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**PAN AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON CELEBRATING
COURAGE AND OVERCOMING HARMFUL TRADITIONS
5 – 7 OCTOBER 2011
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

Concept Note

Celebrating  urage
Overcoming Harmful Traditional Practices

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“We honour our fathers and mothers past – indeed, all of the millions of African fathers and mothers who brought their children up so well in spite of the enormous difficulties they faced over the centuries. We say thank you to you all. And we owe it to you to cherish the good and the positive in African values, while combating those that are harmful and antithetical to the dignity of men and women throughout Africa. We will build on the past - a past for which, we acknowledge, we are primarily responsible for. Through knowledge, analysis, and reflection on who we are and why we are where we are, we hope to serve as the moral voice of Africa’s children, and to build an Africa that can claim its future and assure the rights and dignity of all its people “

Assefa Bequele (PhD)
Former Executive Director
The African Child Policy Forum

The Conference is organized by the African Union Commission with funding support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

I. INTRODUCTION

Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community spanning generations. All social groups all over the world have specific practices and beliefs which often have strong cultural underpinnings. These can be positive but they can also be negative. Almost all societies have positive cultural practices that are beneficial to all members, such as those which sustain society, provide cohesion and solidarity, and promote development in its broad sense. On the other hand, there are also practices which may be harmful to specific groups, example, women. These practices, which go under the generic name of Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) have persisted because individuals and communities may hesitate to sacrifice what is perceived as important, although they may recognise them as harmful. So in fighting HTPs, we should advocate for change without being threatening or making people feel they should abandon the positive in their cultures. This is the rationale behind the convening of this Pan-African Conference.

Children and young women especially are often the victims of various forms of physical or psychological violence that infringe on their bodily or physical integrity and mental well-being. That it is so is due to their perceived and actual inferior status in society and the persistence of patriarchal attitudes.

Many governments and communities in Africa have become aware of the need to achieve gender equality and a more equitable society. Many have initiated efforts to overcome HTPs. These include enactment of laws criminalizing HTPs and development of national policies to sensitize communities and their leadership against HTPs. These efforts must be acknowledged. Equally, there remains a long distance between aspirations and reality.

It is in this context that the AU Commission (AUC), with support from GIZ and other partners, is organising this first ***Pan African Conference on Celebrating Courage and Overcoming Harmful Traditional Practices*** to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 5 to 7 October 2011. The Conference will advocate for strategies and actions to combat HTPs and promote behaviour change, focusing on best practices and success stories.

II. RATIONALE AND JUSTIFICATION

Our legacy: The good and the bad

Culture is an essential part of our African identity. Africa is a rich continent in its diversity of cultures and traditions: We have a duty to promote the positive aspects; We also have a duty to combat those which are harmful to our people.

Harmful traditional practices (HTPs) include female genital mutilation (FGM); early marriage; taboos or practices which prevent women from controlling their own fertility; nutritional taboos and traditional birth practices; the sacrifice of children for organs to be used in witchcraft; boy preference over girls; female infanticide; early pregnancy;

and dowry price. Some HTPs are practiced widely throughout Africa and others only in limited parts of the continent. Most however have been entrenched in communities and societies for so long that they are considered part of accepted cultural practice. The result is death, disability, health complications and psychological harm for millions and millions of Africa's children, girls and women.

On the positive side, Africa has many treaties, laws and Constitutions which guarantee equal rights to all. However, violations abound in the form of HTPs which harm the physical integrity and human rights of women and girls. Clearly, it is much easier to change laws and policies than to change attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and practices. But change can be made to happen - and it can be done successfully, at no loss to anyone and to the benefit of everyone. It must however involve all stakeholders, including community members, traditional leaders, religious groups, the media and governments. Hence the need for a community- and Africa-wide commitment and engagement.

The AU Commitments

Given the serious harm caused by these practices, the AUC has placed HTPs as a priority on its political and social agenda. It has adopted various legal and policy frameworks bearing on the human rights of all in general and those of women and children in particular. These include:

- The African Charter on Human and People's Rights;
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa;
- The Charter on the African Cultural Renaissance;
- The Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa;
- The Call for Accelerated Action on the Implementation of the Plan of Action Towards Africa Fit for Children;
- The Plan of Action on the Family in Africa; and
- The Maputo Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

These legal instruments and policy frameworks have been ratified and adopted by many member states. A number of African countries have adopted legal and policy instruments to combat harmful practices, to address violence against women and girls, to protect and promote their rights, and to promote behavioural change. There has also been an Africa-wide move to eliminate FGM. At the recently held 17th Session of the AU Assembly in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea in June 2011, a decision on Female Genital Mutilation was adopted. But more needs to be done by many more countries to

ratify and, more importantly, incorporate international and continental commitments into national laws and practices and by so doing translate words into deeds.

III. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall and overarching goal of the Conference is to contribute to continental efforts for the promotion and protection of the rights of women and girls. Within this purview, it hopes to celebrate achievements and courage, promote positive cultural values and overcome barriers to combating HTPs..

The specific objectives of the Conference include:

- a. Advocating for the ratification and domestication of the ***African Union Protocol to the Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa***, the ***African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*** and the ***Charter on the African Cultural Renaissance*** ;
- b. Documenting and drawing further attention to the current status of women and children as regards their human rights and legal protection;
- c. Highlighting aspects of African culture, customs and traditions which hinder development in general and impede the advancement of women and children in particular;
- d. c)Providing a forum for building effective partnerships between national, regional, continental and international organisations to bring an end to HTPs;
- e. Identifying and sharing best practices to eliminate HTPs;
- f. Ensuring that strategies to eliminate HTPs are effective and coordinated, leading to a continent-wide movement to eliminate the practice;
- g. Developing a plan of action/framework to serve as guideline to governments and organisations for effective implementation at regional and national levels.

IV. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The Conference will convey a clear political message with respect to HTPs. It also hopes to help translate the knowledge and conclusions generated from this conference into concrete actions and documents which can guide future advocacy and programmatic interventions.

The concrete outcomes of the conference will include:

- a) Enhanced political will towards ratification and domestication of the African Union Protocol to the Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Charter on the African Cultural Renaissance;
- b) Increased commitments by national structures, regional , continental and international institutions, civil society organizations and development partners to enhance partnerships in efforts to bring an end to HTPs;

- c) Increased understanding by activists continent-wide about existing institutional commitments against HTP;
- d) HTP elimination strategies leading to a continent-wide movement ;
- e) Renewed commitment by the African Union and regional bodies to advocate for and coordinate actions to eliminate HTPs;
- f) A plan of action on HTPs and a statement of commitment for adoption by the AU Policy Organs for subsequent dissemination and implementation at national level;
- g) Advocacy for Member States to commemorate the 6th of February as the International Day on “Zero Tolerance to FGM”;
- h)

The main outcome document of the Conference will be A Commitment for Action to the Elimination of HTPs.

V. FORMAT OF THE CONFERENCE

The three-day Conference will be conducted in plenary encouraging interactive discussions moderated by carefully selected experts.

Themes of the Conference

Plenary 1: Human rights and the legal protection of women and girls

This session will present and discuss the human rights and legal protection of African women and girls. It will serve as the curtain-raiser for the Conference and subsequent sessions. .

Plenary 2: Cultural practices

This session will feature presentations and discussions of positive and negative African traditional practices with regards to women and girls.

Plenary 3: Sexual and Reproductive Health

During this session discussions will focus on the inter-linkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights and HTPs. AU’s perspectives and efforts in the promotion of SRHR among its Member States will be considered.

Plenary 4: Case studies on HTP

In this session, case studies on best practices related to combating HTPs in selected AU Member States will be presented followed by discussion.

Plenary session 5: Discussion of the Outcome documents

In this session the statement of commitment document and the draft plan of action on HTP to be implemented at regional and national levels will be discussed and adopted.

VI. ORGANISATION

The Conference is being organized by the African Union Commission (AUC) with funding support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

VII. PARTICIPANTS

Participants will include ministers and experts from selected Member States, parliamentarians, traditional and religious leaders and representatives of international organisations and civil society organisations.

It is furthermore expected that participants from outside of Africa will be invited to attend the Conference.

VIII. DATE AND VENUE

The Conference will take place from 5-7 October 2011 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

IX. LANGUAGES

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in English and French.

X. DOCUMENTATION

Working Documents:

The main working documents will be the Report on Best Practices on HTPs. Other working documents will include thematic papers compiled by the AUC and resource persons.

Reference Documents:

- The African Charter on Human and People's Rights
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child;
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa
- The Charter on the African Cultural Renaissance
- Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa

- The Call for Accelerated Action on the Implementation of the Plan of Action Towards Africa Fit for Children
- The Plan of Action on the Family in Africa
- Other relevant documents

XI. PUBLICITY

The AUC and its partners will ensure that the Conference is publicised to the greatest extent possible in all relevant media: websites, broadcast and printed media. The AUC will develop a media plan together with the AUC Directorate of Communications and in close consultation with the other partners.

XII. CONTACT PERSONS

All Enquiries regarding this Conference should be directed to:

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