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PANEL VII

**The role of regional and inter-governmental organizations
in promoting gender equality**

Written statement* submitted by

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

**The Role of the African Union in Promoting Gender Equality
and Women's Empowerment.**

**Panel VII: 49th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of
Women; 10 March 2005**

**Statement by Winnie Byanyima,
Director, Women, Gender and Development, African Union
Commission**

Chairperson
Excellencies, Heads of Delegations
Distinguished Panelists, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour to speak at this panel on the role of intergovernmental organizations in promoting gender equality.

The African Union is the successor of the Organization of African Unity. It was established three years ago, as an organization for the integration of the continent, and its vision is that of *“a peaceful, integrated and prosperous Africa, driven by its people, a dynamic force in the global community”*. The Secretariat of the Union is the African Union Commission, and its roles include providing political leadership especially in the area of peace and security, harmonization of social, economic and other policies, setting and monitoring common standards, and advocacy especially in the global arena.

The transformation of the Organization of African Unity into the African Union has brought with it several innovative changes regarding the way gender is perceived and gender issues are handled in the Union. The Constitutive Act of the African Union provides that the organisation *“shall function in accordance with the principle of the promotion of gender equality,”* [AU Constitutive Act article 4(1)]. Secondly, the Statutes of the African Union Commission specifically provide that *“gender issues are cross-cutting, through all the portfolios of the Commission... and a special unit shall be established in the Office of the Chairperson to coordinate all activities and programmes of the Commission related to gender issues,”* [Article 12(3)].

At their first Summit in Durban in July 2002, the Heads of African States and Governments established a global precedent for gender equality, by adopting the principle of gender parity in decision-making and elected five female and five male Commissioners to lead the Union. Out of sixteen directors recruited recently, seven are women. Moreover, there is a commitment to extend the principle to all levels of the Commission and to the other AU organs and programmes, including NEPAD. During the second Ordinary Session of the Assembly in Maputo in 2003, the Member States adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. History was made last year, when the Pan African Parliament opened and elected a woman as its first president. Ambassador Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth

World Conference on Women, or *Mama Beijing* as we fondly call her in Africa, took her seat to steer one a key organ of the African Union. We are confident that she will develop the institution into a strong voice for the aspirations of African children, women and men.

At the 3rd Assembly of the African Union in July 2004, the Union Member States went further and adopted the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) where they made several commitments to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in their countries. The Declaration places a responsibility on the Chairperson of the Commission and on Member States to make an annual report on progress in the implementation of the Solemn Declaration as well as on the state of gender mainstreaming and progress towards gender equality at the national and regional levels. The Directorate of Women, Gender and Development, (DWGD), which is the focal point for all gender-related activities within the AU, and which I lead, will prepare the Chairperson's annual report on the SDGEA and progress towards gender equality in Africa. In addition, it will mobilise and lend support to Member States to implement and report on the SDGEA.

Madam Chair

The Gender Directorate was established within the Office of the Chairperson to spearhead the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment within the Commission, in the other organs of the AU and its building blocks, as well as within Member States. It is mandated to facilitate policy development, harmonization and co-ordination; and to design, advocate for and report on implementation of gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment strategies, policies and programs.

The Commission has recently adopted a Strategic Plan for the period 2004 – 2007 that has three main components related to the promotion of gender equality;

- Putting an institutional fabric in place to lay a firm foundation for effective gender mainstreaming
- Building gender mainstreaming capacity within the Commission and other AU organs, so that they can fulfil the gender equality mandate
- Translating the Member States decisions on gender equality and women's empowerment into concrete actions at the continental, regional and national levels.

It is the responsibility of the Gender Directorate, to lead the implementation of these programme components

Madam Chair,

These landmark decisions and steps taken in the first two years of the existence of the African Union, reflect the collective determination of Member States to own the gender equality agenda, to hold each other accountable on it and to open themselves up to be monitored by civil society. They also reflect the advocacy and championing efforts of the AU Commission under the leadership of President Alpha Konare.

The African Union has seriously embarked on the task of generating an African consensus around a shared vision of gender equality and common concerns especially through the Protocol on the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa. The challenge is to link these home-grown instruments to the international instruments, in particular BPFA and CEDAW, to achieve synergies at the national level and register improvements in the lives of African children, women and men. We are confident that a combined strategy of fostering continental ownership of the gender equality agenda, through the development of African instruments, and promoting the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women is the best way forward.

There is no doubt that a new momentum towards realizing the principle of gender equality in Africa has been generated by the newly established African Union. This is a new opportunity that the UN and its agencies and other development partners should seize. An opportunity exists to support, *in truly empowering ways*, our efforts at the continental and regional levels to mobilize Member States to genuinely own and drive the gender equality agenda. The African Union Commission is grateful for the support that various UN agencies and other partners have expressed or extended so far and look forward to greater collaboration.

Thank you for your attention.