



Concept Note

African Women's Empowerment Programme (AWEP) Advocacy and Partnership Building meeting

Friday 13 March 2026, 12:30 – 14:30

African Union Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations, New York

1. Background

The **Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**, established in 1946 as a functional commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), serves as the principal global intergovernmental platform dedicated to promoting gender equality and advancing the rights and agency of women and girls worldwide.

These priorities strongly align with the **African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD)** mandate to accelerate the implementation of **Agenda 2063**, particularly **Aspiration 6, Goal 17**, which calls for *full gender equality in all spheres of life*. The pursuit of gender equality is central to achieving inclusive growth, sustainable development, and social justice across the African continent.

At its current session, CSW is focusing on strengthening **access to justice for women and girls**, including the promotion of inclusive legal systems, the elimination of discriminatory laws and practices, and the dismantling of structural barriers that limit women's rights and opportunities.

Across Africa, women continue to face systemic challenges that constrain their participation in economic, social, and political life. While the continent has the **highest rate of entrepreneurship globally**, women represent nearly **60 percent of Africa's self-employed population**, demonstrating remarkable resilience and innovation in the face of structural constraints. Despite this dynamism, African women entrepreneurs face an estimated **\$42 billion financing gap**, according to the African Development Bank, limiting their ability to scale businesses, access markets, and build long-term economic security.

The economic marginalization of women intersects with other pressing challenges, including **gender-based violence (GBV)** and psychological trauma. Research indicates that approximately **44.9 percent of women across 25 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have experienced at least one form of GBV**, with significant consequences for their mental health, well-being, and economic participation.

Similarly, structural inequalities persist in political representation and leadership. Although women currently hold approximately **24 percent of parliamentary seats across Africa**, exceeding the global average, this figure masks considerable disparities across countries and highlights that representation alone does not automatically translate into gender-responsive governance or policy reform.

2. What is AWEP?

Recognizing the interconnected nature of these challenges, **AUDA-NEPAD launched the African Women's Empowerment Programme (AWEP)** as a strategic continental initiative to address systemic barriers to women's empowerment through an integrated and transformative approach.

AWEP is structured around three complementary pillars:

Pillar 1: Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment

The first pillar of the African Women's Empowerment Programme (AWEP) builds on the achievements of the **NEPAD Spanish Fund for African Women's Empowerment**, which has supported **over 1.2 million women across 38 African countries** through economic empowerment initiatives. It focuses on strengthening women's economic independence by expanding access to financial knowledge, entrepreneurship opportunities, and inclusive financial systems. The programme promotes **financial literacy and entrepreneurship tools for rural and marginalized women**, equipping them with practical skills to manage finances, build sustainable businesses, and participate more effectively in local and regional markets. It also prioritizes **financial education and entrepreneurial training for adolescent girls**, helping young women develop financial confidence, digital competencies, and entrepreneurial mindsets early in life.

At the policy level, AWEP supports African Union Member States in advancing **gender-responsive economic governance**, including the implementation of **gender-responsive budgeting** and **gender-responsive public procurement frameworks**. These measures aim to ensure that national budget processes and public procurement systems create meaningful opportunities for women-owned enterprises and reflect the economic priorities of women and girls.

In addition, the programme promotes women's participation in regional trade through **capacity-building for female cross-border traders under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)**. AWEP also works to **strengthen women's financial collectives**, such as cooperatives, savings groups, and stokvels, recognizing their critical role in improving access to capital. By reinforcing these collective financial structures, the programme seeks to lay the foundation for stronger women-led financial ecosystems, including the long-term development of **women-owned financial institutions** that can expand access to finance for women across the continent.

Pillar 2: Supporting Women's Mental Health and Promoting Positive Masculinity

This pillar addresses the psychological and social consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly among survivors in fragile contexts, conflict zones, and refugee communities where the prevalence of sexual violence remains high. AWEP promotes **community-based psychosocial support services**, including the **deployment of trained mental health community workers** to provide accessible care, trauma support, and pathways for healing and social reintegration for survivors.

At the same time, the programme focuses on **scaling up positive masculinity initiatives** that challenge harmful gender norms, engage men and boys as allies, and contribute to the prevention of GBV while promoting sexual and reproductive health (SRH). AWEP also seeks to **strengthen collaboration with the private sector** to address GBV within corporate environments and the broader world of business, encouraging safer workplaces, gender-responsive policies, and corporate leadership in advancing gender equality.

Following AWEP's consultative meetings held in **Kigali (June 2025)** and **Lusaka (September 2025)**, AUDA-NEPAD has documented regional practices from across Eastern, Southern, Western, Northern, and Central Africa that demonstrate promising approaches to promoting positive masculinity and challenging restrictive social norms.

Pillar 3: Building Capacities of Women in Public Leadership

The third pillar of the African Women's Empowerment Programme (AWEP) focuses on strengthening the leadership capacities of women in governance, public institutions, and decision-making spaces. The programme provides **capacity-building for women Members of Parliament (MPs) and women in public leadership**, including mentorship and dialogue sessions with **former male Heads of State**, aimed at fostering intergenerational leadership exchange, strengthening political navigation skills, and promoting inclusive governance.

To support women entering and advancing in leadership roles, AWEP also promotes the **development of practical guidelines and tools for onboarding women in public leadership**, helping institutions create enabling environments that support women's participation, retention, and effectiveness in public office. In response to emerging technological shifts, the programme further includes **capacity-building on the use of artificial intelligence (AI)** and supports the **promotion of legislative and policy frameworks for ethical and responsible AI**, ensuring that new technologies do not reinforce gender inequalities but instead contribute to inclusive governance.

In addition, AWEP advances **advocacy for the ratification and domestication of the African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (AU-CEVAWG)**, adopted in February 2025. Through policy engagement and leadership training, the programme seeks to strengthen women leaders' ability to champion gender-responsive legislation and reforms that protect the rights and dignity of women and girls across the continent.

3. Objectives

The meeting seeks to strengthen collaboration and mobilize support for advancing women's empowerment across Africa through the African Women's Empowerment Programme (AWEP). Specifically, it aims to:



- **Strengthen Strategic Partnerships and Alliances:** engage development partners, financial institutions, philanthropic foundations, and civil society organizations to build new partnerships that can support the implementation and expansion of AWEP initiatives.
- **Mobilize Resources for Scaled Impact:** explore innovative financing approaches, investment opportunities, and funding partnerships that can accelerate women's economic empowerment, leadership development, positive masculinity and mental health initiatives across Africa.
- **Showcase Scalable African-Led Solutions:** highlight AWEP's three pillars and present promising practices and innovative models that demonstrate effective approaches to advancing women's economic inclusion, resilience, and leadership.
- **Position AWEP as a Strategic Platform for Partnership:** present AWEP as a continental platform that connects policy, finance, and community-driven solutions to advance sustainable development outcomes for African women and girls.

4. Planned Activities

The advocacy and partnership-building meeting will include the following components:

- **High-Level Partners Roundtable:** a moderated discussion with development partners, foundations, and financial institutions to explore collaborative approaches to advancing women's empowerment across Africa.
- **Presentation on AWEP:** an comprehensive overview of the African Women's Empowerment Programme,
- **Partners' Open Discussion:** an interactive session focused on identifying partnership opportunities, potential funding mechanisms, and pathways for scaling AWEP initiatives.

5. Side-event Attendees

The meeting will be attended by:

- AUDA-NEPAD and AWEP leadership
- Philanthropic organisations and Foundations
- Development Partners
- Permanent Missions to the United Nations
- AU Specialized agencies
- UN Agencies



6. Time and location

Location: African Union Permanent Observer Mission to the United Nations (Nelson Mandela Conference Hall), 305 E 47th Street, New York, 13th March 2026,

Time: 12:30 – 14:30

7. Contact Information

For additional information, please reach out to the designated contacts below:

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