**EXPERT GROUP MEETING - LOCAL GOVERNMENT & HUMAN RIGHTS MECHANISMS 28 SEPT. 2023**

**STATEMENT- ESTHER EGHOBAMIEN-MSHELIA VICE-CHAIR CEDAW COMMITTEE**

Excellencies, my sincere commendations to the OHCHR for this unique and innovative EGM. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this historic opportunity to enhance delivery of HRT obligations to local communities.

Local Governments are vital to fulfilling aspirations of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). They highlight the Nexus between CEDAW articles, jurisprudence, optional protocol mechanisms and measures essential for guaranteeing fundamental human rights at the community and village levels for everyone including women and girls.

LGs should provide oversight to ensure that constitutional, legislative, policy and regulatory measures are upheld in local communities and settlements. The array of socio-economic political, religious, cultural and other interactions that occur within the LG gives rise, in reality, to **one of the largest** **theatres of women’s rights protection and violation both in rural and peri-urban settings thereby making it the greatest theatre for realizing gender equality and women’s empowerment, addressing stereotypes, inaction, impunity, lack of agency, voicelessness, near absence in governance at leadership and decision-making levels and other discriminatory factors/practices.**

LGs therefore remain a critical but under-explored vehicle or unchartered frontier for promoting accountability to globally agreed HRs standards and achieving the SDGs as visible its numerous statutory roles/functions such as i) Decentralized duty bearer, policy maker, administrator and regulator; ii) Service provider (Schools, Health Centres, Financial and other Markets, Local vigilantes, Land, Agriculture, Industry, Infrastructure etc); iii) peace and security architecture; iv) Frontline Respondent to crisis, violence and other emergencies; v) Safeguarding etc.

**LGs occupy a crucial niche** in fulfilling State Parties obligations to CEDAW particularly for Articles 3-National Machineries; 5 – Violence Against W&G and trafficking in persons; Art. 7 – Discrimination in Political and Public Life; Art. 13- Socio-economic opportunities and benefits of women and girls; Art. 14- Rural women, national development and investment priorities including SDG implementation. The disconnect & failure to concretely engage LG compromises the realization of CEDAW ideals.

In response to the plight of women in rural communities where LGs hold sway, the Committee issued GR 14 and 34 on their rights. Lessons learned about LGs through the periodic report reviews and Constructive Dialogue with SPs processes reveal:

1. Limited knowledge on global policy frameworks including CEDAW, variety of rights protection it offers women and girls, implementation and reporting obligations of government( central, sub-national and local) and shadow/alternate reporting modalities;
2. Absence of redress mechanisms targeting entrenched stereotypes, harmful and discriminatory cultural practices or dismantling and reforming existing practices;
3. Weak translation, dissemination and follow-up of CoBs, GRs and Inquiry recommendations;
4. Inadequate institutional arrangements, resources and appropriate technical capacities among different LG departments to uphold CEDAW provisions;
5. Lack of clarity on how to share gender mainstreaming responsibilities across sectors and among different tiers of govt. Who budgets for what? How is Financial Inclusion, GRB & Procurement implemented? How is effective coordination and accountability achieved?

Although the Committee has not engaged directly with LGs in its constructive dialogue with SPs, none-the-less some good practice models recorded by the Committee include:

1. **Dialogue with Samoa in 2018** on implementation of the new Family Safety Act(FSA) and Family Courts using all male Village Councils in community GBV management meanwhile GBV cases could not be reported to the police until Village dispute options were exhausted leading to low or almost nil reporting or sanctioning due to lack of fair hearing for women, stigmatization and re-traumatization of victims, local stereotypes and perceptions on family and domestic violence. Consequently, high trends of family GBV persisted with spousal violence accounting for over 80% of recorded cases. The Committee recommended a review in the composition of Village Councils to include at least two women and involving men as male champions of the GBV zero tolerance campaign to make GBV eradication a collective responsibility of all and reverse notions that governance and leadership in the public realm is the sole prerogative of men?

2. **With Spain**, the Committee recently raised concerns on the provision of agricultural resources and equipment to rural women on an equal basis with men as well as land ownership, the land compensatory scheme and climate change management strategy.

3.**For Mauritania** and others, the Committee has requested that traditional and religious leaders be encouraged to play leading advocacy roles in campaigning for cultural change to end discriminatory practices, stressing that provision and access to courts, shelters, safe homes and safe spaces in IDP camps are priorities for women in local communities.

4. The **CEDAW Knowledge Hub** which the OHCHR has integrated into its capacity strengthening mechanism also models how capacities of local entities and opinion leaders can be strengthened to become agents and vanguards of women’s rights and ensure that local peace and security mechanisms integrate WPS considerations into community security management and humanitarian response.

**5.** The new **CEDAW GR 40** on women’s equal representation in decision-making systems especially in the context of the global digital revolution, AI, NFTs provides an unparalleled opportunity for a paradigm shift at all levels. Engaging LGs in the consultation processes for GR40 and other GRs will help to address the present disconnect.

6. Increased engagement of women and women focused CSOs especially from regions like Africa is needed to strengthen capacity and enhance accountability at the LG level. The Committee’s Africa Group is considering the **African Women Avant-Garde project** to bridge this engagement gap and eager to work with the OHCHR, SPs and partners.

Few suggestions for OHCHR and SPs are:

1. considers direct engagement with LGs using the **GHANRI** model to accelerate rights protection for women and girls at the grassroots level and enhance CEDAW-LG engagement;
2. promote adoption and adaptation of the **Los Angeles/San Fransisco** **CEDAW Cities** **project** which has demonstrated local implementation and accountability to CEDAW by ordinance; and
3. embrace **inclusion, innovation, technology and partnerships** for more impactful LG engagement on HRTs

**Closing Remarks**

Across board, the absence of direct engagement with LG makes it difficult for the Committee to monitor implementation and provide policy and other advisory services to address challenges and factors mitigating against the full implementation of the Convention.

Providing pathways for engaging with LGs will enhance functioning and impact of CEDAW and other HRTBs and lessons from Samoa, Mauritania, Spain

In a previous agricultural project where I led the gender component, strategic engagement with the LG opened a unique and innovative entry point for securing access to large land parcels which qualified women to benefit from the Canada supported project. These women went on to be the best performing farmers, supplying tons of grains to industrial users, changing the narrative in rural communities and enabling the project win a global agricultural award**.**

Women’s poor participation, representation and leadership in local governance is recognized by the Committee as a major challenge to achieving parity, redressing structural and systemic barriers across sectors, overcoming historical set-backs and re-inventing a new global order. This is because LGs are known to serve as grooming ground for political leadership, providing key platforms for establishing followership, building political bases, networks and constituencies and fund raising for election campaigns.

Experience from India’s constitutional provision for women in the **Panchayats** demonstrates the potential of LGs in serving as vehicles for transformation, increasing women’s leadership, dismantling local stereotypes and bridging gender gaps.

**Undoubtedly, LGs are the command theatres where the goal of eliminating discrimination and gender inequality must be realized if we are to build the world we want and a safer, greener, more inclusive future.**