

81st Ordinary Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Statement under Item 5: Activity Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa

Observer Status No. 359

**Honourable Chairperson,
Distinguished Commissioners,
State Delegates represented,
All protocols observed!**

We welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of women, and extend our congratulations to you and the Commission for the commendable achievements made during this intersession in the protection and promotion of women's rights in Africa. In particular, we deeply appreciate your leadership in successfully advocating against the reversal of the ban on Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia, ensuring that the significant progress made across the continent in criminalising this harmful practice is preserved and protected.

We also wish to acknowledge and commend the proactive role the Commission has played in fostering collaboration with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights during this intersession. We are confident that this collaboration will yield positive outcomes for the protection and promotion of women's rights, reinforcing the global framework for gender equality.

Honourable Commissioner,

On 28 September 2024, you issued a joint statement on the Global Day of Action for Access to Safe and Legal Abortion, urging all Member States to enact laws and policies that ensure affordable, accessible, and safe abortion services. While this call to action is laudable, the ongoing restriction of civic space, through the misuse of legislation to suppress human rights defenders, significantly hinders the ability of women human rights defenders (WHRDs) to advocate for these progressive reforms at the national level.

In **Cameroon**, for example, the 2014 Anti-Terrorism Law continues to infringe on the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. Women human rights defenders are required to obtain administrative approval for activities, a request often denied when the work challenges societal norms, such as advocating for abortion rights. These restrictions are not only detrimental to women human rights defenders but also undermine efforts to push forward essential reforms in sexual and reproductive health.

Similarly, in **Kenya**, this has been a particularly devastating year for women and girls, with a disturbing rise in gender-based violence (GBV), particularly femicide, often linked to the suppression of peaceful assembly. These acts of violence against women have occurred

amidst public protests, revealing the systemic failure to protect women's safety and rights in such contexts.

Honourable Commissioner,

We also raise serious concerns regarding the alarming increase in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), particularly targeting women in politics and public life. During recent protests in **Kenya**, widespread reports emerged of sexual violence facilitated through digital platforms. Beyond the harm inflicted on individual women, technology-facilitated gender-based violence has a chilling effect, leading to self-censorship and reduced civic participation by women. This digital authoritarianism worsens existing threats to women's rights and deepens the marginalisation of women from political and public spaces.

Honourable Commissioner,

In **Libya**, the restrictions imposed by the Internal Security Agency under the Government of National Unity in Tripoli severely curtail the freedoms of women and girls, particularly their civil liberties and rights to mobility. Women are often forced to justify their travel without male companions across various regions of the country, including at airports and border crossings. For women human rights defenders, these restrictions create significant barriers, hindering their ability to carry out their essential work in an already hostile environment. The situation in Libya requires urgent attention, especially in light of the deeply entrenched cultural and religious barriers that women and girls must navigate.

Honourable Commissioner,

We have documented mass violations of the rights of women human rights defenders in **Zimbabwe** in the lead-up to the 44th Southern African Development Community (SADC) Summit, recently held in Harare. This summit was exploited by the state to target and silence activists, with numerous women human rights defenders subjected to arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, and inhumane prison conditions. While some human rights defenders have since been acquitted by the courts, there remains an urgent need for accountability and redress to address the long-term impacts of these violations on women human rights defenders.

In addition, we are deeply troubled by the devastating lack of adequate care for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict-affected areas such as **Sudan, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Sahel**. Despite the prevalence of sexual violence as a weapon of war in these contexts, survivors continue to face barriers in accessing critical services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare and psychosocial support. Both State and non-State actors actively target women human rights defenders and first responders who document these violations or provide services to survivors. The complete shutdown of telecommunication services in these regions has further made it increasingly difficult for women human rights defenders to report the atrocities that women and girls face.

Honourable Commissioner,

Despite the heavy personal and professional costs involved, women human rights defenders across Africa continue to demonstrate extraordinary resilience and tenacity in their work. Yet, human rights activism remains widely perceived as an inappropriate role for women, a view entrenched by deeply patriarchal norms.

We call on you, Honourable Commissioner, to intensify the monitoring of the implementation of the Maputo Protocol by Member States, ensuring that they are held accountable to their obligations. In particular, we urge you to prioritise the protection of women human rights defenders, whose rights remain under constant threat.

We also urge you to advocate for Member States to invest in long-term community engagement initiatives aimed at dismantling patriarchal systems that hinder women's full participation in civil society.

I thank you.