



ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF
WEST AFRICAN STATES

COMMUNAUTE ECONOMIQUE DES ETATS DE
L'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST

COMUNIDADE ECONOMICA DOS ESTADOS DA
AFRICA OCIDENTAL

**DECLARATION ON ZERO TOLERANCE TO SEXUAL AND
GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE ELIMINATION OF
ALL FORMS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE ECOWAS REGION.**

Endorsed by the Fifty-Eight Ordinary Session of the Authority of the ECOWAS
Heads of State and Government held on 23 January, 2021



PREAMBLE:

WE, THE HEADS OF STATES AND GOVERNMENT OF THE ECONOMIC COMMUNITY OF WEST AFRICAN STATES (ECOWAS)

MINDFUL of Articles 7, 8 and 9 of the ECOWAS Treaty, as amended, establishing the Authority of Heads of State and Government and defining its composition and functions;

MINDFUL of Article 63 of the Revised ECOWAS Treaty entitled "Women and Development" committing Member States "to formulate, harmonize, coordinate and establish appropriate policies and mechanisms for the enhancement of the economic, social and cultural conditions of women";

MINDFUL of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance;

MINDFUL of the Regional Plan of Action for the Abolition of Child Labor Especially in its Worst Forms and the ECOWAS Action Plan against Trafficking in Persons;

MINDFUL of the Supplementary Act relating to Equality of Rights between Women and Men for Sustainable Development in the ECOWAS region;

MINDFUL of the ECOWAS Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action 2019 - 2030;

MINDFUL of the ECOWAS Road Map on the Prevention and Response to Child Marriage 2019 - 2030 and ECOWAS Political Declaration and Common Position Against Child Marriage;

Cognizant of the ECOWAS Strategic Framework for the Strengthening of National Child Protection Systems to Prevent and Respond to Violence, Abuse and Exploitation of Children in West Africa;



Considering that the lockdown period and the attendant economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and is still exposing women and children, especially girls to a higher risk of abuse, violence and exploitation;

Noting that Member States have committed themselves, to preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence and the elimination of all violence against women and girls through the adoption of a number of international and regional legal texts, including the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, the Protocol of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003), the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security and related resolutions 1820 (2008) 1888 and 1889 (2009) .

Reaffirming our firm commitment to the obligations contained in the sub-regional, regional and international legal instruments, which advocate for the promotion of gender equality, the elimination of discrimination and all violence against girls and women; and the protection of human rights as essential for the achievement of the legitimate aspirations of the people of the West African Community;

Recognizing the need to honor the commitments and objectives in these instruments, and that the progress made, which is still fragile, is now faced with new threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the feminization of poverty, violence against women and girls, climate change, food insecurity and armed conflicts;

Recognizing in addition that social, cultural and religious practices, attitudes and opinions continue to militate against the enhancement of gender equality and women empowerment and the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence;



Aware that in conflict, disaster, pandemic and crisis situations, women and children, who are already vulnerable in normal times, become even more vulnerable;

Expressing our gratitude to the ECOWAS Member States for their investments in promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and girls; and in preventing and responding to sexual and gender based violence and the elimination of violence against women and girls;

Expressing also our gratitude to the First Ladies of ECOWAS for their various initiatives for the development and wellbeing of Family, Women and Children in their respective countries;

Strongly emphasizing that quality education that promotes effective learning is an essential tool to realizing the potential of girls and boys for a bright future;

Stressing the importance of budget and technical support to enable Member States to plan, implement laws and policies, monitor and evaluate the prevailing circumstances and take responsibility for actions to respond to Sexual and Gender-based Violence within the framework of COVID 19 Pandemic and beyond;

Affirming the importance of effective child welfare networks and law enforcement officers who have the capacity to ensure that access to justice mechanisms are in place, to protect children from all forms of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and put an end to it;

Conscious of the fact that the family is the most basic unit that has the primary responsibility for caring for children; and for protecting them;

Convinced that the ECOWAS Community, Governments, Non- Governmental and Civil Society Organizations, the media, the private sector, academic and research institutions, women, men, children themselves, especially girls, African Union, United Nations Agencies, and others are key stakeholders and have central roles



in planning, implementation and monitoring-evaluation of initiatives to prevent and respond to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence;

Conscious that all women and men, girls and boys, have basic human rights, especially the right to non-discrimination, survival, live free from violence in both public and private space; development, education, health, well-being and participation; and that Sexual and Gender-Based Violence is a serious violation of these rights;

Recognizing that sexual and gender-based violence is a violation of human rights and it affects physical and mental health, while constituting a critical barrier to the achievement of sustainable development goals, democratic development, economic growth and sustainable peace;

Recognizing that sexual and gender-based violence could be directed against men and women, boys and girls;

Condemning in their entirety all forms of sexual and gender-based violence against men and women and boys and girls;

Recognizing that women and girls are overwhelmingly more exposed to higher risks of sexual and gender-based violence than men and boys; women and girls are often exposed to various forms of sexual and gender-based violence such as rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment, forced marriage, child marriage, traditional harmful practices, and so on, – all of which constitute serious violations of women and girls' human rights as well as impediments to the attainment of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls;

Recognizing the existing links between sexual and gender-based violence and substance use disorders, hence advocate that addressing these criminal and social problems should be resourced and strengthened;

Recognizing that children are also victims and witnesses of sexual abuse, exploitation and violence; that child sexual violence consists of all sexual assault and incest involving children under the age of 18 years and that children especially



young girls are at higher risk; sexual violence against children include (but not limited to) - child sexual abuse, incest, rape, online sexual abuse and sexual violence in the context of dating or intimate relationships;

Concerned that Sexual and Gender-Based Violence have profound impacts on the victim-survivors' lives and well-being, their families, communities and societies at large, and have negative impacts across generations;

Aspiring to instill and promote an enduring culture of Zero Tolerance to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls at all times and circumstances within the ECOWAS Region;

1A: DECLARATION:

We the Heads of States and Government of ECOWAS hereby solemnly declare our commitment to:

1. Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Violence against Women and Girls, this is of utmost priority to us as ECOWAS Member States individually and collectively; and we hereby declare that sexual and gender-based violence are totally condemnable and unacceptable on any basis be it on customary, tradition, religious or any other basis;
2. Effectively implementing , reviewing, and/or strengthening appropriate laws, policies, programmes and innovative interventions across all critical sectors in the prevention and response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and to adequately respond to the needs of those affected by such violence;
3. Exercise due diligence to prevent sexual and gender-based violence and to investigate and punish, in accordance with extant laws and policies, all acts of violence against women and girls;



4. Pro-actively, innovatively and effectively address issues of child sexual violence taking cognizance of the age of the children and their different contexts;
5. Promoting effective participation and active counselling of children and young people in general, girls in particular, on all issues that affect them and raise their awareness of their duties and rights, so that they are empowered to express themselves, avoid sexually violent risky situations and relationships;
6. Encouraging initiative that promote education on parental and community responsibility and the participation of men, including fathers, religious leaders, custodians of tradition, in promoting positive male role models that oppose all forms of sexual and gender-based violence and work towards ending all gender stereotypes and social norms that promote rape, child marriage, incest, pedophilia, trafficking, and so on.
7. Creating enabling environments for easy access to justice, effective intervention programs and specialized assistance to victims-survivors of violence; ensuring that they are treated with dignity, while taking necessary measures to promote their physical and psycho-social recovery in an environment conducive to their health, well-being and with due respect to the specificities and peculiarities of each case;
8. Ensuring continued investments in and prioritization of efforts to ensure protection of girls and women and eliminate gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, harmful practices such as Child marriage and Female Genital Mutilation and Cuttings in all circumstances including in humanitarian settings;



9. Put in place incentives to encourage innovations and initiatives to eliminate all Forms of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence including the protection of Anti Gender-Based Violence Whistle-blowers, Advocates and Activists; creating physical or virtual safe spaces for women and men where they can report abuse without alerting perpetrators.
10. Promoting cooperation and collaboration across national frontiers between ECOWAS Member States as well as third countries in the processes for preventing and addressing Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Violence against Women and Girls;
11. Coordinating and strengthening a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach involving all critical stakeholders in the prevention and response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Violence against Women and Girls;
12. Put in place Coordination and Peer Review Mechanisms and a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to track progress, assess achievements, address constraints and put in place strategies for continuity and reinforcement of lessons learnt and good practices.

ACTIONS:

We Hereby Agree to undertake the following Actions:

1B: Member states should:

1. have, strengthened or reviewed National Plans of Action on Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and Girls, to incorporate comprehensive and specialized services for the victim-survivors such as health services, shelter and counselling centres;



2. implement comprehensive and coordinated intervention policies and programmes to address the cultural roots of sexual and gender-based violence (with special emphasis on rape); as well as initiate interventions within the mass and social media and educational settings;
3. condemn all acts of sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls and ensure that these repulsive actions can never and should never be justified on any basis, including on the basis of any custom, tradition or religious practice;
4. promote appropriate changes in social norms, attitude and behavior of women and men as well as boys and girls that are conducive to: Zero Tolerance to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and Girls;
5. design awareness raising and training activities for all the stakeholders (health sector, judiciary, police, gendarmeries, media and so on) including state and non-state actors;
6. put in place diversified prevention strategies against child sexual violence such as the use of innovative software to address issues of gender-based violence, especially cyber-space child sexual violence;
7. provide special protection measures for child victims and witnesses of violence taking due cognizance of the best interests of the child;



8. promote economic empowerment strategies for women – as special measures to prevent vulnerability to sexual violence and gender-based violence, since there is a link between socio-economic status and vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence;
9. put in place effective criminal justice systems that are accessible to all victims of sexual violence, in order to reduce the rate of impunity and make all perpetrators accountable for their actions;
10. promote the participation and engagement of the private sector, information technology sector and the media in enhancing actions against sexual and gender-based violence and the elimination of all forms violence against women and girls;
11. provide adequate financial and human resources for all associated activities, projects and programmes;
12. ensure, support and promote effective cooperation between state and non-state stakeholders; and
13. put in place an effective Data Collection, Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for tracking progress, constraints, achievements and improvement of the programs.

1C: The Member States Approach will include the following:

In the prevention and response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence against Women and Girls, we shall be engaging the whole of society and whole of government approach; as such:



1. There will be increased engagement directly or indirectly by all of government and all of society (including civil society organizations) in promoting and advocating zero tolerance for sexual and gender-based violence;
2. Intervention programs will involve every segment of the society – children, adolescents, men and women; faith-based organizations, civil society organizations, modern and traditional leaders, and so on.
3. Intervention programs shall include men and boys and the transformation of gender stereotypes, inappropriate norms, attitude and behavior;
4. Adequate planning and coordination will be put in place for all relevant government ministries and agencies and for collaboration with non-state actors;
5. The interventions shall be at the individual, community and society levels, in conflict and non-conflict zones and humanitarian emergency situations as well as at the national and regional levels, taking cognizance of relevant causative and influencing factors at each level;
6. Policies and interventions will therefore be put in place to target all the different actors and institutions that have direct and indirect roles in the prevention and response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence against Women and Girls. These shall include the following categories (but not limited to them):
 - Victims-survivors;
 - Perpetrators;
 - Legal Actors – for improving and strengthening existing legal and policy frameworks;
 - Front-line professionals - for training and consultative forums (health sector, judiciary, prosecutors, human rights organizations, police, gendarmerie, government agencies, social workers, policy makers and so on);



- Researchers and academicians – for promotion of evidence-based actions and programs; continuous data collection and design of monitoring and evaluation frameworks; for study of situational contexts enhancing or impeding committing of sexual and gender-based violence crimes (home situation, location of public toilets, lightening of roads, and so on);
- Community and society groups and institutions – such as the family, media, educational institutions, women’s groups, civil society groups, faith-based groups, traditional and modern leaders and so on.

2. ECOWAS Commission should:

1. Embark on a Regional Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and Girls and in so doing:
2. Undertake research and evidence building in each Member State - that will highlight the magnitude of sexual and gender-based violence (with special emphasis on rape), its risk factors, consequences and current responses in order to identify socio-culturally specific and appropriate interventions for prevention and response; and in order to have the following outcomes amongst others:
 - Validated National Documents on Nature and Pattern of Sexual and Gender-based Violence.
 - Validated ECOWAS Regional Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of all Violence Against Women and Girls.



3. Assist Member States in identifying the detailed policy measures and mechanisms that need to be put in place or strengthened so as implement the Regional Strategy and Action Plan Effectively;
4. Put in place Consultative and Coordination platforms and/or mechanisms for critical stakeholder groups, such as women's organizations, civil society organizations, police/gendarmerie, judiciary, health sector actors, human rights actors, media, educational institutions, in order to promote harmonized actions and approach as well as advocacy, capacity building, appropriate actions and sharing of good practices;
5. Develop innovative methods for addressing sexual violence (especially as it involves children) in the social media and the information and technology sector;
6. Organize meetings, workshops and conferences in order to create and raise awareness as well as build capacities of all stakeholders;
7. Put in place frameworks for addressing child sexual violence including the additional threats of technology-facilitated online sexual violence;
8. Ensure that the Regional Strategy is subject to regular review, monitoring, evaluation and improvement at the regional and national levels.

3. We hereby task our Member States and the ECOWAS Institutions to initiate pro-active actions on this Declaration and fast track the effective implementation of Regional and National Strategies and Action Plans for Preventing and



Responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the Elimination of All Violence Against Women and Girls.

4. Finally, we call on all our Member States, our societies, our governments, state and non-state actors, international, continental, bilateral and regional organizations; developmental and technical partners to join hands with us to ensure, promote, establish and instill an abiding culture of **Zero Tolerance to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls at all Times and Circumstances within the ECOWAS Region.**

In faith whereof we, the Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have signed:

Done by **Videoconference**, this **23** of **January** 2021.

In single original in the English, French and Portuguese languages, the three texts being equally authentic.

For further information, please contact:

ECOWAS Gender Development Centre,

Dakar, Senegal.

Email: egdc@ecowas.int

Website: www.ccdg.ecowas.int