



CSW63 Position Statement by African Women's Rights Organizations

&

Strategies for a Gender Responsive Approach to Social Protection Systems, Access to Public Services and Sustainable Infrastructure

We, the members of the NGO CSW/Africa¹, take note of the African Ministerial Outcome Document resulting from the meeting of African Ministers' of Gender/Women Affairs in Cairo from 3 to 6 February 2019 and acknowledge the Ministers' pledge of their commitment and support to global and regional conventions ratified by member states relating to the theme of the 63rd session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW63) concerning social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and empowerment of women and girls.

We recognize that social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure have profound gender implications. It is therefore critical that governments develop, implement and ensure the enforcement by all segments of society of evidence-based holistic, coherent and multisectoral protections services that are qualitative, inclusive, confidential, open, friendly, accessible and adequately address the needs of vulnerable / under-served groups.

Despite African governments' commitment to engender social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure, we note with concern that there is still widespread violations of these rights across the continent and that African women still face several vulnerabilities in these areas.

¹ NGO CSW/Africa is one of the regional forums of Non-Governmental Organization Commission on the Status of Women, established in 2013 to increase the effectiveness of African civil society participation in the annual United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW).

The African Ministerial Outcome Document's commitments are welcome in a time where African women face several challenges, most of them relating to substantive gender equality. Striving towards women's rights in Africa encounters many challenges because women across the continent, especially those living in rural areas, face challenges which include: 'culture, religion, language, the impact of historical events in local settings, the natural environment and the political economy shaping subsistence and the distribution of resources. Most of these human rights challenges can be linked to the fact that women face barriers in accessing the social protection systems, public services and sustainable infrastructure in their countries.

The overall framework for this discourse is going beyond access and anchoring the discourse on Rights and Entitlement. Women and girls should not be reduced to beneficiary status. They should be duly recognised as rights holders and people with agency, especially as citizens paying taxes.

The social protection discourse for Africans must be linked with social and economic policy space and effectively address the failure to deliver basic services. The social security or protection system is very technocratic and devoid of recognition of our community's social support systems and positive cultural values. This should be addressed by National Governments as a matter of urgency.

A responsibility and accountability framework should be urgently adopted which recognises the central role of government in delivering public services, protecting vulnerable groups who are often excluded from service delivery, especially women and girls in all their diversities. Member states should recognize the importance of social, political economic and security environment that women and girls operate.

We therefore present this position statement with key messages to African governments with the view of assisting them to develop and implement strategies that ensure gender equality in social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure. We enjoin our governments to adopt an evidence-based, holistic, coherent, multisectoral, cross-sectional, and intergenerational approach to addressing gender inequalities, vulnerability and exclusion across Africa.

Key Recommendations by African Women's Rights Organizations on the CSW63 theme

1. Social Protection Systems

Through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), governments have committed to reducing inequality by adopting fiscal, wage and social protection policies which will achieve this goal. However, the global economic crisis in 2008 and the austerity policies still followed in many countries have curtailed or even reversed progress towards the realisation of economic and social rights, with particularly devastating effects for women

Social protection programmes, including social assistance and social insurance programs linking to education, health and safety services are crucial in promoting the rights of women and girls. Existing evidence shows that social protection programmes contribute to reducing poverty, improving income security, mitigating hunger and malnutrition and enabling access to better nutrition, health care and education. However, a majority of the world's population often lack access to these social protection mechanisms, particularly marginalised women and girls.

Specifically, we call upon African governments to:

- i. Adopt specific social protection systems for women and girls. For instance, violence against women and girls, young women's rights and climate change must feature as stand-alone and inter-linked in policies and approaches to advance women's economic empowerment, breaking the silences between economic, social and environment policy making, to effectively respond to multi-faced realities faced women and girls.
- ii. Support non-formal forms of social protection such as community based programmes, for example, burial societies, income savings and lending groups so that these are transformative to women's lives and do not increase women's unpaid work.
- iii. Create Interlinkages amongst social protection services and ensure that each social protection systems complement each other.
- iv. Recognize, reduce and redistribute women's and girls' disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work through access to adequate parental leave, affordable and accessible quality child care, flexible work hours and social security mechanisms.
- v. Ensure safety in public and domestic space for girls and young women to better enjoy their right to public services and social protection.
- vi. Move away from input-based to results-oriented management of social protection to ensure the investment is realizing what it is supposed to achieve.
- vii. Put in place laws that will ensure women's ownership of land is enhanced.

- viii. Ensure a gender and tax justice approach to fiscal policies be put in place by governments if the Beijing Platform is to be achieved.
- ix. Adopt affirmative action for women to access big procurements and projects, and include persons with disabilities in infrastructure construction.
- x. Eliminate barriers relating to female participation in the labour force.
- xi. Provide legislated, comprehensive, inclusive, gender and age responsive and adolescent friendly social protection services during emergency and non-emergency settings.
- xii. Depart from export-oriented economic growth models underpinned by GDP growth targets as a measure of progress instead of progress made on workers' rights, social and gender justice.
- xiii. Prioritise mobilisation of resources to support full realisation of women's human rights over tax or trade treaties that prioritise incentives for foreign investors.

2. Access to Public Services and Sustainable Infrastructure

Effective accessible public services and sustainable infrastructure are critical throughout the life cycle to promote girls' and women's empowerment and to prevent their discrimination. Exclusion from registration to public systems, lower rates of completion of quality, inclusive education, harmful and discriminatory gender norms and stereotypes around adolescent sexual and reproductive health, and lack of safety in public and domestic spaces are just a few of the barriers that girls and young women acutely and routinely face. These barriers greatly contribute to continued disempowerment of girls and women and perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination.

It is crucial that the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women recognizes and urges Member States to acknowledge and promote the rights of women and girls across their life-course through promoting access to effective gender transformative public services, that aim to tackle the root causes of gender inequality – such as unequal power relations and discriminatory norms and practices. This requires including women's and girls' voices, realities, and participation in this important conversation in order to ensure that Member States are made aware of, take into consideration, and promote policies to address all the underlying barriers to girls' and women's empowerment, and the achievement of true gender equality.

Specifically, we call upon African governments to:

- i. Adopt a life-course approach to education and empowerment of women and girls, creating an enabling public service environment from very early in life, that is, dedicated investment for accessible and gender transformative public services.

- ii. Provide access to adolescent and youth friendly Sexual Rights and Health Rights services and education in all settings.
- iii. Eliminate all forms of gender based violence in all settings. Services preventing and addressing Gender Based Violence (GBV) should be affordable, accessible and appropriate user friendly services for GBV survivors.
- iv. Create an enabling environment for girls to return to school, including: policies on re-entry to schools of pregnant girls and day care for returning mothers; the provision of compulsory 10 to 12 years of basic education (including at least one year of compulsory Early Childhood Development service provision); the provision of free education that is of quality and relevant to peoples' needs to enable girls' retention, performance, completion and transition to higher sectors of education and work as well as girls' empowerment for agency; and ensuring the integration of refugees and internally displaced persons.
- v. Reach out to out-of-school children, adolescents and youth with adequate education services and also develop social safety nets concerning access to education for the elderly, orphans, widows, female dependents and those with disabilities.
- vi. Eliminate all forms of school related GBV (and create safe school environments conducive to learning free of any form of violence, (physical punishment, school usage by military or rebel groups, abduction when in school, amongst others) harassment and bullying, with adequate facilities that are gender and disability sensitive.
- vii. Understand the importance of providing scholarship for vulnerable women and girls to study professional courses in schools to enhance their access to public service.
- viii. Ensure that public services are not privatised and are not left to the free market so that there is no violation of the sexual and reproductive health rights and the rights to health of women living in poverty, lesbian, bisexual, trans, queer or intersex persons, people living with HIV and AIDS, people using drugs, sex workers, people of colour, migrant workers, people of specific ethnicity and /or religion and other oppressed peoples due to rising private health care costs and that women's rights, leisure, health and to participate in political processes are not violated due to them having to stay at home and look after the sick ones and having to work longer hours overall in paid work, unpaid work and domestic work.
- ix. Avoid the use -and abuse- of public-private partnerships as a silver-bullet for public services financing, as there is scant regard for accountability mechanisms to uphold human rights standards, including environmental and social safeguards: the prioritisation of Public Private Partnership projects is structurally guided by profit-driven considerations rather than actual social need and many a time, public services and goods that mostly have an impact on women and girls (such as maternal care) are the least profitable and as a result, priority is put on mega infrastructure projects like tolled mega highways.

- x. Provide an environment where citizens can mobilize and organize to demand decent work and labour rights.
- xi. Curb illicit financial flows that continue to drain public reserves particularly in developing countries and translate into fewer national resources available to improve access to key areas such as education, healthcare, or social protection with a disproportionate gender impact.
- xii. Provide safe, accessible and reliable public transport, footpaths, market places and public facilities including sanitation facilities with adequate menstrual hygiene management to support girls 'and women's mobility, which can enable them to access education, seek employment and participate more widely in social, economic and political life.
- xiii. Reduce distances for public services such as hospitals, schools and banks with the view of addressing rural-urban bias.
- xiv. Consider the challenges that persons with disabilities face in providing access to public infrastructure.

In conclusion, NGO CSW/Africa members urge member states to abide by their commitments by strengthening the legal provisions and ensure a rights-based approach for women's access to social protection, public services and sustainable infrastructure as provided by not only UN instruments but also pertinent comprehensive African human rights system documents including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, Agenda 2063, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa and the Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Other Related Infectious Diseases.

We further urge the international community to recognise that it is not only countries that need to adopt an intersectoral approach. Following Paris Declaration that 'lays out a practical, action-orientated roadmap to improve the quality of aid and its impact on development', donors need to align their objectives and hence the United Nations needs walk the talk of 'Delivering as One' approach towards social protection to include all agencies whose mandate is about one of the other marginalized-excluded-vulnerable group.

NGO CSW/Africa is one of the regional forums of Non-Governmental Organization Commission on the Status of Women established in 2013 as a substantive committee under the auspices Conference of NGOs (CoNGO). NGOCSW/Africa was created to increase the effectiveness of African Civil Society participation in the Commission on the Status of women. Since its establishment NGO CSW/Africa has provided leadership to African women in mobilizing women to participate in CSW and ensuring that women effectively engage and contribute to processes leading up to, during and after the Commission. Members of NGO CSW/Africa include FEMNET – African Women's Development and Communication Network, FAS - Femmes Africa Solidarité, Akina Mama wa Afrika (AMWA), AAWORD/AFARD, Eastern Africa Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI), Servitas Cameroon and Women in Law and Development in Africa (WiLDAF). <http://www.ngocswafrica.org>