



Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Great Lakes Region of Africa

International Women's Day 2021

Hand Up High to Show Your Solidarity

Message by the UN Special Envoy Huang Xia on behalf of the 'Advisory Board for Women, Peace & Security in the Great Lakes Region'

on the occasion of the International Women's Day

8 March 2021

This year's International Women's Day is commemorated under the theme "***Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world***". On behalf of the Advisory Board for Women, Peace & Security in the Great Lakes Region and other regional partners, I wish to take this occasion to reiterate our commitment to advance gender equality, as well as women's and girl's rights in the Great Lakes region at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact all aspects of our lives.

International Women's Day offers us an opportunity to reflect on the challenges that women and girls have faced over the past year across the region that have impacted on their livelihoods and security, including increased sexual and domestic violence. Despite this challenging context, women have played a prominent role in social, domestic and economic areas in fighting the effects of COVID-19, with their contribution to the health sector of particular note. Within the political sphere, women have also stepped up further their participation in democratic processes, as candidates, in citizens' rights movements and as voters, that have provided an important avenue for women's advancement.

We therefore commend these women champions on their convictions and endeavors, as they offer inspiration to the younger generation in breaking down artificial barriers on rights issues.

The theme of 2021 "Women in Leadership: Achieving an Equal Future in a COVID-19 world", is fully in line with the objectives of the new United Nations Strategy for Peace Consolidation, Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution in the Great Lakes Region as well as the Peace, Security & Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the region; the Pact on Security, Stability and Development in the Great Lakes Region of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region; and the African Union Agenda 2063. The strengthening of a network of women mediators, who can directly contribute to peacebuilding, as well as continued advocacy initiatives by the Advisory Board for

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women's political participation in electoral processes will be key to the joint endeavours of the Guarantors of the PSC Framework.

At a time when regional leaders are forging and strengthening the bonds of cooperation, women and girls, including people with disabilities, must be afforded the opportunity to play a leading role in efforts aimed at building peace and advancing shared prosperity that will deliver greater unity and regional cohesion.

We must recognize and advance the nexus between economic development and women's empowerment, and in this context, we encourage increased women's involvement and leadership in driving forward the economic agenda, particularly during this time of the pandemic. By way of example, women currently represent more than 70% of those operating in the agricultural sector in the Great Lakes region and are instrumental in promoting small and medium cross-border activities, thereby demonstrating their ability to lead a prominent and critical sector. Yet, their role is not always fully recognized. Space must therefore be afforded to this important segment of our society to maximize the region's potential.

As we look ahead, we call on all stakeholders - national, regional, and international - to challenge themselves through the reinforcement of policies and demonstrate practical commitment that will allow women and girls to effectively take on the necessary increased leadership at all levels.