High Level Seminar:

Sustaining Peace: African Women Mediators in focus

Opening speech by H.E. Amb. Smaïl Chergui
Commissioner for Peace and Security

New York, 25 April 2018
Your Majesty Queen of Belgium,
Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belgium Didier Reynders
Your Excellency Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Mme Margot Wallström
Your Excellency Mme Catherine Samba Panza, co-chair of FemWise-Africa
Your Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like from the onset to express my sincere gratitude to Her Majesty the Queen for her encouragement and unwavering support and for gracing our meeting by her presence. I also wish to extend my thanks to the Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations and the International Peace Institute for co-hosting this important event with us.

We are gathered here today to reflect on a subject that is very dear to the African Union and to me personally: how to significantly and urgently advance the substantive participation of African Women in sustaining peace, in mediation, conflict prevention, and management and resolution efforts in Africa and further afield.

This is not merely a wish shared by all of us at the African Union Commission; it is also not simply a promise to be fulfilled at some unspecified moment in the future. It is however a firm commitment, a deeply felt and shared concern that we must do much more – in Africa and the world at large – to overcome what to us is an inexcusable state of affairs.

Indeed, it is deeply worrying that, 18 years since the adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 – a true watershed moment in the development of an international normative framework for women’s participation in peace and security – women’s participation in this field remains marginal at best.
The obligations placed on state parties to “ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict” contained in Resolution 1325 notwithstanding, the international community has been slow in its determination to accelerate the participation of women.

And yet, without the substantive participation, contribution and engagement of women, we have little chance of overcoming, in a sustainable and inclusive manner, the violent conflicts that affect many of our countries, that so ravage our communities, stunt our progress, reverse any growth and development achieved. At the same time, but equally concerning to us, is the fact that the gender dimensions of conflict continue to be largely absent in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction processes, despite the continued international community’s efforts.

Your Majesty

Your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The question of women’s participation in peace processes and mediation is in fact rooted in the premise that women’s inclusion – their presence and participation as well as their perspective and contributions to the substance of talks – improves the chances of attaining viable and sustainable solutions. Yet, even though women in Africa as elsewhere have excelled in all areas of public life, rarely do we find women conducting, or even leading so-called Track One processes. Women’s perspectives and experience in government, in the private sector, at community, at family levels would undoubtedly strengthen our ability to better conduct and manage conflict prevention, management and resolution.

On the African continent, the African Union has led efforts at the promotion and empowerment of African women in conflict prevention, management and resolution. Indeed, the African Union has put in place a number of institutions and structures specifically to accelerate the empowerment of women including the appointment of an AU Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security in 2014 and the establishment of Gender, Peace and Security Programme in 2015.
Equally important, the African Union has created the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise-Africa). Indeed, on 13 March 2017, the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed the modalities for FemWise-Africa with additional endorsement given by the UN Security Council on 27 March 2017 in New York as part of an Arria Formula meeting. FemWise-Africa was officially established through a decision of the AU Assembly of Heads of State (AU Summit) on 4 July 2017.

For the purposes of our meeting here today it is important to recall our priorities as FemWise-Africa:

1. Professionalizing the role of women in preventive diplomacy and mediation,
2. Ensuring a channel for women’s meaningful and effective participation in peace processes, including as heads of official high-level mediation missions;
3. Initiating women’s action that will catalyse and mainstream the engagement of women in mediation in line with the African Union’s “Agenda 2063” and the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
4. Bridging the gap between Tracks 1, 2 and 3 mediation and synergizing efforts towards inclusive peace processes with sustainable outcomes.
5. Strengthening the mediation interventions of FemWise-Africa with the facilitation of Quick Impact Projects and the establishment of local and national peace infrastructures as foundations and Launchpads for medium and longer term initiatives that will ensure that stability and development take root.

Your Majesty, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

The First General Assembly of Fem-Wise, held in Constantine, Algeria, laid out a roadmap to ensure that a number of conflict prevention and mediation-related actions are implemented by FemWise-Africa. These include special missions to select countries, professionalizing the role of women in preventive diplomacy and mediation, implementation of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) in support of FemWise interventions, and the support to national peace infrastructures.

This will ensure FemWise-Africa is anchored in on-going peace processes, such as in Mali/Sahel the Lake Chad Basin, Horn of Africa or the Great Lakes region, where the co-chairs of FemWise-Africa, H.E. Mme Catherine Samba Panza and H.E. Mme Speciosa Wandira Kazibwe, are serving as Advisory Board Members of the Women’s Platform for the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of Congo.
and the Great Lakes region. In the meantime, we have also developed a Continental Results Framework for Monitoring and Reporting on the Implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in Africa.

I am committed to ensuring that women play a pivotal and meaningful role in the area of conflict prevention, social cohesion, dialogue and peace mediation, including in the borderland areas across the African continent. We are steadfast in our efforts to harness the impact of empowering women in mediation, and we look forward to setting this example through upcoming deployments this year. In 2018 alone, we are firmly committed to training one hundred young women mediators. A key priority will be the deployment of these mediators within our ongoing initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali, as well as facilitating national dialogues in other countries.

Your Majesty, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

This is a time of increased complexity and unpredictability in world affairs, characterised by the gradual erosion of multilateralism through the deepening of isolationism and the rise of nationalist identity based politics. These worrying trends, which directly impact on multilateral organisations such as ours, take place when the world most needs cooperation and unity of purpose to address the threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism, migration, the consequences of environmental degradation and climate change, transnational organised crime, the proliferation of weapons, to name but a few.

In this context, the African Union Commission holds in the highest regard our partnerships with those such as yourselves who share our values. In operationalizing the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation we are calling on the steadfast support of our international partners as rolling out FemWise-Africa throughout the continent will take a concerted and unwavering effort. The important role of women in preventive diplomacy and conflict mediation has been neglected for far too long and the mere fact that we are meeting to discuss this important issues shows that we can do better and we are determined to deliver on that promise.

For this reason, the Commission invites and welcomes collaboration with similar mechanisms around the world, such as the Nordic Women Mediators Network, the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network and the Commonwealth Women Mediators Network. More partnerships will continue to be forged as FemWise-Africa takes root. Potential for collaboration also exists with the Asia Women’s Networks (the Philippines
and SANGAT) and the Latin American Networks and platforms such as in Colombia and Brazil, which we will pursue. Just four weeks ago, we had a promising meeting in Oslo, Norway, with the Nordic Women Mediators Network where we were honored by the attendance of the UN Under-Secretary-General, Mme Ana Maria Menendez.

I Thank you for your kind attention!