OPENING REMARKS BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL ON THE CONSIDERATION OF THE SADC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM ANTI-SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

Honourable President of the SADC Parliamentary Forum;
Honourable Speakers of Parliament;
Honourable Members of the Executive Committee;
Honourable Members of Parliament;
Distinguished Delegates;
Ladies and Gentlemen.

We are gathered here today to consider a policy of considerable institutional importance. I wish to invite Honourable Members to approach this matter with the seriousness, diligence and sense of responsibility it deserves.

The SADC Parliamentary Forum is not an ordinary meeting place, nor is it merely a platform where parliamentarians from our region convene to exchange ideas. It is a gathering of some of the most influential political leaders in our countries: Honourable Speakers, Members of Parliament and holders of high public office. It is an institution whose work is closely connected to constitutional democracy, the rule of law, accountability and the protection of fundamental rights.

It follows, therefore, that the standards we uphold within this institution must reflect the constitutional values that we expect our national institutions and citizens to respect. We cannot advocate constitutionalism, equality, accountability and the rule of law externally while tolerating conduct internally that undermines those very principles.

Honourable Members, history has repeatedly demonstrated that no political office, however powerful, is immune to the consequences of sexual harassment. We have witnessed the public disgrace and downfall of highly influential men, including individuals who occupied the highest levels of political leadership, following allegations and findings relating to sexual misconduct and harassment. We have equally witnessed women in positions of considerable influence and public standing whose careers and reputations have been profoundly affected by sexual harassment and the unequal power relationships that often accompany it.

These experiences remind us that sexual harassment is not a trivial personal matter, nor is it simply an issue of individual conduct. It has consequences for leadership, political legitimacy, institutional credibility and public confidence.

Sexual harassment interferes with the proper exercise of political office. It compromises professional relationships, distorts the balance of power, damages working environments and degrades the dignity of the offices that we hold. More importantly, it creates a contradiction between the laws and principles that an institution promotes and the conduct that may be tolerated within its own walls.

How can citizens have confidence in laws protecting equality, dignity and the rights of women and men if the institutions responsible for making those laws are unable to uphold those standards within their own environments?

This is why the policy before us is so important.

Sexual harassment must not be trivialised, excused or treated as an unavoidable feature of political life. It must not be defended through arguments about status, seniority, tradition, political influence or the supposed privileges of holding public office. Nor should it be reduced to a gender contest. While women are disproportionately affected by sexual harassment, the protection of human dignity and the prevention of abuse of power are responsibilities that concern everyone.

As we approach the period of the **16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence**, this deliberation carries particular significance. The campaign calls upon us not merely to express solidarity, but to demonstrate through our institutions, decisions and conduct that violence, intimidation, exploitation and abuse have no place in our societies. The adoption and effective implementation of this policy would be a meaningful contribution to that commitment.

I wish, however, to draw particular attention to one aspect of the policy: the mechanisms for receiving, considering and determining complaints.

Honourable Members, a policy is only as credible as the procedures through which it is implemented. It is not sufficient to declare that harassment is prohibited. We must establish a process that people can trust: one that is accessible, impartial, confidential, timely and fair. It must protect those who report harassment from retaliation, while equally safeguarding the rights of persons against whom allegations are made. It must provide for appropriate investigation, clear responsibilities, accountability and outcomes that are consistent with the seriousness of the matter.

There is a well-established principle in the administration of justice, articulated by Lord Hewart, that **"Justice should not only be done, but should manifestly and undoubtedly be seen to be done."** This principle is particularly relevant to the policy before us. The procedures must not only be fair; they must inspire confidence that fairness has been observed. Neither influence nor office should determine the outcome of a complaint. No complainant should be discouraged from seeking redress, and no respondent should be deprived of a fair opportunity to answer allegations.

I therefore encourage Honourable Members to examine these provisions carefully. Let us ensure that the mechanisms are not merely aspirational, but practical, workable and sufficiently robust to withstand scrutiny. The credibility of this institution will depend not only on what we prohibit, but on how consistently and impartially we respond when concerns are raised.

Our responsibility also extends beyond individual protection. Peace and security are built upon respect for human dignity, equality, justice and the protection of rights. Institutions that tolerate harassment, intimidation and abuse of power weaken the conditions necessary for peaceful participation and inclusive governance. Conversely, institutions that uphold dignity and accountability strengthen public trust and contribute to a culture of peace and security.

We must also remain vigilant against narratives that seek to reverse the progress made in protecting fundamental rights. Anti-rights attitudes, whether expressed through the normalisation of harassment, the silencing of complainants or the justification of unequal treatment, must find no comfortable place within the SADC Parliamentary Forum. We cannot champion democratic values in our region while

allowing practices that undermine those values to take root within our own institution.

Honourable Members, the consideration of this policy is therefore not simply an administrative exercise. It is a test of institutional leadership. It is an opportunity to demonstrate that this Forum is prepared to hold itself to the same standards of constitutionalism, accountability and respect for human rights that it encourages among Member Parliaments.

I urge you to deliberate diligently, strengthen the provisions where necessary and approach the policy with a shared understanding that its purpose is to protect the dignity of every person who participates in, serves or engages with the work of this Forum.

Let us ensure that our institution is a place where leadership is exercised responsibly, where power is never used to intimidate or exploit, where complaints are treated seriously and fairly, and where every individual can participate without fear of harassment or discrimination.

The strength of this Forum is not measured only by the political influence of those who sit around its tables. It is measured equally by the principles we uphold, the people we protect and the example we set.

I thank you.