WELCOME ADDRESS

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ON THE ADOPTION OF THE SADC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM ANTI-SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

Honourable President of the SADC Parliamentary Forum; Honourable Speakers and Members of Parliament; Honourable Members of the Executive Committee; distinguished delegates; the Secretary General; officials and colleagues; ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed a great honour to stand before you today, and, more importantly, to celebrate a significant step that we are taking as a region towards strengthening the values, principles and standards that define the institutions we represent.

Today, we meet as a proud SADC region, where legislators have come together, not only in the exercise of their parliamentary responsibilities, but also in a collective expression of their respect

for human dignity, the rule of law, equality and the protection of all persons.

The consideration and adoption of an Anti-Sexual Harassment Policy is therefore much more than an administrative or institutional exercise. It is a deliberate step in the right direction. It is a statement of the kind of institution we want to be, the kind of leadership we aspire to demonstrate and the kind of environment we wish to create for everyone who interacts with the SADC Parliamentary Forum.

We must appreciate that political institutions are not immune to the challenges that exist in our societies. Indeed, the very positions we occupy often come with influence, authority and unequal power relationships. These must be exercised responsibly. No political title, seniority, position or influence should ever diminish another person's dignity or become a basis for intimidation, exploitation or unwanted sexual conduct.

Sexual harassment is not simply an issue of inappropriate behaviour. It is fundamentally an issue of power, respect and the protection of human dignity. Its consequences extend beyond the individual affected. It undermines confidence, compromises participation, damages institutional integrity and, ultimately, weakens the democratic values we are entrusted to uphold.

We must also be honest about the cultures that sometimes allow sexual harassment to persist.

There are attitudes and social practices that have, over time, normalised or excused conduct that should never have been acceptable. We sometimes dismiss inappropriate behaviour as a joke, suggest that it is simply how men behave, excuse it as part of our culture, or advise those affected to tolerate it for the sake of maintaining relationships, avoiding embarrassment or preserving institutional harmony.

Sometimes, the response is that the matter is not serious enough to warrant attention. At other times, it is treated as a private issue rather than a matter of institutional responsibility.

We must challenge these attitudes.

Our cultures are rich in values of respect, dignity, community and mutual responsibility. We should preserve and celebrate those aspects of our heritage. But culture must never become a convenient justification for conduct that violates the dignity and rights of another person. Neither tradition, political status nor institutional hierarchy should be used to excuse harassment.

We must be able to distinguish between preserving our cultural identity and perpetuating practices that undermine the very humanity we seek to protect. Culture is not static; it must also evolve in response to our collective understanding of justice, equality and human dignity.

This is why today's development is so important.

By taking this step, we are demonstrating that we are prepared to move beyond acknowledging the problem to establishing standards and mechanisms that address it. We are saying that

respect must not depend on who a person is, the position they occupy, the country they come from or the influence they wield.

We want every person who participates in SADC Parliamentary Forum meetings, every Member of Parliament, every parliamentary official, every member of staff, every delegate, every visitor and everyone who comes into contact with this institution to know that they are welcome, valued and respected.

We want people to attend our meetings, undertake official assignments, participate in our programmes and contribute to our work without fear of harassment, intimidation or exploitation. We want an environment in which professional relationships are built on mutual respect, where opportunities are determined by merit and where no one feels compelled to compromise their dignity to participate or belong.

At the same time, the existence of this policy must assure everyone that allegations will be handled responsibly, impartially and fairly. The rights of complainants and respondents must be respected, and due process must be observed. Accountability and fairness are not competing principles; they are both essential to institutional justice.

Honourable Members and distinguished colleagues,

We should take pride in the fact that we have chosen to take this conversation a step further. It is easy for institutions to make declarations about human rights, gender equality and the protection of vulnerable persons. It is much more meaningful when we are prepared to translate those commitments into practical institutional safeguards.

Today, we are doing precisely that.

And our responsibility must not end with the adoption of this policy. As a region, we must continue to strengthen awareness, promote responsible leadership, challenge harmful attitudes and ensure that the standards we establish are implemented consistently. We must lead by example, because our credibility in advocating for the rights and dignity of our citizens is strengthened when we demonstrate those same values within our own institutions.

Let this therefore be remembered as an important moment in the evolution of the SADC Parliamentary Forum: a moment when our legislators collectively affirmed that public office carries responsibility, that human dignity is non-negotiable and that respect must be the foundation of our institutional culture.

We are not simply adopting a policy today. We are affirming a standard. We are setting an example. And we are declaring that everyone who enters our institution, serves alongside us or participates in our work deserves to do so with dignity, safety and respect.

May we continue to build a SADC region whose parliamentary institutions are not only recognised for the laws they make and the democratic values they promote, but also for the standards of conduct they practise.

I congratulate the SADC Parliamentary Forum, its leadership and all Member Parliaments for taking this important step.

Let this be the beginning of an even stronger culture of dignity, accountability and respect across our region.

I thank you.