

69th Session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights

**Statement under Item 5: Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa
DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)**

Observer Status: No. 359

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**Honourable Chairperson,
Honourable Commissioners,
State Delegates represented,
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,**

**Honorable Chairpersons,
Distinguished Commissioners,
State Delegates represented,
Ladies and gentlemen,**

AfricanDefenders and DefendDefenders welcome the report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of women. We reiterate the many challenges faced by women on the continent, especially those in conflict situations and refugee women. We further bring to your attention specific challenges, such as online and offline gender-based violence (GBV), surveillance, harassment, and censorship, faced by the women human rights defenders (WHRDs) across the continent.

Honourable Chairperson,

Despite numerous resolutions and guidance by this Commission, gender-based violence on our continent is on the rise. Women continue to suffer the consequences. WHRDs have reported an increasing number of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cases, including harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, as a result of or in relation to school closures and other negative impact related to measures adopted to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as sex trafficking and rape. WHRDs have also often been victims of SGBV as reprisal for their activism. More recently, there has been an increase in cases of online GBV against WHRDs who use social media platforms to amplify their online activism efforts. Egyptian journalist and human rights activist, Nawara Negm, has repeatedly been a victim of

online smear campaigns, including gendered and sexualized threats. In order to protect herself and her family, she has withdrawn from the public.

Honourable Chairperson,

It is vital for the Commission to take into account the serious threat to women's freedoms and human rights in **Sudan** following the 25 October 2021 military coup. The military takeover threatens to undermine the gains made by the civilian transitional government to advance gender equality and promote and protect women's and girls' rights. Sudanese women have once again united and organised peaceful protests, as they have in the country's history, determined to secure their newly gained rights. Unfortunately, we have documented cases of harassment and physical assault of the women activists from soldiers dispersing demonstrations. Some activists such as Alaa Salah, who were instrumental in the 2019 revolution, have been tightly surveilled, forcing them into hiding.

The situation in **Ethiopia** is serious. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the ongoing armed conflict in and around the Tigray region. Since the conflict began in November 2020, sexual violence has been used as a weapon of war by all parties to the conflict, to humiliate, terrorize, and traumatize Ethiopian women and their communities. Despite the Commission renewing the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry on the situation in the Tigray region under Res. 487 (EXT.OS/XXXIV) 2021 in August 2021, the conflict in the country continues to expand and the humanitarian situation is quickly deteriorating. Thousands of displaced Ethiopian women are experiencing patterns of gross human rights violations. These are worsening as WHRDs are unable to accurately monitor and report these abuses and deliver assistance due to the ongoing fighting.

Honourable Chairperson,

We call on this Commission to:

- Take necessary measures to ensure that States parties comply with the full implementation of Maputo Protocol;
- Urge State Parties to implement the recommendations contained in the Study of the Commission on Women Human Rights Defenders in Africa adopted in 2014;
- Urge State Parties to implement Res. 474 (EXT.OS/ XXXI) 2021 on prohibition of excessive use of force by law enforcement officers; and
- Urge State Parties to adhere to their commitments and obligations under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, international human rights law, and international humanitarian law to protect the rights of women and girls.

I thank you.