

Women heads of electoral bodies must consolidate democracy — Jean Mensa

By Timothy Ngenbe

THE Chairperson of the Electoral Commission (EC), Jean Mensa, has called for stronger collaboration and knowledge sharing among female leaders of election

management bodies across Africa to help consolidate democratic governance on the continent.

Mrs Mensa said given the increasing challenges and complexities in election management, the establishment of a strong network of women leaders in election management would help to deepen the culture of peer learning and

sharing of best practices for effective election management.

"By working together, we can address the systemic barriers that hinder women's participation and create a more inclusive environment for future generations of women leaders," she stated.

Two-day meeting

Mrs Mensa made the call at the opening session of a two-day meeting of Women Chairpersons of African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) held in Accra yesterday.

The meeting, which was organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in collaboration with the Association of the African Election Authorities (AAEA), brought together the nine women heads of EMBs across Africa.

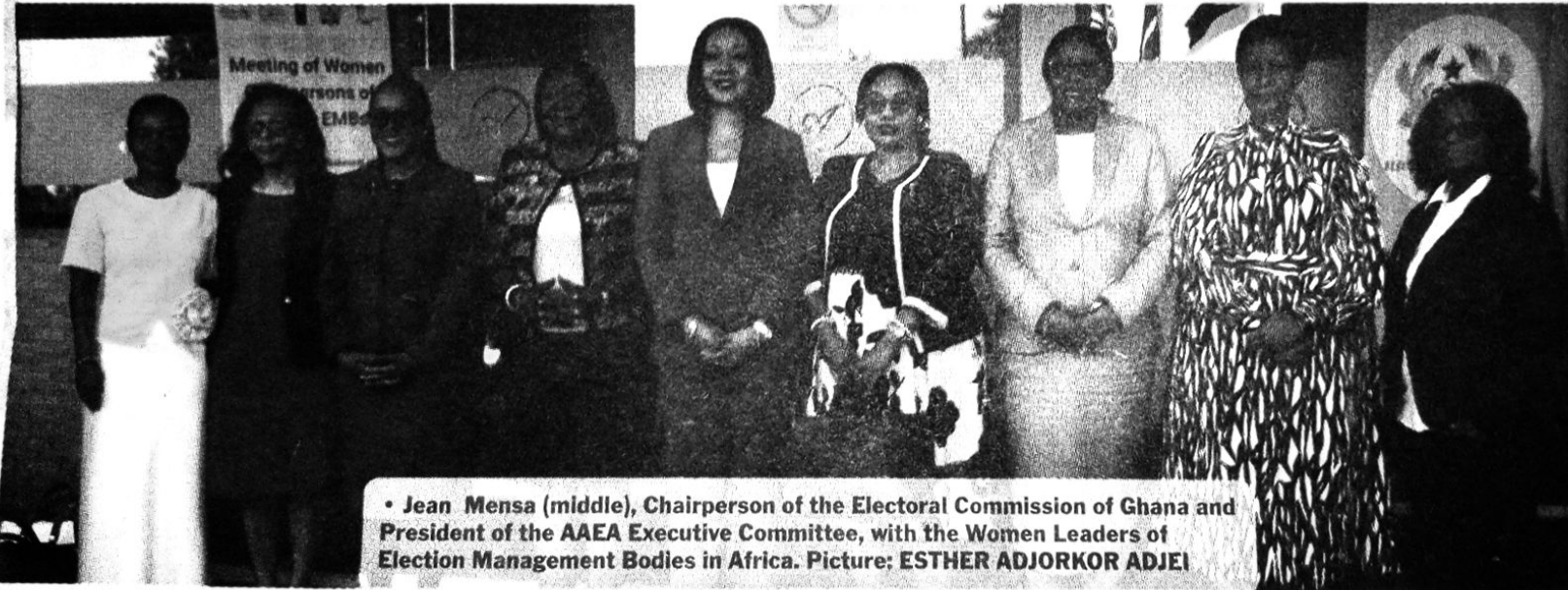
The other eight participating heads of EMBs were Dr Elsie Nghikembua, Namibia; Davidetta Browne-Lansanah, Liberia; Maria do Rosario L. Pereira Gonelaves, Cape Verde; Frances Zalumis, Zambia, and Justice Annabel Mtalimamja from Malawi.

The rest are Justice Priscilla Chigumba, Zimbabwe; Oda Gasinzigwa, Rwanda, and Melatwork Hailu, Ethiopia.

Diligent work

Mrs Mensa added that building such a network would provide the opportunity

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• Jean Mensa (middle), Chairperson of the Electoral Commission of Ghana and President of the AAEA Executive Committee, with the Women Leaders of Election Management Bodies in Africa. Picture: ESTHER ADJORKOR ADJEI

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for professional development and equip women leaders of EMBs with the skills and tools needed to succeed and make a positive impact on election management in their respective countries.

She stressed that even as the women leaders of election management strived to strengthen collaboration, they must also commit to advocating and promoting good governance principles within the electoral process.

"In this regard, we should emphasise transparency, accountability and integrity in all aspects of our work. As we all know, good governance is the foundation of a healthy democracy," she said.

Mrs Mensa also called on women election managers to prioritise inclusive and participatory electoral process "and thereby build trust and confidence in institutions."

"We must advocate and institute gender-sensitive policies and practices so as to ensure that the needs and perspectives of women are taken into account and that we create a more inclusive and representative electoral process," she added.

The EC chairperson also stressed the need for women in the election management space to highlight their achievements by telling their own stories.

Mrs Mensa said while it was important to work diligently to implement transformative electoral reforms, it was equally imperative to ensure that a positive narrative was put out to amplify those achievements.

Women and election management

The Chief Electoral Officer at the Electoral Assistance Division of the United Nations, Akinyemi Adegbola, said given the crucial roles election management bodies

played in shaping democratic governance in Africa, strategic women leadership in that space was indispensable.

He said the women brought unique perspectives and strategic policies that would help to navigate the complexities of election management.

That was particularly so because women leaders emphasised integrity and transparency, which were critical to enhancing the electoral process, Mr Adegbola said.

He stressed the need for AAEA to prioritise capacity-building to ensure that women in EMBs acquired the skills and knowledge needed to excel in their roles.

Again, Mr Adegbola underscored the need for deliberate efforts to be made to imbibe modern technologies and efficient data management systems that would improve election management.

He also urged the women chairpersons to take steps to empower women in the

democratic process through mentorship and invest in women to take up roles in the electoral bodies.

The UN Electoral Officer also urged women leaders of EMBs to bring policies that would help to promote gender and women participation in the electoral space.

'Collaboration key'

The Thematic Lead on Electoral Processes for Africa and West Asia Regional Programme of International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), Olufunto Akinduro, said stronger collaboration among female Electoral Commissioners in Africa was the best way by which they could learn from each other to improve on election management.

Ms Akinduro said it was important for the women leaders of EMBs on the continent to focus on providing space for women to operate freely in the electoral process without hindrances.

She also stressed the need to put in place systems that helped to promote positive narratives about women in the space of election management.