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PRESS RELEASE

Practical solutions mooted on ending violence against women and girls and harmful practices in Africa.

Addressing harmful social norms, behavioural change interventions, continuous data and evidence generation, innovative partnerships, knowledge management and advocacy, as well as, multi-stakeholder and multisectoral approaches have been identified as some of the practical interventions to end all forms of violence against women and girls.

At the Annual Continental Coordination Platform held for eight (8) African Union (AU) Member States implementing National Spotlight Programmes, participants reviewed progress in programme implementation in the countries under the initiative focused on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls by 2030. The Spotlight Initiative regional programme in Africa provides a regional response to addressing sexual gender-based violence, harmful practices and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The programme puts a special focus on empowering women's movements. Currently, eight African countries are implementing the project, they include, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

The two-day meeting was organised by the African Union Commission, Women, Gender and Youth Directorate (AUC-WGYD) in collaboration with UN Women and brought together experts from Ministries of Gender and Women's Affairs and Justice; the Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), and other stakeholders, focused on sharing knowledge and learning from the eight Spotlight countries

Opening the event, **Madame Cisse Mariama Mohamed**, Director of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, African Union Commission, emphasized the need to take a holistic approach to shift social norms and narratives that contribute to proliferated gendered violence on the continent. Presenting a palpable example, she illustrated, "a boy who witnesses any male role model in his life being violent and abusive will grow up believing this is the norm. This turns into a vicious intergenerational cycle where boys internalize a view of manhood that is equated with

physical and sexual aggression and dominance over girls and women. Let us all join hands as we are implementing this initiative to stop this behaviour of violence against girls and women in our continent by embracing the potential of male involvement and by mothers teaching their sons and daughters that violence must not be tolerated or seen as normal”.

The Regional Programme supports the overall regional response to addressing sexual and gender-based violence, harmful practices and sexual and reproductive health and rights. It also responds to the African Union (AU)'s priority of ending child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) across the continent such as “Saleema”, the African Union Initiative designed to galvanise political action to accelerate the elimination of the harmful practices against women and girls.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the levels of gender-based violence globally, and Africa has not been an exception. As stated by **Lehau Victoria Maloka**, Acting Director of the Women, Gender and Youth Directorate (WGYD), African Union Commission noted, “We all know how COVID-19 has unearthed the debilitating gender inequalities that continue to bedevil African societies, where women continue to bear the brunt of fragility. Despite this, African women are conquerors and we have seen how they have navigated the difficulties of the pandemic”.

The most compelling and insightful stories, lessons and lived experiences shared demonstrated that the best way to improve Phase Two of the Spotlight Programme will be to involve women, girls, boys and men in programme design, implementation and learning. The Learning Event provided lessons-learned, best practices and strategies aimed at enriching the outcomes of the initiative in service of the billions of women, girls, boys and men impacted by violence against women and girls. The shared knowledge will be deployed in Phase Two of the initiative to end violence against women and girls, harmful practices and ensure the promotion of sexual rights and reproductive health. The programme implementation will use evidence, informed by statistical information on progress and challenges at sub-national and national levels.

Speaking about the importance of knowledge sharing, **Letty Chiwara**, UN Women Representative in Ethiopia, to the AU and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) (noted, “I cannot emphasize enough on the need to document, disseminate, and utilize the wealth of knowledge that will be generated in the course of these two days to address issues of violence against women and girls in Africa. It is only when the evidence is used to transform the daily realities of women and girls for the better that we consider this platform a successful one.”

Thomas Huyghebaert, the Head of Policy Cooperation at the EU Delegation to the African Union observed that “We can change legislation, or improve access to services, such as preventative or post violence care; but to change mindsets and challenge

stereotypes, we need to engage at the community level - engage men, boys, traditional and religious leaders at the grassroots level, based on an accurate analysis of the situation and supported by quality, disaggregated and globally comparable data". Moving forward, Spotlight countries will ensure improved coherence and comparability in data collection, analysis and dissemination while recognizing contextual peculiarities and strengthening a sense of collaboration and shared contribution to ending violence against women and girls.

A knowledge product will be developed documenting the lessons from the two days for wider dissemination in countries implementing National Spotlight Programmes as well as other AU Member States.

For further information, please contact:

Doreen Apollos, Directorate of Information and Communication | African Union Commission | E-mail: ApollosD@africa-union.org | www.au.int | Addis Ababa | Ethiopia

Directorate of Information and Communication | African Union Commission,
E-mail: DIC@african-union.org | **Website:** www.au.africa | Addis Ababa | Ethiopia
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