

54th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

Banjul, Gambia

STATEMENT ON THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN AFRICA

Madame Chair,

This year marks 10 years since the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Maputo Protocol, was adopted. The 36 State parties to the Protocol determine 'to ensure that the rights of women are promoted, realized and protected' so women can enjoy fully all their human rights. That is to say, these States commit to ensuring women can claim and defend all human rights. This is in line with the obligations of all member states under the African Charter.

However, although the Protocol speaks of States parties' commitment to increasing women's participation 'in structures and processes for conflict prevention, management and resolution,' and at all levels of decision-making, we know this is far from being realized. Women's participation in the public space remains largely marginalized.

Furthermore, women human rights defenders across the continent continue to face attack, harassment and intimidation. Attacks against them are frequently justified in the name of tradition, culture or religion, as they challenge the subordinate role frequently ascribed to women in all our societies. This will only change when such a role is challenged, gender equality promoted, and rights for women guaranteed.

During her remarks on behalf of AU States during the Opening Ceremony of this session, the Minister of Human Rights of Burkina Faso spoke of the importance of the role of women defenders across the continent to peace and security, democratic processes, development and upholding human rights; and of the obligations of States to take steps to promote and protect their work. These remarks recall UN General Assembly consensus resolutions on human right defenders, which reference the need to pay particular attention to guaranteeing the rights of women defenders. These consensus resolutions mean that all States represented in this room; all member states of the AU, have acknowledged the importance of the role of women defenders and have committed to their protection. As we gather at this Commission session, the first ever resolution focusing on the protection of women defenders is being discussed at the UN General Assembly. We look to all African States to show their human rights commitment by supporting this UN resolution, and by taking concrete steps to protect women defenders in their work.

We commend the Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders in Africa, supported by Commissioner Maiga for producing a study on the situation of women defenders in Africa with recommendations for their protection, to assist States in fulfilling their obligations. As the importance of the role of women defenders is increasingly recognized – including at the Human Rights Awards held on the margins of this session – we look to the Commission to adopt this important and timely report and the recommendations at this session. Civil society stands ready to assist the Commission in pushing States for the implementation of their recommendations.

Madame Chair: Where women defenders cannot do their work free from attack, human rights will continue to be violated and deep inequalities will persist in our societies. To protect women defenders involves putting in place effective gender specific protection measures; but far more fundamentally it requires the elimination of structural discrimination and violence.

It requires States to implement the articles of the Maputo Protocol.