

MEDIA RELEASE

African Union Adopts Common Position on Ending Child Marriage *Agreement signals AU's commitment to empower women and girls and protect their human rights*

Johannesburg, South Africa – 17 June, 2014 – The African Union (AU) today announced that it has formally adopted a common position on ending child marriage in Africa. Under the new agreement, the AU is urging its Member States to establish comprehensive action plans to end child marriage, including establishing and enforcing laws which set the minimum age for marriage at 18. The AU will monitor progress toward this goal as part of its Agenda 2063 strategy, which aims to ensure positive socioeconomic transformation within the next 50 years.

Speaking at the African Union Summit in Johannesburg, African Union Director of Social Affairs, Ambassador Olawale Maiyegun, commented: “Today is an important day for all Africans as we seek to empower women and girls by ending child marriage. Child marriage is a harmful social-cultural practice which is endemic in many parts of Africa. We know it has a negative impact on the women and girls’ personal development, future opportunities, education, health and wellbeing. It also has detrimental consequences for families, communities and nations at large.

“While we recognize that some African nations have already launched initiatives and campaigns to end child marriage, the agreement today will help accelerate that process.”

According to statistics from UNICEF, in Africa, south of the Sahara, 40% of women and girls aged 20 to 24 years old were married before age 18.¹ This number rises to 42% in West and Central Africa. If current trends continue, the number of child marriages in Africa, south of the Sahara, is expected to double by 2020, and the region will overtake South Asia to become the region with the largest number of child brides in the world.²

Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women, said: “A safe and sustainable world demands women’s rights, women’s empowerment and gender equality. Ending child marriage is a critical step in providing women and girls with the opportunities to

¹ UNICEF global databases: <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-marriage>

² Draft African Common Position on the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa

make their own decisions about their health, their education and their lives. We can end child marriage in a generation if we come together to drive social change.”

In May 2014, the AU launched the first campaign of its kind in Africa to End Child Marriage by enhancing continental awareness of the harmful impact of child marriage and by taking appropriate legal, social and economic measures.

Some African nations have already implemented laws to stop child marriage. In February of this year, the Malawian Parliament passed the National Marriage Law, which raised the legal marriage age from 15 to 18 years old. Previously, 50% of girls in Malawi were married before the age of 18, contributing to a high rate of maternal mortality and other harmful health consequences. Other nations, such as Zambia, are putting multi-sectoral approaches in place.

Professor Nkandu Luo, Minister of Gender, Zambia, said: “We look at child marriage as an octopus. It has financial, economic, health, education and other social issues. In Zambia, we therefore have established a multi-sectoral approach to prevent child marriage and ensure the rights and needs of married girls are systematically addressed.”

Ms. Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, African Union Goodwill Ambassador for Ending Child Marriage, and General Secretary, World YWCA, said: “We know that ending child marriage can break the cycle of poverty and unleash the potential of girls. However, it’s equally important to empower and support young women and girls who are already married, many of whom are also young mothers. We need to provide them with the information, education and services they need to live healthy and empowered lives.”

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