Opening remarks by the Secretary General on the occasion of the celebration of Women’s Day 2017

Excellencies, Distinguished invited guests, Ladies and gentlemen

It is indeed an honour for me this afternoon, to be granted this opportunity to provide a few opening remarks on our theme for this afternoon, SHE INSPIRES, as we pay homage to International Women’s Day (8th March, 2017), and the inspirational role of the women in our ACP countries and in the diaspora.

Instead of speaking on behalf of ACP women, the ACP Secretariat consulted the ACP Civil Society Forum Network, (first conceptualised in 1997; first meeting 5th July, 2001), in order to receive their inputs on how best to strengthen and foster a more visible generation of inspirational women throughout our ACP regions.

In the global sense of He for She, my voice this afternoon shall convey their message.

THE FOUNDATION

First and foremost though, it is important that we acknowledge the foundation of this international discourse. Today’s meeting represents an integral component of a process which was first started at the international level in 1975, when under the UN framework, significant steps were made to sensitize Heads of States to the specific challenges faced by women. Discussions identified the urgent and requisite need to find solutions to a wide range of severe shortcomings.

Between 1975 and 1995, the United Nations organised a series of four World Conferences on Women. The first conference in 1975 took place in Mexico City. This was followed by the meetings in Copenhagen, Denmark (1980), Nairobi, Kenya (1985) and Beijing, China (1995).

These conferences outlined a positive message. Despite the fact that women remained poor, underprivileged and marginalised, the actions and efforts of women from the South, against great odds, have consistently persevered to change their lives and provide a source of hope.

It is true, there are many ODDS which remain.

Many women continue to face dehumanising practices such as female genital mutilation, as women and girls continue to live in environments where there are unfortunately inadequate rights to self determination on what is done to their own bodies, ranging from sexual consent, to decisionmaking on childbirth, the size of their families or gaining access to internationally acceptable levels of health services.

In conflict scenarios, women and young girls remain vulnerable, and rape has surfaced as an unwelcome scourge of war and political instability.

The UN led conferences remain instrumental in enhancing the level of visibility of these problems.

Women under the ACP Civil Society Forum network, through the creation of organised grass root organisations, now have increased possibilities to network and engage with like-minded communities under the framework of the UN and the African Union, to set upon the work of initiating change. The platform has been created for women’s expressions. Their voices more than ever need to be heard.

The ACP group recognise that there needs to be a greater appreciation of the valuable contribution which women make to our societies...simply because throughout our regions, the success of our societies are directly rooted in the strength or weaknesses of our local communities.

In the best case scenario, ACP women continue to play a principal cohesive and consolidated role, particularly in relation to responsibilities that positively contribute to larger socio-economic requirements of respective communities.

Women are daily faced with the dual aim to (a) seek to realise their own personal ambitions and (b) guide and inspire the future prospects and career options for the younger generation, whilst simultaneously multi-tasking for the family (providing nutrition, management of health requirements etc).

Female Headed households:

Hence, female headed households are not an unusual phenomenon and attest to the significant socio-economic role played by women in ACP states.
Within this context the ACP Secretariat acknowledges the multiple responsibilities of women and re-affirm our commitment to further provide room for growth.

It is our aim to achieve this growth, through continued support for capacity building programs to consolidate development oriented actions with positive benefits for grass root community activity and organisations.

Secondly- A balanced perspective

In my attempt to provide a balanced perspective, let us now take a brief look at the following statistics on existing challenges as well as the areas of progress.

Statistics revealing positive developments on female entrepreneurship:

- In the case of Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Zambia, over 50% of the total pool of entrepreneurs are female. However challenges remain as the 2014 Findex report, identified that only 30% of women in Sub-Saharan Africa have access to bank accounts. Generally, African female entrepreneurs had limited access to finance in comparison with male counterparts.

- Nigeria (41%) outrank the US (10%) and the UK (5.7%) in terms of percentage of female entrepreneurs.

- The World Bank’s 2014 Gender at Work report, highlighted that between 1960 and 2010, there was a reduction of gender discriminatory laws against women, mainly with regards to property ownership and inheritance rights. These positive developments highlight global initiatives in favour of female entrepreneurs in our ACP states. It further encourages us to acknowledge the scope of possibilities which can be achieved through collaboration between ACP governments and local communities, international organisations and corporate sponsors.

Challenges:

Excellencies, Distinguished invited guests,

It is now time to acknowledge that nonetheless, challenges do remain.

The 2016 report by the African Development Bank, (despite the existence of international agreements which aim to eliminate gender inequalities) highlighted difficulties:

- only 15% of African women are landowners.
- less than 10% of women have access to contraception.
- over 1/3 of women will experience domestic violence from their partners.

UN Women and Demographic and Health Statistics:

- 35.6% of women will experience some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime.
- Women spend two and a half time more unpaid working hours to care for their families and communities compared to men. Unpaid care work (eg. fetching water, washing, cooking, cleaning etc.) is therefore mainly done by women.
- Every 10 minutes, at the global level, an adolescent girl will die as a result of violence.
- In the Pacific region, 2 out of 3 women will experience domestic physical or sexual violence.
- Up to 80% of men surveyed in the Asian-Pacific region admitted to perpetrating physical and/or sexual violence against women and girls during their lifetime.

World Bank Data reveal:

- at the global level, females aged between 15-44 years old, face a higher risk of rape and domestic violence than from cancer, car accidents, war and malaria.
- The negative impact of these forms of violence against women therefore resulted in sustained long term physical and sexual consequences, as well as fatalities.

These statistics have resulted in international organisations identifying a clear link between the existence of structured power inequalities that operate in favour of men and the consequent negative effect of violence against women.

As identified in a recent South Sudan Women Advocacy and Empowerment research on South Sudan, the situation is often exacerbated during political conflict when women have no independent income. Political instability, economic dependency, and lack of alternative solutions, increase women’s vulnerability, especially as they are often encouraged to remain silent in the face of domestic violence.

Economic empowerment encourages a recognition of empowering options, increase levels of independence and
also increase the capacities to send higher levels of young girls to receive primary and secondary education.

Thirdly- ACP Civil Society Forum Network proposals:

In the spirit of He for She, it remains my task to inform you that the ACP Civil Society Forum have also recognised this phenomenon and have highlighted the need for gender specific solutions to urgently address these problems within a development cooperation context. Within this framework, the ACP Secretariat aims to continue its collaboration with governments and organised civil society organisations, with a view to promoting women economic empowerment through, *inter alia*:

a) Creating policy and programme interventions for an enabling environment for women entrepreneurs to conduct business and have improved capacities to engage in regional trade;

b) Enhancing access to information, markets, finance, training and transportation;

c) Supporting the promotion of gender mainstreaming tools such as gender-responsive budgeting to all aspects of economic and social sectors, including trade facilitation, and infrastructure projects that address the needs of female entrepreneurs and traders.

d) Strengthening legal systems to combat domestic violence such as beatings, humiliation, rape, and other forms of violations of human rights, whilst creating platforms for greater involvement of women's organisations in the drafting and advocacy of supportive legal texts;

With regards to unpaid work, which at the global level are largely performed by women, the following ACP Civil Society Forum recommendations to government will be seriously addressed by the ACP Group as we work towards:

- The inclusion of unpaid care work in national accounts and in the calculation of GDP;
- The commissioning of gender impact assessments of macroeconomic policies and budgets;
- Involvement of more ACP female negotiators in upcoming ACP-EU agreement negotiations and multilateral and bilateral trade negotiations.
- Encouragement of states to better regulate and provide for social protection schemes which will act as a safety net for local communities in an environment of increased liberalization and privatization.

Excellencies, Distinguished guests, the challenges facing women since 1975, have seen noted examples of success, however my overview outlines that many challenges do still remain. We will however, take a moment to exhale and this afternoon focus on the positive, and be inspired by the presence of our ACP women, who I am pleased to see have turned out in full force to recognise the great potential that has always and will always exist...as long as we pursue hard work and maintain an optimistic perspective.

It remains my fervent hope that our reflection and celebrations of women's inspiration this afternoon, will bear positive fruits and further strengthen our commitment to the promotion of women's interests.

In turn, this will strengthen our common ACP destiny.

I thank you.