African Indigenous Women’s Regional Statement For the Second World Conference of Indigenous Women

Indigenous Women have progressed in advocating for their rights through capacity building by participating in different National, Regional and International Meetings like the Commission on the Status of Women, Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the Convention Biological Diversity among others. African Indigenous Women, however, have been sidelined. This is due to various challenges facing indigenous women like Gender-based violence, poverty (economic inequality), inequality before the law, lack of access to social services such as health and education, access to, use and ownership of land, political participation, and decision making, Insecurity and conflict; characterized by armed banditry, insurgency leading to kidnappings, amongst others.

The 1st Indigenous Women’s conference was held in 2013, As we approach the 2nd Indigenous women conference that will be held virtually from 12th August 2021- 2nd September 2021. African Indigenous women and girls representing various sub-regions in Africa; French West Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa, East Africa, Sudan, and other Arabic speaking countries in Northern Africa have come together to bring a collective document that will present their priorities and recommendations as well as add the African Indigenous woman’s voice on to the global statement which will be presented during the conference.

The main priority issues for Africa are:

**Poverty:** Sub-Saharan Africa has risen to the top of the list of regions with extreme poverty as of 2015 and Indigenous women account for the highest percentage of the world’s poorest. African indigenous women have the highest levels of poverty due to extremely limited access to resources such as land, inadequate skills, consequences and impact of climate change, internal displacements

caused by logging and mining activities, and armed conflict resulting in the loss of livelihoods as well as inequalities.

**Lack of access to Education**: Most Indigenous communities are patriarchal and as such, they do not value girl child education, and preference is given to the education of the male child. It is believed that a girl's place is at home to carry out household chores, learn how to take care of a home, and finally be married off to her own home. Some of these marriages are child marriages where a girl as young as 9 years old can be married off. Poverty attributes to the lack of access to education and instead, the girl is married for a bride price that would fund her family. Early and teenage pregnancies have also contributed to a high number of Indigenous girls either not joining a school or dropping out prematurely. The fear of abduction and kidnappings in both conflict and non-conflict situations has led to the withdrawal of children, especially girls from schools. Countries like Nigeria keep experiencing this situation regularly. The majority of indigenous peoples' lands are located far from the towns where schools are located, and the distance, which is only accessible by foot, is a barrier to receiving education.

**Health**: African Indigenous Women experience unequal access to health and healthcare facilities. They have to travel long distances to access the bare minimum form of healthcare. Where healthcare centers are close to the communities there are no doctors, nurses, medicine, or facilities to cater to the community. Indigenous women and girls have no access to sexual and reproductive health services; and in situations such as these where pregnant women and girls do not have access to maternity services, the option left is to rely on traditional birth attendants which is not effective leading to transmission of infections such as HIV and Hepatitis from mother to child. Girls do not have access to sanitary products such as sanitary towels which affect their quality of life. In light of the COVID 19 pandemic, indigenous people have been the last to receive Government assistance and materials such as information on infection and prevention measures, hand sanitizers, masks, and other items to help curb the spread of the disease. Indigenous women have found strategies to fight the pandemic with the use of traditional medicine as they are the traditional knowledge holders in the communities.

**Violence against Women and Girls**: There is a high rate of Gender-Based Violence, rape, and other forms of violence against Indigenous women. These cases are not usually reported to the relevant authorities because of fear and women’s dependence on men, social and cultural beliefs and practices that have normalized violence against women, and lack of access to justice for Indigenous women. Other forms of violence prevalent in indigenous communities especially towards indigenous girls are harmful cultural practices such as early and forced marriages and female genital mutilation.

**Power and Decision Making**: In most African countries, there is a low number and sometimes nonexistent number of Indigenous women participating in political and policy spaces. This is mostly because of the high rates of illiteracy amongst indigenous women. They also suffer from discrimination and stigmatization hence reducing their rate of participation in various processes at the local, national, regional, or international levels that would have a direct impact on their lives. Institutionalized patriarchy has also prevented African Indigenous women to be part of both traditional and formal institutions and in positions where they can influence decisions and policies.

**Climate Change**: Indigenous peoples rely on natural resources for their survival; without sufficient adaptation and mitigation measures, they risk losing access to water, desertification, and a lack of pasture for their livestock. Indigenous women’s productive role of ensuring the provision of food, water, and energy for their families is impacted by climate change. Indigenous women are facing the consequences of climate change i.e. forced migration, drought, floods which are responsible for land degradation, landslides, locust invasion, food insecurity, and conflict. Women and Children are the most vulnerable members of the community making them unequally affected by the impacts of climate change.

**Human Rights**: There is insufficient promotion and protection of Indigenous women's human rights, as well as continuous discrimination and violations of Indigenous women and girl’s child rights. The presence of patriarchy in the dominant society makes them more vulnerable to oppression, exploitation, abuse, and violence because of the intersections of gender and ethnicity. In other instances, indigenous women are unaware of their rights and are therefore not aware of the violations against them. Indigenous women and girls are denied rights to inheritance, material

possessions, the lack of access to and ownership of land because they are women. These contribute to the violation of their rights because they are dependents and at the mercy of those who own and control resources. Due to the ignorance of their rights, they are out rightly denied those rights.

**Biodiversity and Conservation:** The role of indigenous girls and women is not yet being recognized by governments. They are always written about as beneficiaries or those dependent on biodiversity for their survival. They are hardly portrayed as the stewards of biodiversity and conservation. This undermines their generational power, knowledge of prevention, and coping skills at the household and community level. During times of disaster, they uphold families and communities by using their knowledge of food, herbs, and medicine.

**Peace and Security**: Indigenous Women are often victims of armed conflict or in times of crisis. They are left to fend for their children and family while the men take part in the conflict. Indigenous peoples are living in territories prone to resource conflict due to resource governance problems. In other regions, insecurity and conflict manifest through political violence, armed banditry, and insurgence. In the case of conflict and insecurity, indigenous women and children account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by conflict. The plight of women is rarely taken into account and their role in the maintenance and promotion of peace is not recognized. Furthermore, indigenous women are hardly ever represented in decision-making institutions and mechanisms for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

**Economic empowerment:** The majority of African countries do not have programs to economically empower indigenous women as they are left to fend for themselves. Most of them do not have access to land which is their main source of wealth and loans that will make them self- sufficient. They also lack skills and knowledge on how to run and market their businesses. When a woman is economically empowered she will be able to take her children to school and avoid instances of violence.

# Therefore, we would like to make the following recommendations to the 2nd Indigenous Women’s Conference:

* Member states should ratify and implement all international human rights instruments that promote and protect the rights of Indigenous peoples and especially Indigenous women like the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples, African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights, The ILO Convention 169, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.
* States shall take effective measures to strengthen, respect, and support Indigenous women and girls’ access to and participation in meaningful political and decision-making processes at all levels from the local to international platforms.
* Governments, the private sector, and other stakeholders should invest in building the capacity of indigenous women and girls to empower them with knowledge and skills which enable them to self-develop socially, economically, and politically.
* Governments should ensure that there is an implementation of the already existing laws that protect Indigenous women and girls against harmful cultural practices such as early marriage and Female Genital Mutilation.
* Governments must create mechanisms to guarantee access to justice for indigenous women and girls in judicial institutions and put measures, systems and resources in place to effectively prevent and protect women from all forms of violence.
* Government and all relevant stakeholders to eliminate all barriers such as access and pricing to health and sexual reproductive health products such as sanitary towels that are essential needs.
* Governments should include indigenous women in their COVID 19 recovery strategies. Indigenous women hold vast knowledge on how to fight the pandemic especially with the use of traditional medicine and self-isolation measures.
* Governments must ensure that indigenous women and girls have access to quality and adequate health services that are culturally appropriate for them and take into account their traditional medicine Governments and other stakeholders should partner with Indigenous women in developing climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies using a rights- based approach to climate actions that address Indigenous peoples’ specific social and economic vulnerabilities and create opportunities for them to pursue their development

priorities. Indigenous women have vast traditional knowledge which is often neglected in policy and research which when recognized and integrated with scientific knowledge will increase the effectiveness of adaptation and mitigation foe example in addressing food security, developing early warning systems, etc.

* Specific and specialized funding should be made accessible and available for Indigenous women’s organizations that often lack access to this information. This will enable Indigenous women and girls to build their capacity through trainings, workshops, and advocacy that will enable them to have access to social, economic, and political freedom and self-reliance.
* Governments should guarantee that the proposals from the 1st World Conference of Indigenous Women in 2013 are properly implemented.
* States should ensure the implementation of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace, and security. States should prioritize the representation of indigenous women at all decision-making levels in sub-national, national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict.
* Member states should support the transformation of our food systems towards agro ecology that ensures quality food production system while maintaining and protecting the ecosystem at the same time producing healthy and nutritive diets that are sustainable while mitigating climate change.
* States should put in place mechanisms and measures to ensure that indigenous peoples’ have access to their lands.

# Indigenous women and girls have long been in the frontline of Indigenous movements, fighting for their rights, demanding recognition, and participating in spaces where life- changing decisions are made. We, the indigenous women of Africa, pledge to work with our Governments to secure and defend our rights, as well as to maintain and protect our communities' natural resources.