

**Statement of Refugee and Returnee Women  
To the African Union Continental Commemorative Meeting on the  
Implementation and Supervision of the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention  
Addis Ababa, 19 June 2019**

Your Excellency Madam Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

Your Excellency Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea,

Your Excellency Ambassador Ossama Abd Elkhalek, Ambassador of the Arab Republic of Egypt,

Your Excellency Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the African Union Commission,

Your Excellency Ambassador Minata Samate Cessouma, African Union Commissioner for Political Affairs,

Mr George Okoth-Obbo, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations,  
Distinguished delegates,

Sisters and brothers,

I am speaking on behalf of 15 women who have been meeting in Addis to discuss our situations and the need for solutions. We are lawyers, doctors, engineers, farmers, students, managers of households and families, caregivers and leaders of peace associations. Twelve of us are refugees, while three of us have returned home to rebuild our lives and contribute to rebuilding our country. We come from nine different countries across Africa.

We are here today to give you a small window into our lives and some of the issues we face as refugees and returnees. We are also here to ask for your help because we cannot solve our situations without you.

Your Excellency, we are speaking to you in particular, in your capacity as Champion of the AU's theme of 2019. We applaud you for taking on this role and are grateful for the opportunity to speak directly to you. It is rare for a refugee to have the opportunity to address leadership at the highest level and someone in a position to change our lives. We congratulate Her Excellency Madam Sahle-Work Zewde on her election as President of Ethiopia and we feel very privileged that she is also here and can make a difference.

Madam First Lady, Constancia Mangué de Obiang, we welcome you to Addis Ababa and this commemoration, and ask you to please repeat our message to His Excellency later today.

We thank the host countries that have welcomed us in spite of their own challenges, sheltering us from the conflicts we fled. We ask you all today to increase your support to countries that are hosting refugees, to demonstrate your solidarity.

The calls for change that we are making here today result directly from our experiences, from the pain and sorrow we have endured and from the knowledge we have gained in these trying years.

First, we call for peace. It is the most durable solution and it cannot be achieved without us. Every day we work to build peace but every day that peace is broken by forces beyond our control. We are excluded from the negotiation tables at the AU, the UN and at regional and national levels—centres of power that have yet to deliver on the simple fact that peace is impossible without women. If you want to silence the guns by next year and heal and reconcile our countries, you cannot do it without women and youth.

Peace also cannot be achieved without good governance. Good governance is inclusive, responsive, transparent and fair. Many conflicts result from people feeling excluded and marginalized – from inequality in access and participation. We want leadership that cares about us. Today, you have shown that you care.

Some of us returned to our countries because we love our homes and want to contribute to peace and development. We want our children to know our countries and to be raised in them. But it requires real courage to return to some countries, as they are still not safe and women are still not included or respected.

We did not choose to be displaced. We had to flee because of conflict and violence, but sometimes violence has followed us. We believe that inequality between women and men is often at the heart of violence. Even in peace time, women are subjected to violence. This violence is heightened and targeted during conflict, because some men fight their battles on our bodies.

Women are unequal in the home and outside of it. We are unequal in leadership, in power, in decision-making, in education and in the economy. We are so unequal that we often do not even have a choice as to when we marry or who we marry. *Children* should not be married off, simply for the benefit of fathers and uncles. This is a severe violation of girls' rights. Women are unequal in every way, limiting both ourselves and our countries. If women were equal, the world would be a different place.

We congratulate Ethiopia and other countries which have understood the link between women's participation in leadership and sustainable and people-centred development. We urge all countries to follow these examples.

Some of us have lived in camps for many years. We have seen our parents die there and our children born there. We have no future in these camps and solutions cannot be found there. Isolating refugees from host communities creates tension and suspicion and contributes to violence. Integrating refugees with their hosts benefits both, in social, cultural and economic terms, and also builds peace. New relationships revive the dream of Pan-Africanism by reuniting communities, often long separated by colonialism.

Many private sector organizations have now understood that including us who are displaced or newly returned to countries struggling to make peace stick is not only good for their image, but good for their bottom lines. Investing and partnering with governments, UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies is bringing new life to long forgotten situations. Ikea and Kenya's Equity Bank are just two examples of large

private corporations using a lens of inclusion for positive profit. Some of us have managed to open bank accounts because of Equity Bank and others like it. Some of us have even been able to start small businesses with nationals, because of remittances we received through those accounts. This gives us hope.

But these efforts will not benefit us if we are not educated and have the access to opportunities which can come with education. If you remember only two things from what we are saying today, remember that we need peace and we need education. Education in particular within national systems, at the secondary and tertiary levels and functional literacy programs for women. Having large numbers of displaced young people, in particular, without access to education is simply a recipe for continuing conflict, violence and underdevelopment. We are appealing to you to prevent more lost generations, who are vulnerable to recruitment to extremism and terrorism.

We also cannot benefit if we are still suffering from the physical and mental scars of conflict and violence. You can see the physical effects but you cannot see the invisible torment in our minds. We are calling for more funding for psycho-social counselling and interventions.

During our meeting, we were told of efforts by governments, UNECA and UNHCR to support portable identities. This means that our data can be integrated, so that we do not lose our identities. Displacement often means the loss of national and other documents—we cannot prove who we are, whether we went to school, where we were born, where we worked, what our skills are, who our grandparents

and parents were. We are losing ourselves, our culture and future. This process is good for governments too, so that you know who has fled into your country.

In conclusion, we are asking that you:

- Include us in peace processes;
- Give us full and quality education, including within national education systems in host countries;
- Prioritize the rule of law to end impunity for violence;
- Remove barriers to work and entrepreneurship so that we can earn our livelihood;
- Provide us with psycho-social support for trauma; and
- Facilitate further Dialogues among refugee women and create a permanent regional platform for our interaction under the auspices of the African Women Leaders Network.

We are not responsible for our displacement. We appeal to those in a position to reverse it to do so. Please give us the conditions that will let us live in dignity.