The Gender and Social Affairs Division in the COMESA Secretariat, exists to provide leadership, direction and oversight of the implementation of the COMESA Gender Policy in the Member States and at the Secretariat. The Division sets out to achieve this purpose through mainstreaming of gender as a crosscutting issue within the Secretariat and the COMESA programmes and overseeing the implementation of the Social and Cultural Affairs activities.

In line with Articles 154 and 155 of the COMESA Treaty, and in recognition of the fact that sustainable economic and social development of the region requires the effective participation of women, men and youth, the 7th COMESA Summit of the Heads of State and Government held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in May 2002 adopted the COMESA Gender Policy and the Addis Ababa Declaration on Gender. The COMESA Gender Policy advocates equal and full participation of women in all aspects of COMESA activities and other operations taking place in the region. It emphasizes the principle of Affirmative Action across all spheres of COMESA policies, systems, structures, programmes and activities in order to redress existing gender imbalances. Essentially, affirmative action will be employed to ensure that barriers that prevent women’s participation in core COMESA activities such as trade, the private sector, infrastructure development and science and technology are addressed and removed. Also, this will ensure that policies, programmes, projects, administrative procedures and practices of COMESA Secretariat, COMESA institutions, COMESA structures and their budgets are gender sensitive.

The Gender Policy is also intended for facilitating the engendering of legislation and development policies in Member States in order to promote women’s access to and control over production and productivity resources such as land, credit, technology and information. In line with article 143 of the COMESA Treaty, the policy also integrates the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, governance, environment, information, communication and technology, gender based violence, substance and drug abuse and related developmental issues into all its policies, structures and operations. In order to achieve, a full implementation of the Policy, the COMESA Secretariat has developed a Gender Mainstreaming Strategy and the five years action Plan. Work is in progress to develop a COMESA Social Charter as a basis for formulating regulations and programmes for better implementation of social and cultural issues.

The full implementation of the COMESA Gender Policy will significantly contribute to the overall attainment of COMESA’s vision and strategy for the 21st century, which is: integrating gender into the mainstream of the work of COMESA.

Gender Mainstreaming
Since 2009, COMESA Secretariat has been implementing its five year Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Action Plan. The main achievements realized so far on Gender Mainstreaming include, the development of the Gender Mainstreaming manuals that will serve as guidelines to foster the mainstreaming of Gender perspectives in the COMESA’s Regional Integration agenda with special attention to Trade, Infrastructure, Investment Promotion and Private Sector Development, Environment, Peace and Conflict prevention, HIV and AIDS, Information and
Communication and COMESA institutions. The manuals will also act as tools for monitoring the extent to which the Secretariat and Member States implement gender-focused programmes in line with the COMESA Gender Policy and the Strategic Action Plan. In addition to this the Secretariat has developed a specific strategy- Regional Strategy and Action Plan (RESTRAP) for mainstreaming Gender into COMESA’s Agriculture and Climate Change programmes.

The secretariat also works to integrate the mainstreaming of cross-cutting issues such as HIV and AIDS in order to control such epidemics. The COMESA Secretariat has developed a multi-sectoral programme on HIV/ and AIDS through the financial assistance of the Swedish/NORAD grant. The programme document which was endorsed by the Thirtieth Meeting of COMESA Council of Ministers, was finalized following consultations with the other RECs who currently are running similar HIV/ and AIDS programmes funded by the same donor. The overall goal of the multisectoral programme on HIV and AIDS is to contribute to the reduction of the epidemic and also mitigate its negative impacts in the COMESA region.