



Statement by the SADC Executive Secretary, H.E. Dr Stergomena Lawrence Tax on the 2019 Commemoration of 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

Once again this year, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) joins the rest of the world to commemorate the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (GBV), an international Campaign aimed at heightening awareness and strengthening the voice of advocacy against GBV.

The theme of this year's Campaign, which runs from the 25th of November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, to the 10th of December, Human Rights Day, is ***“Orange the World: Generation Equality Stands against Rape!”***. It is drawn from the *United Nations Secretary-General's UNiTE by 2030 to End Violence against Women Campaign*, which is mobilizing the global community to raise voice against rape in our communities.

Rape or any form of sexual assault constitutes one of the most severe human rights violations inflicted particularly on women, and girls. The negative effects of rape are well documented. Rape continues to traumatize mainly women and girls, resulting in life-long repercussions on the victim's health and well-being. The consequences of rape can last a lifetime and span generations, with serious adverse effects on health, education, employment, crime, and the economic well-being of individuals, families, communities and societies, thus, resulting in adverse effects on economic growth and development. Unfortunately, due to social stigma towards survivors in communities, coupled with the fear of abandonment by families and the impunity for perpetrators, majority of rape cases remain unreported, as victims are usually reluctant to report.

In conflict situations, rape continues to be used as weapons of war, often characterised by, among others, intimidation and other forms of GBV on family members and women human rights defenders. Sexual violence and exploitation of women and children as well as displacement and kidnapping are heightened during conflict.

SADC recognises the need to address all forms of GBV. In this regard, the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development places strong focus on prevention of GBV. In addition, SADC has developed the Regional Strategy and Framework of Action for Addressing GBV (2018-2030) and the Regional Strategy on Women, Peace and Security (2018 – 2022), all of which seek to harmonize and coordinate the regional response to GBV and to help Member States to effectively respond to GBV. If well implemented, these strategies could set the SADC region on the sustainable path to ending GBV. It is important, to understand that in addressing these social ills, we must go beyond these policies, frameworks and strategies that we have put in place by complementing them with enforcement, training, research, information-sharing, appropriate budgets, and behaviour change interventions in the communities.

As we commemorate this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, we must first recognise that rape and other forms of sexual assault or abuse are in our midst and that we must all do our part. We cannot fully achieve Goal 16 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) which specifically calls for the promotion of peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, if incidences of rape and other forms of GBV continue to thrive in our communities.

In commemorating this Campaign, we must actively reflect on addressing the root causes of GBV, which include imbalance in power and control dynamics between men and women as well as the deep-rooted cultural and social norms in societies that perpetuate gender inequality. To this end, we need long term investment in education programmes to promote behaviour change and advance substantive gender equality by ensuring women's full and effective participation in political, economic and social life. We must also ensure accessible and responsive justice and security institutions, to fully implement laws that protect the rights of women and girls.

Our community members must also understand that rape or any form of GBV is a crime punishable by law, and that it has no place in the modern society. We must enlist active community involvement to create and sustain a safe and supportive environment that protects women and girls.