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Women's rights in the ECOWAS region: Experts and Ministers in charge of gender affairs are meeting to examine draft strategies to combat sexual and gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

The ECOWAS Centre for Gender Development (ECGD) is organizing from 11 to 13 October 2021 in Dakar, Senegal, an Experts' Meeting, followed by a meeting of ECOWAS Ministers in charge of Gender and Women's Affairs on 15 October 2021. The meeting focuses on the draft ECOWAS Regional Strategy for Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and on the ECOWAS Project on Sexual Harassment in Workplaces and Educational Institutions.

West Africa, like other countries worldwide, is experiencing a recurrence of sexual and gender-based violence in both private and public spaces. There has been a dramatic escalation of gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence perpetrated against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions and lockdowns were implemented.

ECOWAS Member States have undoubtedly taken measures to address gender-based violence by defending and supporting victims. However, the challenges remain enormous, particularly the culture of silence and the trivialization of gender-based violence, which favor the impunity of perpetrators. The ECOWAS Commission, through ECGD, has therefore decided to address the situation of sexual and gender-based violence in order to consolidate the achievements of Member States.

Both meetings of Experts and ECOWAS Ministers in charge of Gender and Women's Affairs aim at implementing the commitment made in January 2021 by the Heads of State and Government in the "Declaration on Zero Tolerance to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of all Forms of Violence against Women and Girls at all times and under all circumstances in the ECOWAS region." This aim is to be achieved through the definition of a regional strategy and action plan for preventing and controlling sexual and gender-based violence in the West African region. The Declaration urges the ECOWAS Commission to provide Member States with such documents to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls in the region.

During these two meetings, participants will be asked to review and make concrete contributions to the draft Regional Strategy for Preventing of and Responding to Sexual and Gender-



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Based Violence and Eliminating of All Forms of Violence against Women and Girls; and the draft ECOWAS Policy on Sexual Harassment in Workplaces and Educational Institutions. They will then propose model policies on sexual harassment in workplaces and educational institutions; and make recommendations on activities that can be implemented at the regional, national and local levels for both programs.

These two meetings in Dakar should lead to stronger and appropriate strategies in ECOWAS Member States that can influence changes in social norms, behaviors, attitudes, policies, and laws conducive to zero tolerance to sexual and gender-based violence and the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls.

Participants in these two meetings include Ministers and Gender Experts from ECOWAS Member States, staff of the ECOWAS Centre for Gender Development, Technical Development Partners, Civil Society Organizations, specialists from the ECOWAS Commission's Departments of Social Welfare and Gender, Education and Finance.

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