

TIME'S UP

# The systematic discrimination that's brought the African Union to its own #MeToo reckoning

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Quartz Africa



📷 The AU is not empowering women inside its own walls. (Reuters/Tiksa Negeri)

A group of women tired of being sidelined at the African Union have revealed the systematic discrimination they face at the union's Addis Ababa headquarters and beyond. A group of women staffers sent two memos to senior officials and spoke

out to the press about the various ways they have been held back by prejudice at the organization that is mandated to protect African women.

The memos challenge the continental body's outward dedication to gender equality as just lip service. Despite declaring 2010 to 2020 the [decade of women](#), being headed by a woman for five years and championing [numerous gender programs](#), it seems the AU is struggling to empower women within the organization. An image from a recent meeting was just a hint that the AU was still very much a boys club.



**Ken Opalo**  
@kopalo

It is absolutely wild that there is not a single woman in this picture.

Despite the fact that it includes ministers and Obasanjo. [#AfCFTA2018](#)

10:03 AM - Mar 22, 2018

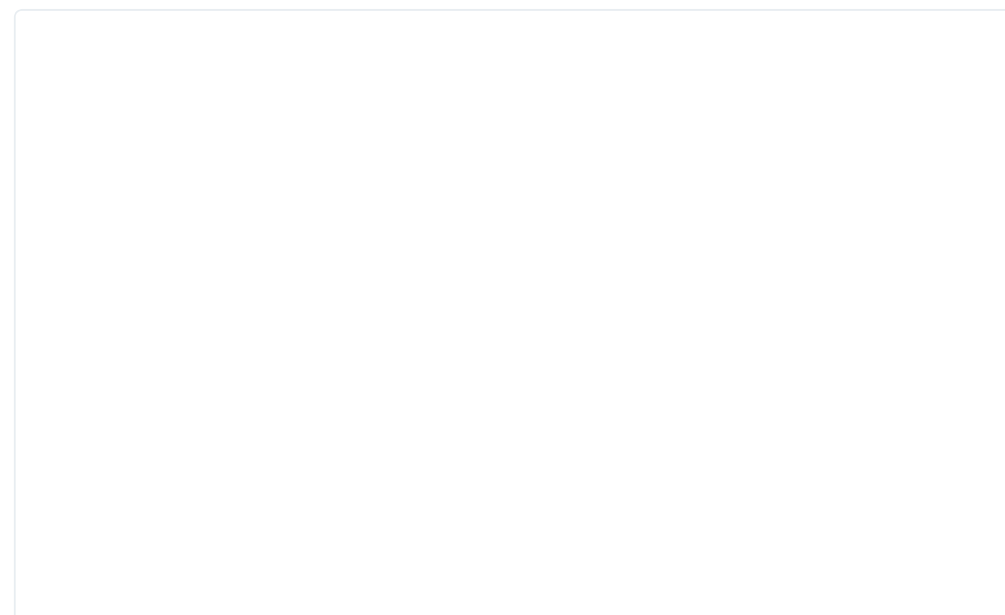
295      350 people are talking about this

“We, female employees of the AU Commission, are totally appalled by the entrenchment of professional apartheid against female employees in the commission as manifested in the Peace and Security department,” read the first memo, sent in January.

Titled, “Me too up for her; She matters for all of us” it detailed years of discrimination, even with South Africa’s Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma at the helm. Women staffers say they have been overlooked for promotions, their contracts ended without explanation, and alleged corruption and manipulation of hiring practices and daily discrimination, according to a report by [The East African newspaper](#).

When the AU failed to address their concerns, they sent another memo in February, this time also signed by senior human resources officials. This time, they zeroed in on the sexism within the Union’s powerful Peace and Security Commission. The memo described the environment inside the commission as “toxic” and “too male-heavy in the upper layers.” They also accused commissioner Smail Chergui, an Algerian in charge of the peace and security mission, of personally blocking the ascension of women in his department, [according to a report](#) by the Mail and Guardian newspaper.

“It is all a fabrication from one person who is not even a staff of the commission, seconded by ACCORD, who was not retained by an independent panel for recruitment of a head of division. It has nothing to do with gender,” Chergui [said over the weekend](#), and reiterated his dedication to gender equality via his Twitter account



**Amb. Smail Chergui**

@AU\_Chergui

My sister @AUBinetaDiop and I explored options to advance the [#women](#), peace and security agenda in [#Africa](#)

6:12 AM - May 14, 2018

23     21 people are talking about this

One woman who was appointed to a senior role [recalled starting her new job](#) with a declaration from a male subordinate “I’m still in charge here.” This culture has seen a stream of senior and experienced women leave the African Union, yet no official would speak on the record for fear of victimization.

Still, they’d hoped the media attention would drive action. This month, they also took their grievances directly to current chairman Rwandan president Paul Kagame, in the hope that the statesman [hailed for gender parity](#) in his cabinet would intervene.

AU commission deputy chair Kwesi Quartey apologized to the women last Saturday (May 19) and promised to investigate the matter. The commission is the [executive body of the union](#), but the women accusers say it is hamstrung by internal power struggles and boys club.

The AU did not respond to Quartz’s request for comment.

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