



STATEMENT BY THE COMESA SECRETARY GENERAL

**NATIONAL LAUNCH OF THE 50 MILLION AFRICAN WOMEN SPEAK
PLATFORM IN ZIMBABWE**

3 SEPTEMBER 2020

VENUE: VIRTUAL

The Chief Guest and Minister of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development, Honourable Dr. Stembiso Gladys Nyoni,
Honourable Ministers present,
Honourable Members of Parliament,
Permanent Secretaries present,
Members of the diplomatic corps,
Representatives of Government Departments and Agencies,
Heads of Private Sector Institutions,
Representatives from our funding partner, the African Development Bank,
Colleagues from the COMESA Secretariat,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

On behalf of COMESA, I am greatly honoured to join you today as we officially launch the 50 Million African Women Speak platform in Zimbabwe. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the honourable Minister for your leadership and for gracing this important occasion. I also wish to pay tribute to our dependable partners on this journey; the East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) with whom we are jointly implementing the 50

Million African Women Speak Networking Platform Project (50MAWSP), as well as the project funder, the African Development Bank.

Honourable Minister, I am sure you will agree with me that this is a day that has been several months in the making. As you may recall, we were set for this launch event in March before we were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. That we are conducting this launch event today using virtual means is indeed confirmation of the disruptions the pandemic has caused to the way we do business. Some of these may be temporary, but most will be permanent.

Back in March, we had prepared for a large celebration that would bring together hundreds of Zimbabwean women in a gathering where we hoped they would serve as physical witnesses to the unveiling of a digital platform designed to transform how they do business. Little did we know that this novel, and noble initiative we had planned to unveil in Zimbabwe then would quickly become illustrative of what we now refer to as the “new normal”.

The 50 Million African Women Speak platform that we are launching today comes at a time when businesses whether big or small, are more seized than ever before of the need to move their enterprises online. I therefore speak with utmost confidence

when I say that the 50 Million African Women Speak platform could not have come at a better time!

The COVID-19 pandemic has redefined not only how we live our lives, but how we run our businesses. Existing and aspiring women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe for whom traditional markets may be shut are looking for solutions. As COMESA Secretary General, I am proud this morning to offer one practical solution for a new beginning. That solution is signing up to the 50 Million African Women Speak platform, because the new normal dictates that our women move their businesses to digital platforms like the one we are launching today.

The 50 Million African Women Speak digital networking platform is a tool that has been specifically built to create a new world of opportunities for women in our COMESA region, and indeed, the African continent as a whole. The platform was designed with inputs from women in business in Zimbabwe and other stakeholders. It comes highly recommended for all Zimbabwean women because it specifically speaks to their needs, providing information on where they can access financial services, training facilities and opportunities for mentorship with an exactness that no other platform provides.

Honourable Minister, when we set out, in 2018, to Zimbabwe to introduce the commencement of the 50 Million African Women Speak Project to stakeholders and collect information on the needs of women in business , we believed that together we were creating an initiative that would play a part in helping women to rise above the social, economic and cultural barriers they face as they go about pursuing their development goals.

The digital platform we are launching today will contribute to the economic empowerment of women by enabling them to access real-time information on financial and non-financial services. This information, as has been said many times before, is power. What women who visit the platform will find is carefully curated content to empower them in ways they had never considered possible. The Resources Area of the 50 Million African Women Speak platform boasts of some of the most comprehensive content on financial products that are tailored specifically for women, information on where to access business management training, obtain financial literacy skills and opportunities for mentorship, to mention but a few.

The Networking Area of the platform provides an intuitive capability to facilitate prompt connections between women who are located within the same geographical spaces and those separated by national or regional boundaries. Through the

Networking Area of the platform, Zimbabwean women will have an opportunity to create their own virtual market stalls where they can showcase their products all day long and all year round without a worry about restrictions imposed by COVID-19, and without the need for physical interactions with their potential buyers. In effect, this platform is making it possible for them to observe social distance without necessarily slowing down their business.

Honourable Minister, I am pleased to inform you that the thousands of women who have already signed up to the platform have quickly found value in the various knowledge groups that connect women entrepreneurs based on their specific interests, which range from the pursuit of book keeping skills to honey processing to identifying markets for their products. My simple message to my Zimbabweans sisters today is that this platform we are launching today in Zimbabwe is too good an opportunity to miss out on!

It would be very remiss of me, honourable Minister, to conclude my statement without an expression of my profound gratitude to the Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe for the support it has rendered to the 50 Million African Women Speak Project to this point. I therefore take this opportunity to recognize the support rendered by the work of the COMESA coordinating ministry- Ministry of Foreign

Affairs & International Trade; the project host ministry- Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprise Development; the Project Country Team for Zimbabwe, as well as the various stakeholders who have made this progress possible. I am immensely proud as COMESA Secretary General that we have been able to successfully implement this project in Zimbabwe to date and that we have something to show for it. Congratulations are surely in order.

I count on the Zimbabwean Government's stewardship and ownership of the platform going forward to ensure its sustainability and growth as that would be the surest way for it to deliver practical benefits to Zimbabwean women.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues at the COMESA Secretariat who have worked extremely hard and with you over the last two years to ensure the successful delivery of this platform. I pledge COMESA's continued support to you for this initiative.

Finally, I would like to thank the national organizing committee for putting together this national launch event and to congratulate you all once again on this wonderful achievement.

I wish you every success and I thank you for your kind attention.