**OFFICIAL REMARKS**

**WORKNEH GEBEYEHU, IGAD EXECUTIVE SECRETARY**

**Regional Workshop on Enhancing the Capacity of Women in Strategic Communications**

***Developing Alternative and Counter-Narratives to Prevent Violent Extremism***

**Tuesday, 16th March 2022**

* Your Excellency and our gracious hostess, **Osman Aden,** Minister of Women, Republic of Djibouti;
* Madam **Anissa Hassan Bahdon,** Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Women Republic of Djibouti;
* Madam **Hasna Bilil,** Vice-President of the Djibouti National Union of Women;
* Your Excellencies **Ambassadors from IGAD Member States;**
* Our CVE partners, **Ambassador Aiden O’Hara,** Head of the EU Delegation and **Ambassador Jonathan Pratt** from the United States Embassy;
* Your Excellencies **Ambassadors of Germany, Turkey,** (more to be added on Confirmation)
* **Dear IGAD Colleagues;**
* **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good morning and welcome to this regional workshop on **‘Enhancing the Capacity of Women in Strategic Communications’,** the objective of which is toempower women from the IGAD region to prevent and counter violent extremism by developing alternative and counter-narratives.

IGAD is cognisant of the fact that **as half our population, women are equal stakeholders in stability** and have a critical role to play in the establishment and maintenance of a peaceful society.

However, at the same time, **women and children are the most disproportionately affected by the effects of violent extremism and conflict in general.**

We have seen that **what is common to the footage of active conflict situations in our region,** as well as further afield in the middle east and even Ukraine **is that women tend to constitute the larger portion of civilian casualties and displaced populations.**

Paradoxically, **formal peace processes** **tend to overlook women when it comes to the negotiations for winning the peace,** even though in practice, informal processes have long recognised the instrumental role that women play in keeping the peace.

For instance, in the pastoralist communities of the central IGAD region, **women are reputed to lay a “birth belt” across a manyatta (settlement) gate as an invisible barrier** for the young men preparing to go going to war with a neighbouring community.

So ladies and gentlemen, what would be the solution?

For one, at the policy level, **I immediately noticed a data gap that is in our region when it comes to measuring the extent of womens’ participation** and impact in the realm of peace processes.

In my view, part of this challenge **stems from our own reluctance to recognise, adopt and formalise** the best elements of local practices for the prevention of all forms of violence.

Furthermore, the under-representation and outright exclusion of women **denies the efforts that are being made to reduce conflict and violence of a critical ingredient for long term success.**

Indeed, respectable scholars have gathered **persuasive evidence that suggests that the participation of civil society groups, particularly women’s organizations, reduces the chances of failure for a peace process by as much as two thirds (64%).**

The **failure to include women in peace processes, has therefore significantly contributed to the inertia** that is experienced in effectively preventing and countering peace and security threats around the globe including violent extremism.

In the public domain, **the focus has been on women as victims and forced perpetrators of violent extremism.**

**I seriously disagree with this perspective because it robs women of their agency, relegating them to the status of passive participants in these situations**.

Instead, **I am convinced that more focus needs to be directed towards the active, positive and under-appreciated role that women are already playing as peacebuilders and preventors of violent extremism.**

**As IGAD, we are keen on scaling up women’s participation and incorporating their perspectives as equal stakeholders in peace and security** initiatives in the region, so that they are more meaningful and effective.

I am therefore pleased that the IGAD Centre of Excellence in the Prevention and Countering of Violent Extremism has **adopted a ‘whole of society’ approach that emphasises on the inclusion of the entire spectrum of our communities in peace initiatives.**

One of the key pillars driving our work in this area is ‘Strengthening the Capacity of At-Risk Communities’ to develop alternative and counter-narratives to the ideology and messaging of violent extremist groups.

**This workshop,** which brings together women from the IGAD region to build their capacity in strategic communications **is** **therefore a key milestone towards fulfilling this strategic objective.**

It is with this in mind that I draw your attention to the words of a young woman and Nobel Peace Prize Winner who reminded us that ***“With guns we can kill terrorists, but with education we can kill terrorism.”***

In this regard, **IGAD remains keen on working in partnership with established women groups and network**s that are working on peace to lend our additional support in the efforts and initiatives they are driving to prevent and counter the spread of violent extremism in our communities.

Going forward, IGAD proposes the following 4 measures under **a PREP framework** namely; **Participation, Research,** **Empowerment** and **Policy Reform.**

The first element is **participation**. We should increase women’s participation and leadership in efforts to prevent and respond to terrorism and violent extremism.

Secondly, let us invest in **research**. As I mentioned before, our region is behind in data-driven on the drivers of extremist violence by gender, the impact on women and girls and the contribution that women make in preventing it.

The third element is **empowerment**. We are all duty-bound to promote women’s leadership and economic empowerment in order to stimulate peaceful coexistence, build social cohesion and strengthen resilience at the community level.

Finally, **policy transformation**. As IGAD, this our niche; we are uniquely placed to work with our constituent Member States to strengthen existing national and regional counter-terrorism frameworks to integrate gender and be influenced positively by experiences of women.

As I come to the conclusion of my remarks, **I cannot forget that March is women’s month!**

**Please join me as we celebrate women across the globe for the invaluable contribution, they are making for the world a safer place.**

For the women like you who are working very hard to push the agenda of peace in our region and **the men of quality who support women’s equality, Happy Women’s Month!**

**Thank you very much.**