status, sexual orientation and gender identity.

### **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

This retreat has created space where as African feminists, gender and women's rights activists in all their diversities will connect, reflect, and rekindle their resolve to advance women's and girls' rights especially now in light of the pandemic so that gender justice is foundational to a just and inclusive recovery.

According to the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, I hope we will all continue to reaffirm our commitment to dismantling patriarchy in all its manifestations in Africa. Continuously reminding ourselves of our duty to defend and respect the rights of all women, without qualification. Let us commit to protecting the legacy of our feminist ancestors who made numerous sacrifices, in order that we can exercise greater autonomy in all spheres of life.

### **In Conclusion,**

I would like to quote Maya Angelou, An American Civil rights activist, who once said, ***“Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women.”*** I would like to call upon all State, Non – State Actors, Development Partners, Feminist and Women's Rights Organizations, African feminists, gender and women's rights activists to nurture collaboration among ourselves and strengthen the feminist's movement in Africa and globally especially during these times of the COVID-19 pandemic and all its restrictions and impacts.

I wish you successful deliberations during the next few days of the retreat!

It is now my pleasure to declare the Pan African Feminist Retreat officially opened.

God bless us all and God bless Africa

Thank you.

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