STATEMENT OF THE REGIONAL WOMEN'S PARLIAMENTARY CAUCUS

DELIVERED BY HON. SENATOR DR LINDA NXUMALO, MP (ESWATINI),

DURING THE OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE 59TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY

HOSTED BY
THE KINGDOM OF ESWATINI
IN EZULWINI
ON
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SALUTATIONS

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It is with profound honour and a deep sense of responsibility that I address this distinguished gathering on behalf of the women parliamentarians of Southern Africa, under the auspices of the Regional Women's Parliamentary Caucus (RWPC).

We gather in the beautiful Kingdom of Eswatini, a nation whose history bears enduring testimony to the strength, wisdom and leadership of women. The institution of the *Ndlovukazi*, the revered She-Elephant, stands as a powerful symbol of women's authority and influence in national governance.

We draw equal inspiration from Queen Labotsibeni Gwamile, revered as *The Indomitable One,* whose remarkable courage, political acumen and steadfast resolve helped safeguard the sovereignty, land and heritage of the Swazi nation amid the formidable challenges of colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her enduring legacy is a powerful testament to the pivotal role women play in shaping the history and destiny of nations.

These legacies remind us that women's leadership is neither foreign to our African traditions nor a recent aspiration. It is deeply rooted in our history, culture and identity. Our responsibility is to ensure that the authority historically exercised by exceptional women translates into meaningful opportunities for women throughout our societies.

Guest of Honour and Distinguished Delegates,

However, even as we celebrate these legacies, the realities facing women and girls across Southern Africa, the African continent and the world demand urgent attention. According to the United Nations, nearly one in three women globally, approximately 840 million, have experienced physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Behind these figures are women whose safety, dignity and fundamental rights have been violated, often in their own homes. Gender-based violence and femicide remain pervasive, while emerging forms of digital violence, including cyberstalking, online harassment and the misuse of artificial intelligence, increasingly threaten women's safety and participation in public life.

Economic inequality remains equally troubling. Women continue to face barriers to land ownership, financial services, decent employment and productive resources, while carrying a disproportionate burden of unpaid care responsibilities. These inequalities constrain their economic independence and diminish their contribution to national development.

Climate change is further deepening these vulnerabilities. Across Southern Africa, recurring droughts, floods and extreme weather events threaten agricultural livelihoods, food security and access to water. The gravity of this challenge is evident in SADC assessments, which project that approximately 53 million people across the region will face food insecurity during the 2026/27 consumption period. With the prospect of El Niño conditions bringing renewed rainfall deficits to parts of the region, women smallholder farmers and rural households face heightened uncertainty. Such shocks also heighten

the risks of girls dropping out of school, child marriage and gender-based violence.

Equally concerning are persistent inequalities in maternal healthcare, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, and access to economic opportunities. Political representation also remains far below our aspirations. As of January 2026, women occupied only 27.4 per cent of seats in national parliaments worldwide. The situation across Southern Africa is equally concerning. According to the SADC Secretariat's 2025 figures, women's parliamentary representation stood at 43 per cent in South Africa, 41 per cent in Angola, 40 per cent in Namibia, 39 per cent in Mozambique and Tanzania, and 34 per cent in Zimbabwe. Here in Eswatini, representation stood at 28 per cent, while several Member States remained below 25 per cent, with Botswana recording just 8.6 per cent.

More alarming is the uneven trajectory of progress. Between 2024 and 2025, only three Member States recorded improvements, while five experienced stagnation and five registered reversals. Namibia's representation declined from 50.9 to 40 per cent, Mozambique's from 43 to 39 per cent, and Seychelles from 25.7 to 22.8 per cent. Not a single one of the 14 reporting Member States achieved the 50 per cent gender parity target in 2025. These trends demonstrate that gains in women's political representation are neither assured nor irreversible. They underscore the urgency of sustained electoral and institutional reforms, alongside measures to safeguard progress already achieved. Above all, women's representation must translate into substantive influence over legislation, public policy, national budgets and political leadership.

These challenges are deeply interconnected. Poverty increases vulnerability, economic exclusion limits women's choices, and violence undermines their ability to participate fully in society. Addressing them requires coordinated action across our legislative, economic and social institutions.

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As we commemorate ten years since the adoption of the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage, the evidence demands serious reflection. According to the United Nations, 31 per cent of young women aged 20–24 in sub-Saharan Africa were married before their eighteenth birthday. This represents nearly one in three young women whose childhoods have been affected by a practice that frequently interrupts education, undermines health and restricts economic opportunities.

For the Regional Women's Parliamentary Caucus, these challenges require a more decisive legislative, policy and institutional response. Our regional commitments must be reflected in national laws, adequately funded programmes and measurable improvements in the lives of women and girls. Central to this responsibility is the urgent need to domesticise and implement our regional commitments to eradicate child marriage and gender-based violence. This requires not only legislative reform but also effective enforcement, accessible justice, adequately resourced protection services and sustained investment in prevention. Without these measures, the rights

enshrined in our laws will remain out of reach for those who need them most.

Equally fundamental is women's economic empowerment. Governments must address the structural barriers that restrict women's access to land, agricultural inputs, finance, markets and decent employment. Gender-responsive budgeting must be institutionalised within national planning and public expenditure frameworks and be subject to effective parliamentary scrutiny. Economic independence is essential not only to women's dignity and livelihoods but also to their capacity to make meaningful choices and participate fully in national development.

Economic vulnerability is being exacerbated by climate change and recurring El Niño-associated droughts. We therefore urge our governments to strengthen gender-responsive climate adaptation and disaster preparedness by investing in early-warning systems, climate-resilient agriculture, water infrastructure and social protection. These measures are particularly critical for rural women, whose livelihoods sustain households and communities and whose economic insecurity can have far-reaching consequences for children's education, nutrition and protection.

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As our societies become increasingly digital, the protection and empowerment of women must also extend to the digital sphere. National legislation must provide effective safeguards and remedies against online harassment, cyberstalking and technology-facilitated

violence, while public policies must expand women's access to connectivity, digital skills and emerging economic opportunities. Women must be able to participate in the digital economy and public discourse without intimidation, discrimination or exclusion.

These priorities are underpinned by the imperative for women's equal participation in political leadership and decision-making. Member States must give practical effect to the SADC Framework on Achieving Gender Parity in Politics and Decision-Making, 2025–2035, through appropriate electoral and institutional reforms, measurable targets, and regular accountability mechanisms. Increased representation must be accompanied by meaningful participation in parliamentary leadership, legislative processes, budgetary decisions, and public policy formulation.

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Our gathering also comes on the eve of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, observed from 25 November to 10 December 2026 under the global theme, *"UNiTE to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Ensure Justice, Protect Survivors, End Impunity."* This theme is particularly significant because it places justice and institutional accountability at the heart of our collective response. It reminds us that condemning violence is insufficient when survivors cannot access protection, perpetrators evade accountability, and essential support services are inaccessible or underfunded.

Guest of Honour and Distinguished Delegates,

As I conclude, allow me to return to the enduring legacy of Queen Labotsibeni Gwamile, whose courage, wisdom and determination helped shape the destiny of this Kingdom. Her remarkable example reminds us of what women can accomplish when their leadership is recognised and their authority respected. Our collective responsibility is to ensure that every woman and girl enjoys the rights, opportunities and institutional support necessary to participate fully in shaping the future of our societies.

Let this 59th Plenary Assembly mark a renewed commitment to decisive action. I call upon our Parliaments to exercise their legislative, budgetary and oversight mandates with greater resolve, ensuring that our regional commitments translate into enforceable laws, adequately funded programmes and measurable progress.
Let us build a SADC region where no woman is denied the opportunity to lead, no girl is robbed of her childhood, and equality is not merely promised, but experienced in everyday life.

I thank you.