

*Your Excellency(ies).....*

*Ambassadors;*

*Children;*

*Invited guests;*

*Ladies and gentlemen;*

The list of harmful social and cultural practices found in Africa is long. It includes lesser-known practices such as the removal of flesh from the soft palate at the back of the mouth (uvulectomy), milk teeth extraction, breast ironing, forced feeding and nutritional taboos, and the mutilation and sacrifice of children used in witchcraft rituals. It also includes more commonly known practices such as female genital mutilation or cutting, forced and child marriage, honour killings, acid attacks, son preference, female infanticide and prenatal sex selection, as well as virginity testing.

These practices are indeed harmful. They involve different forms of violence against children – physical violence, sexual violence, mental violence and emotional violence. They constitute an unacceptable violation of human dignity and integrity. There is no justification for their continuation, yet they persist. They can be widespread, socially and culturally accepted – a harsh reality for millions of children, yet often under-reported and unrecorded.

Plan International welcomes wholeheartedly the choice made by the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child for the theme of this 23<sup>rd</sup> Day of the African Child: '***Eliminating Harmful Social and Cultural Practices Affecting Children; Our Collective Responsibility***'. It is with pleasure that Plan International is here to commemorate with all of you the Day of the African Child for 2013, in collaboration with the Committee of Experts, with the African Union, with children, and with all concerned organisations and individuals.

*Excellencies; Children; Ladies and Gentlemen;*

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child requires State Parties "to eliminate social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of a child". The good news is the large majority of countries in Africa – 48 in total – have ratified the Charter and other relevant human rights instruments. Ratification puts these countries under the global spotlight of accountability, and, depending on each country's legal traditions, ratification influences the domestic legislative process with potentially far reaching implications for ensuring the rights and welfare of children. In essence, ratification makes the country duty-bound and accountable for eliminating all harmful social and cultural practices affecting children.

As you will read in our statement for today, Plan's recommendations for State Parties include **undertaking comprehensive national legislative reviews; introducing clear legal bans on harmful practices; establishing accountability mechanisms and fighting impunity; and establishing mandatory reporting responsibilities**

and protection orders. In particular, Plan calls for **national legislation that guarantees 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage for both boys and girls, with or without parental consent**; and for **comprehensive vital registration systems to ensure universal and mandatory registration of births, as well as of marriages, divorces and deaths.**

*Excellencies; Children; Ladies and Gentlemen;*

While the primary responsibility lies with State Parties, it is important to remember the final few words of our theme, which refer to 'our collective responsibility'. We all have responsibilities, and we all have a role to play – collectively. In our statement for today, we call for the **engagement of strategic stakeholders, including community and religious leaders; support to families to exercise their protective role; empowerment of children to support the prevention and abandonment of harmful practices; and the strengthening of international, regional and bilateral cooperation to promote joint awareness and sensitization efforts, and to identify and build upon good practices in legislation, in policy development and in practical action.**

It is within this spirit of collective responsibility that Plan International continues to work hand in hand with the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Violence Against Children, with governments and local authorities across the African continent, with non-government and civil society organizations, with businesses and donor institutions, and with children themselves and their communities. Central to our work is the global campaign called '**Because I am a Girl**', which highlights the particular circumstances of girls, including the damaging and degrading effects of harmful traditional practices on them, and the ways in which such practices impact negatively on their opportunities to lead full and productive and happy lives. The '**Because I am a Girl**' campaign galvanizes opinion, efforts and resources, and encourages collective action to improve the lives of girls and young women, including through the reduction and elimination of harmful social and cultural practices.

*Excellencies; Children; Ladies and Gentlemen;*

We believe that through raising awareness, and through collaborating with governments, organizations and individuals from all parts of society, there are opportunities to accelerate the rate of change and improvement in the lives of children. All of us have the chance, and the duty, to join hands in working together to improve the situation of African Children who face the challenges of harmful social and cultural practices.

Thank you for listening. We look forward to continuing our work with you in genuine partnership, and also with a shared sense of urgency, so that the children of Africa will have a healthier and brighter future.

David Throp  
Country Director  
Plan International