



PRESS RELEASE

COMESA To Launch Women's Digital Networking Platform in Member States

50 Million African Women Speak platform national launches planned in 14 Member States

Lusaka, Monday, 17 August 2020 – The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) will, starting this week, conduct national launches of a digital platform specifically designed to address the information needs of women in the region.

COMESA will be rolling out the 50 Million African Women Speak platform (50MAWSP) in 14 Member States between August and November 2020 largely through virtual means owing to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The launches will kick off in Zimbabwe on 20 August followed by Seychelles on 25 August.

The platform which is accessible at www.womenconnect.org primarily seeks to economically empower women by providing a one-stop shop for a wide range of financial and non-financial services that women need to start and grow successful businesses.

It is jointly implemented by COMESA, the East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and is funded by the African Development Bank. Continentally unveiled during the Global Gender Summit in November 2019 in Kigali, Rwanda, the platform enables women in member/partner States of COMESA, EAC and ECOWAS and other African countries to find information on how to run businesses, where to access financial services, how to create business opportunities online and where to access training resources.

The COMESA Secretary General H.E Ms. Chileshe Mpundu Kapwepwe has described the initiative as “a *very practical way of speaking to the general agenda of empowering women*” with its business resources and custom-built social networking features already attracting thousands of women and connecting them to do business with each other and share experiences in ways that were previously not possible.

According to the COMESA Director for Gender and Social Affairs Mrs Beatrice Hamusonde the platform, which is also available as an app, is timely and the perfect response for the region's women to turn to as they deal with the social and economic challenges which have resulted from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“For women entrepreneurs in the COMESA region, the 50 Million African Women Speak platform couldn't have come at a better time. As the world grapples with the adverse effects of COVID-19, we know that women-owned businesses are even more vulnerable right now because the pandemic has reinforced the social, economic and cultural hurdles women entrepreneurs face,” she said.

“The 50MAWSP digital platform therefore is giving women-owned businesses a lifeline as we embrace a new normal where businesses, whether big or small, are moving online,” she added, emphasizing that the platform will give women an opportunity to showcase their products and connect with a market of millions across Africa, in addition to leveraging opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship as part of a dynamic online community of entrepreneurs.

Following the two national launches scheduled this August in Zimbabwe and Seychelles, 12 more launches will be conducted in Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia,

Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Sudan and Tunisia. The first 50MAWSP national launch in the COMESA region was held in Zambia in February this year.

Note to Editors

About 50 Million African Women Speak

Women play a critical role in the development of African economies. However, existing and potential women entrepreneurs continue to face gender-specific barriers such as limited access to information and networking opportunities, lower levels of education and business training, weak property rights that deprive them of collateral and tangible assets, legal barriers that impede their economic activities and cultural barriers that discourage them from thriving as entrepreneurs. As a result, women have challenges to access financial and non-financial services and so the size and growth of their businesses suffer.

The 50 Million African Women Speak platform comes at a time when Sub-Saharan Africa hosts close to 13 million formal and informal small and medium-sized enterprises with one or more women owners. Yet, only [16-20%](#) of women entrepreneurs are able to access long-term financing from formal financial institutions to scale up their businesses.

In addition, with a financing gap for women entrepreneurs across business value chains in Sub-Saharan Africa [estimated at \\$42 billion](#) by the African Development Bank, the 50 Million African Women Speak platform stands out as a unique solution to provide information on available financial products specifically designed with women entrepreneurs in mind.

By using Information Communication Technology (ICTs), some of the challenges women entrepreneurs face can be alleviated, hence the establishment of the 50 Million African Women Speak Project (50MAWSP) funded by the African Development Bank.

The Project is contributing to the economic and social empowerment of women across COMESA, EAC and ECOWAS member/partner States through the provision of a networking platform (www.womenconnect.org) to access information on financial and non-financial services.

The Project which is jointly implemented by the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the East African Community (EAC) and the Economic Community for Western African States (ECOWAS) aims to connect at least 50 million women in business across Africa. It is also expected to contribute to the achievement of African Union's Agenda 2063 goals specifically the goals on gender equality and women and youth empowerment.

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