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REPUBLIC OF CAMEROON
Peace – Work – Fatherland

CAMEROON HUMAN
RIGHTS COMMISSION

SUB-COMMISSION IN CHARGE
OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROMOTION

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STATEMENT BY THE CAMEROON HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION TO MARK THE 61st AFRICAN WOMEN'S DAY

Theme.- *Pooling wisdom and women's potential on peace-building to accelerate the implementation of the African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)*

31 July 2023

The Cameroon Human Rights Commission (hereinafter referred to as "the Commission"), created by Law No. 2019/014 of 19 July 2019 and inaugurated on 29 April 2021, following the swearing-in of its members before the Supreme Court sitting in Combined Chambers,

Considering that the celebration of African Women's Day on 31 July of each year, marks the anniversary of the creation of the Pan-African Women's Organisation (PAWO), the first women's meeting organised on the African continent on 31 July 1962, to create a platform for reflection on how to significantly improve on the living conditions and emancipation of African women,

Considering that the State of Cameroon is a party to several instruments for the promotion and protection of the rights of women, and in turn, the improvement of their living conditions such as:

- i) the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)
- ii) the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)
- iii) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)
- iv) the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)
- v) the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights - Maputo Protocol, (2005)
- vi) the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action adopted at the World Conference on Human Rights (1993)

- vii) the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995)
- viii) the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment; -

Noting that the 61st African Women's Day is being celebrated at the African regional level under the theme, *Pooling Wisdom and Women's Potential on peace-building to accelerate the implementation of the African Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)*, and that national ownership of the Day is reflected in the theme, *The role of women in peace-building for the operationalisation of the African Continental Free Trade Area*¹,

Agreeing with the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Family that the 2023 edition "is an opportunity to reflect on the importance of African women, in general, and Cameroonian women, in particular, not only in economic development but also in the peacekeeping and peace-building process",

Recalling that the role of women in peace-building was reaffirmed in resolution S/RES/1325 adopted by the Security Council on 31 October 2000, which "*led to what is now known as the Women, Peace and Security Programme, [which] focuses on conflict prevention, gender equality and the meaningful participation of women in all stages of conflict management and resolution, as well as in all aspects of post-conflict reconstruction and development*"²,

Noting that such role of women has been reasserted in a permanent context where not only "*women's efforts and actions in the areas of peace, governance and development are very rarely heard and shared in the public life of our countries*", also, where women and girls are victims of socio-cultural constraints that very often hinder their effective inclusion in decision-making processes and weaken their social position³,

Further to the social constraints and the fact that women and men are affected differently by conflicts, the United Nations Security Council reinforced Resolution S/RES/1325 by adopting Resolutions 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960 and 2106 "*which recognize that sexual violence in conflict has been and continues to be, in some contexts, used as a tactic of war to achieve military and political objectives*"⁴,

Recalling the eight pillars of the Culture of Peace, according to UNESCO⁵, namely to:

1. promote peace through education for all children, with special emphasis on girls

¹ Terms of reference of the Ministry for Women Empowerment and the Family to mark the 61st African Women's Day on 31 July 2023, p. 5.

² Foreword by MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, to *Elle se bat pour la paix, 20 ans, 20 parcours*, a book published jointly by the United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU) and the African Union Commission (AUC), January 2020, p. 12

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴ Guidelines for developing a national action plan for women, peace and security, United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, October 2012, p. 5.

⁵ <https://WWW.unesco.org/fr/vision>, *Notre vision de la paix*, accessed on 17 July 2023.

2. improve sustainable economic and social development, giving priority to eradicating poverty
3. promote respect for all human beings by guaranteeing the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
4. ensure equality between women and men by integrating a gender-specific approach and eliminating all forms of discrimination
5. support democratic participation by educating citizens in responsible practices
6. advance the concepts of tolerance, understanding and solidarity by promoting dialogue between civilisations
7. support the free flow of knowledge and information through independent media
8. promote international peace and security through actions such as disarmament and the peaceful resolution of conflicts,

Recalling the UN General Assembly resolution A /73/890-S/2019/448 of 30 May 2018, publishing the Secretary-General's report on peacebuilding and peace sustainability, which states that *"in the context of transitions and downsizing, there is a need to systematically mainstream gender issues, drawing on relevant expertise and analysis, and paying due attention to gender equality and women's empowerment"*⁶,

Considering that as part of its activities, the CHRC is *"develop[ing] relations with NGOs working for the protection and promotion of human rights, for economic and social development [...] for the protection of particularly vulnerable groups [especially girls and women] or in specialised fields"*⁷,

Noting that the objectives of the Women, Peace and Security Programme are closely linked to the goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Agenda 2063 and the Silencing the Guns by 2020 initiative,

Aligning with some specific aspirations of AU Agenda 2063 such as the *"desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth are realised, and with freedom from fear, disease and want"*⁸,

Considering that the AfCFTA is an opportunity to realise the aspirations set out in Agenda 2063 *"to create a continental market with free movement of people, capital, goods and services, which is essential to strengthen economic integration, promote agricultural development and food security"*⁹

Considering, therefore, that the AfCFTA is an opportunity to address the challenges set out in Agenda 2063, especially those concerning the persistence of *"the burdens that*

⁶ United Nations General Assembly resolution No. A /73/890-S/2019/448 of 30 May 2018 on the publication of the report of the Secretary-General on the building and maintenance of peace, Geneva, October 2012, p. 5.

⁷ Point C, paragraph 7 concerning the modalities of operation of NHRIs contained in the (Resolution A/RES/48/134 of 20 December 1993) on principles concerning the status and functioning of national institutions for the protection and promotion of human rights.

⁸ Agenda 2063, The Africa we want, The African Union Commission, April 2015, Addis-Abeba, Ethiopia, p. 2.

⁹ Accord portant ZLECAF, p. 1.

continue to be part of the human experience and of underdevelopment, namely hunger, malnutrition, fragility, marginalisation and inequalities between regions and countries"¹⁰,

*Aware that "no society can achieve its full potential unless it empowers women and young people and removes all barriers to women's full participation in all spheres of human activity"*¹¹,

Convinced with MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, *"that prioritising gender issues is a prerequisite for building the Africa we aspire to by 2063, an Africa that represents a dynamic force in the community of nations"*¹²,

Mindful that it is through The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa on the theme Financial and Economic Inclusion of African Women that the African Union has called upon African States to increase actions towards progressive gender inclusion for sustainable development at national and regional levels,

Taking into account that the Strategic Plan 2022-2025 of the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) promotes broader systemic changes in its core areas of competence and thematic actions, namely:

- i) governance and participation in public life
- ii) economic advancement
- iii) elimination of violence against women and girls
- iv) women, peace and security, humanitarian action and disaster risk reduction,

Considering Article 3 of the Agreement establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), adopted in Kigali, Rwanda, on 21 March 2018, which entered into force on 30 May 2019, was ratified by Cameroon on 31 January 2020 and has been officially operational since 1 January 2021, sets out eight general objectives, including some that explicitly refer to gender issues:

- subparagraph (e), which aims to *"promote and attain sustainable and inclusive socio-economic development, gender equality and structural transformation of the State Parties"*
- subparagraph (g), which aims to *"promote industrial development through diversification and regional value chain development, agricultural development and food security"*,

Considering that *"the Continental Free Trade Area should create inclusive economic opportunities and generate employment for all social strata, including the most vulnerable, with the aim of 'leaving no one behind'"*¹³,

¹⁰ AUA Agenda 2063, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹² Foreword by MOUSSA FAKI MAHAMAT, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, to the book titled, *Elle se bat pour la paix, 20 ans, 20 parcours*, op. cit., p. 12.

Considering further that the AfCFTA offers an opportunity to "create new opportunities for productive formal employment and decent work, and to stimulate the development of entrepreneurship, thereby serving as a bridge to new avenues of economic empowerment for youth"¹⁴ and women,

Aware of the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA to address mass unemployment among women and the girl child, particularly in the tourism sector, where there is a growing need for workers in the hotel, restaurant and travel industry, and for the reception and accommodation of tourists¹⁵,

Noting that the National Strategy Document for the Implementation of the AfCFTA, prepared and adopted by the Government of Cameroon on 22 April 2020, is broken down into specific actions and activities to promote women's participation in cross-border trade and entrepreneurship,

The Commission commends the committed actions of women for a return to peace in the North-West and South-West regions, including the peace march organised by North-West women in Yaoundé on 13 April 2023 and the demonstration by North-West and South-West women in Bamenda on 7 September 2018 to demand a return to peace,

The Commission commends the activities in which it participated to improve the living conditions of women and the girl child, particularly:

- the validation workshop for the second generation of the National Action Plan for Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security and the related resolutions, organised by MINPROFF in Mbalmayo from 9 to 10 August 2022
- the capacity-building workshop for young people and women, organised in Bafoussam by the Ministry of Youth and Civic Education from 29 September to 1 October 2022,

The Commission commends the government authorities, private entities and civil society actors for their efforts to effectively combat terrorism and protect peace in Cameroon; and for promoting the role of women in peace-building, and increasing their participation as well as integration into the economic sectors¹⁶ as illustrated through:

- the inclusion of Cameroon among the eight African countries ready to freely trade 96 products with tariff preferences for the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Zone on 7 October 2022, under the new "Guided Trade Initiative", which aims to multiply intra-African trade by three by the end of 2023;
- the 14th Annual Central Africa Cross-Border Trade Fair (FOTRAC) organised by the Ministry of Trade, in Kye-ossi, a town on the three borders between

¹³ AU AfCFTA, p. 37.

¹⁴ Accord portant création de la Zone de libre-échange continentale africaine (ZLECAf), p. 39.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁶ Cameroon's National Strategy for the Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area 2020-2035, 22 April 2020, p. 37.

Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea, from 7 to 30 July 2023 on the theme of Continuing the socio-economic integration process with the FTAA and resilience in the face of multi-faceted violence due to security, health and food crises and climate change in Africa

- the *Salon de la Maternité et de la petite Enfance (SIMAPE)* organised by the Ministry of Public Health at the Yaoundé Multi-Purpose Sports Complex from 26 May to 3 June 2023 on the specific theme of the panel 10 African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) - a lever for female empowerment
- the first negotiations of women for peace in Cameroon, organised from 19 to 21 September 2022 in Yaoundé by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, with the preparation of a document entitled "Piece by piece, building peace in Cameroon through women's action"
- the creation of Centres for Women Empowerment and the Family (CPFF) throughout the country to build the capacity of women and girls in entrepreneurship, project set-up and management, with a special focus on new information and communication technologies
- implementation of the Central African Backbone / Dorsale à fibre optique d'Afrique centrale project, with a sub-component entitled "Support for the empowerment of women",

Finally, the Commission commends the attitude of the communities in the Far North, North West and South West regions who, in the interests of a definitive return to peace, are reporting the presence of terrorists in their areas and are helping the defence and security forces, in particular through the vigilance committees, to root out the many armed gangs sowing terror among the population,

However, the Commission remains concerned that:

- most women compared to men still operate either in the craft sector, in small and medium-sized agri-food businesses, or in the informal sector, a situation which is very precarious and characterised by, low productivity and low income
- women face more challenges than men in developing their businesses, such as:
 - limited access to credit and land ownership
 - insufficient business management and marketing skills
- there is a low level of trade policy ownership and compliance by economic operators, especially women
- the persistence of informal cross-border trade with AfCFTA countries:
 - which is reflected in the low participation of women in trade policy making
 - which suggests that many of the services produced at the national level are not covered by the monitoring mechanisms that could ensure their structure and sustainable development

- the failure of national trade laws and regulations to prevent and punish human rights abuses, the displacement of communities, environmental degradation, and the failure to respect workers' rights, women's rights, the rights of disabled people, and the rights of refugee women;

Concerning the National Strategy for the Implementation of the Cameroon African Continental Free Trade Area 2020-2035, adopted on 22 April 2020, *the Commission recommends* that the authorities:

- accelerate the implementation of national gender policies to promote gender equality, women's empowerment and the transition from the informal to the formal sector, while mainstreaming gender concerns ;
- assess the capacity of women-owned enterprises to participate in regional value networks, improve their productivity and take advantage of the new export opportunities offered by the AfCFTA ;
- develop and/or strengthen government initiatives to improve access to finance for women entrepreneurs by organising workshops and other seminars to help them develop projects that could benefit from funding,

In particular, the Commission recommends :

- *For the government* to enhance the role and contribution of women in peace-building and reconciliation activities, particularly in regions facing acute security challenges;
- *For the ministries responsible for trade and women's empowerment* to:
 - o implement the Action Plan of the AfCFTA National Strategy, in particular concerning building women's leadership capacity, developing a mentoring system for women involved in trade and promoting women's financial inclusion
 - o increase women's awareness of the opportunities offered by the AfCFTA to bring their production into line with product standards for sub-regional and international markets
 - o keep encouraging women to organise themselves into economic interest groups to harness their dynamism and enable them to overcome the fragility of their individual and organisational structures
 - o put vulnerable groups, especially women, at the centre of the implementation of the AfCFTA, through the equitable distribution of benefits, respect for the principle of non-discrimination and their participation;
- *The CHRC urges the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Social Affairs and Labour* to strengthen capacity building activities for inspectors on the identification of

- *The CHRC urges the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Social Affairs and Labour to strengthen capacity building activities for inspectors on the identification of indicators to measure the extent to which the fight against economic violence against women is taken on board ;*
- *The CHRC recommends that MINCOMMERCE, MINDDEVEL and local authorities, as well as Civil Society actors:*
 - *build the capacity of actors in the chain of collection and management of trade resources to put human well-being at the heart of trade ;*
 - *assess the impact of trade policies on human rights ;*
- *the ministries responsible for education to ensure that education policies and curriculum content do not fuel conflict or hate speech, but rather promote the return to and consolidation of peace;*
- *For the Ministry of Justice to:*
 - *continue relentlessly to track down the perpetrators and sponsors of armed conflicts, wherever they may be hiding, and punish them to the full extent of the law ;*
 - *ensure that investigations into violence against women committed by State and non-State actors are concluded and, if found guilty, that they are sentenced to punishments commensurate to the offence, including compensation for the victims ;*
 - *strengthen the implementation of accountability measures to ensure that victims of human rights violations have access to justice;*
- *For the Civil Society Organisations to:*
 - *develop and/or strengthen women's organisations and groups, particularly in the commercial and informal sectors, through the implementation of specific support programmes and training for these organisations and groups;*
 - *strengthen the establishment of channels and platforms for public reporting of acts that may undermine and violate the rights of women and the girl child;*
- *government representatives, civil society, the media, local leaders, educational establishments and parents are to:*
 - *increase women's awareness of the various forms of protection and recourse available to them and encourage women of all ages and social statuses to report all forms of violence;*
 - *culture a mindset that value and opines that:*
 - *"education helps to protect communities and is undoubtedly a preventive measure against violence"¹⁷;*
 - *"when children [and especially girls] go to school, their minds become less susceptible to those who would recruit them into violence [because] they are better trained to reason [and] are better equipped to resist manipulation [and] are able to make choices that will enable*

¹⁷ *Elle se bat pour la paix, 20 ans, 20 parcours, op. cit., pp. 50-51.*


*them to provide for themselves and their children and to develop their community and nation"*¹⁸;

For its part, the Commission:

- ***Commits***, as part of its strengthened mandate, to strengthen its actions to ensure that vulnerable groups, including women and the girl child, are not overlooked in the implementation of the AfCFTA,
- ***reiterates*** that it will spare no effort to continue raising awareness of women's rights through training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy, fact-finding missions and the handling of complaints or self-initiated investigations,

The Commission once again urges women, girls, men and boys to break the silence by denouncing or reporting any case of violation of human rights, in particular women's rights, in conflict or non-conflict situations of which they are victims or witnesses, including through **its toll-free number 1523**.

Yaoundé, the 31st July 2023



James MOUANGUE KOBILA

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 50.