Opening Statement by Her Excellency Vice President Madam Isatou Njie Saidy delivered by Hon. Mama Fatima Singhateh Attorney General And Minister of Justice

AT THE

59TH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMISSION ON HUMAN AND PEOPLES’ RIGHTS

AND

THE 28TH ORDINARY SESSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD

21ST OCTOBER TO THE 4TH OF NOVEMBER 2016

AT THE KAIRABA BEACH HOTEL

BANJUL, THE GAMBIA
H.E. Dr. Aisha Abdoullahi – Commissioner Political Affairs representing the Chairperson A.U.C.

Chairperson of the ACHPR – Madam Paney Thakula

My Lord the Chief Justice of The Gambia – E.O.Fagbenle

My Lord the President of the African Court

Honourable Ministers from across the Continent and Cabinet Colleagues here present

My Lord justices of the Superior Courts of the Gambia, Hon. Justices of the African Court

Honourable Commissioners and members of the African Commission

Honourable Chairperson and members of the Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;

Members of the Diplomatic and Consular Corps

Distinguished Delegates of African Union Member States;

Representatives of National Human Rights Institutions;

Representatives of NGO and Civil Society Organisations;

Members of the Press, Ladies and Gentlemen all other protocols respectfully observed

Good Morning,

I make the following statement on behalf of Her Excellency Vice President Isatou Njie Saidy who would love to have been here today but for the fact that she had to travel out of the jurisdiction.

Her statement is as follows: On behalf of His Excellency, the President of the Republic of The Gambia, Sheikh Professor, Dr.

The Government of the Republic of The Gambia is delighted to host this historic joint session and it is my fervent hope that you will have the time to explore and enjoy our beautiful country, the smiling coast during your stay.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

You will all recall that this year has been designated ‘The year of Human Rights, with Special Focus on the Rights of Women’. The theme for this session, ‘Women’s Rights - Our Collective Responsibility’ is appropriate as safeguarding the rights of Women is a collective responsibility that all stakeholders and partners, both duty bearers and duty holders alike, must all invest in to ensure that the rights of women are protected holistically across our continent.

I therefore take this opportunity to thank The Commission for its tireless and continued work in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in the continent. I wish to recognise its excellent contributions and achievements in this domain.

As we know, the sessions of the Commission are an important forum for all stakeholders to carry out an objective assessment of the effective implementation of our obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights within which the Commission plays a pivotal role. This Session, it will primarily be centred on the successes and challenges in the protection and promotion of the rights of women.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,
You will agree with me that Women across the African Continent have come a long way since the inception of the Banjul Charter. There have been many obstacles along the way some have resulted in numerous milestones celebrated. We must recognise and celebrate the work of women who serve as inspiration to other women and most importantly to younger generation in recognising that they too can achieve success and in the belief that women can be economic power houses and affords to provide and support their families. That little girls around the continent can dare to dream to one day becoming Presidents, Vice Presidents, Ministers, Heads of International Organisations,

Whilst highlighting the progress made by women in positions of power, we must also acknowledge and salute the women who are changing the continent not from the boardroom or the office front but from their farms, the petty traders who are the backbone of our commercial sectors and also the everyday women raising their kids and tendering to their families. They are all worth celebrating. Many times these women are not factored when successes are celebrated but they play a crucial role in that they, in their homes, shape and nurture the leaders of tomorrow.

**Your Excellences, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.**

The highlighting of all the progress and achievements is in no way a statement that the struggle is over. Many women in Africa continue to be the victims of Human Rights violations. Whilst Human Rights are indivisible, inalienable, interrelated and interdependent and equally important to the dignity and respect for all persons, I would like to buttress on the burning issues such as Domestic violence, Customary traditions, many of which fail to acknowledge the rights of women especially in relation to inheritance by women, Sexual violence and abuse, Equal access to education, and Equal sexual and reproductive health services. There is still more to be done.
There have been numerous high level dialogues held this year both at the AU level and at National level. It is pertinent therefore that we ask the question, ‘Are the voices that matter really being heard? Are the opinions of the vulnerable and destitute women really being taken into consideration in the making of decisions? Are their opinions sought during implementation’?

The privilege few that attend these gatherings are very often not the ones affected by these violations. The majority of women and girls at the grassroots level desire very simple things such as accessibility to clean drinking water, access to reliable reproductive health care, access to credit to start small businesses to take care of their families and to educate their children and the ability to live each day without the fear of being domestically or sexually abused.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

As this is the year of human rights with special emphasis on the rights of women, we are happy to present that whiles safeguarding the rights of all, the Gambia has put special emphasis on the protection of the rights of Women.

The Gambia has also acknowledged that women make up more than half the population and as such, for this country to flourish and enjoy success, half of the population cannot be side-lined. As it is evidenced around us today, times have changed. Women are involved in decision making and doing many things which hereto they were unable to do. Such women serve as a source of inspiration for millions of women around the continent.

**Madam Chair**, Sustainable economic and social development of any country requires the full and equal participation of women. The Government of the Gambia recognizes this which is evidenced not only by the high level participation of women in government but also, by the tremendous strides made by the Government in various sectors.
The 1997 Constitution of The Gambia recognizes and guarantees gender equality. This guarantee includes equal treatment in all spheres of life, and equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities.

In general, women participation is cut across all sectors of government, and the government particularly attaches great importance to the areas of Health, Education, Agriculture, youth empowerment as well as issues affecting children to mention but a few.

Taking care of reproductive health matters, providing free education for girls in the rural and urban areas, the change in policy to allow pregnant girls to go back to school after delivery, the initiative to encourage girls and women pursue science and technology courses, the revision of the education curricula to make it more gender responsive amongst others, are some of the evidential basis of the government’s achievement in recognising women’s development and empowerment.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

In its participation in the International and Regional levels, the Government of the Gambia has ratified a number of International Declarations, and Conventions including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), AU Protocol on the Rights of Women and Girls and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

In the implementation and fulfilment of its obligation at the home front, the Government of The Gambia has enacted numerous laws which contain provisions for the protection and promotion of women in The Gambia such as The Women’s Act of 2010 which is a domestication of the CEDAW and which contains provisions for the protection of women and girls.

The Domestic Violence Act 2013, which protects women from all forms of violence which occurs in domestic setting, not provided
for and The Sexual Offences Act of 2013 which criminalises all forms of sexual violence against women.

**Madam Chairperson,** the recent Amendment to the Women’s Act 2015, on the prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation in its entirety in The Gambia is an important milestone for the effective protection of all women and girls in the country and for the eradication of this harmful practice which for years has blighted the lives of many women and girls in the country and thus preventing them not only from enjoying their lives fully, but also infringing their fundamental human rights. This law is evidence of the stance of the government to further the promotion and protection of women and girls in The Gambia. It is hoped that all countries will emulate this bold step.

Additionally, The Government is committed to not only implement this legislation but also to disseminate and make it available to women and girls to ensure effective and proper application. As such, series of sensitizations workshop and trainings have been carried out across the country.

**Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

A more recent milestone is the Amendment to the Children’s Act 2016 on the abolishment of child marriage in The Gambia this year which is another stride by the Government in the stance to protect women and children and enable them to fully develop and also ensure their participation in society.

**Madam Chairperson,** In The Gambia, tremendous success has been gained in expanding access to education across all levels. Schools have been brought nearer to home within 3 km-5 km from the community. Building schools closer to the homes of the students contributes to providing safety and security for them especially the girls as they have to walk shorter distances to and from the school. In addition children do not have to leave their homes and communities with all the attendant risks. Under the Third
Education Sector Project Phase 1 (1998-2006) and Phase 2 (2006-2011), the Ministry of Education was able to build classrooms throughout the country supported by different donors to improve access to quality education for all Gambians.

Madam Chairperson, I am happy to inform you that Primary and secondary health care have expanded significantly and increased immunization has reduced mortality rates. Physical access continues to improve with the upgrading and building of new facilities and staffing them with trained health personnel. This has increased the geographical access and has reduced the distance to the nearest health facility. Antenatal care coverage country wide is as high as 96% as well as the Reproductive and Child Health awareness at 96%. The cost of public health care services remains relatively cheap, as Reproductive and Child Health Services including family planning are provided free of charge.

It is worth noting, Madam Chairperson that we have successfully validated the draft Bill on the setting up of the Human Rights Commission, the Plans are far advanced for The Gambia to soon be counted amongst African nations that have established a National Human Rights Commissions according to the Paris Principles.

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

I am certain that this session would open the platform for fruitful deliberations whilst we celebrate women in all spheres of life for their contribution to society and the continent as a whole. I extend my appreciation to all women where ever you are or whoever you may be. I say thank you in all your languages. I also extend my thanks to you all for travelling far and wide to attend this historic occasion. I would like to say a big thank you to Mrs. Maboreke and team at the African Commission for the efficient and professional manner in which they conducted the organisation of this session. I would be remiss if I do not
acknowledge the great contribution made by my staff and team of organizers in this session. Well done to you all and thank you.

On this note, it is my honour to declare the 59th session of the African Commission of Human and Peoples’ Right and the 28th Ordinary Session of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child officially open.

I thank you all for your kind attention.