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AFRICAN UNION HOSTS CONFERENCE ON CELEBRATING THE COURAGE AND OVERCOMING HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES



Addis Ababa, 05th October 2011 – The African Union's (AU's) Department of Social Affairs is promoting the efforts of the AU towards protection of the rights of women and girls against harmful traditional practices. In this respect, the "Pan African Conference on Celebrating the Courage and Overcoming Harmful Traditional Practices" is being held from 5 to 7 October at the AU headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It started today, in the presence of the Chairperson of the AU

Commissioner Dr Jean Ping, the AU Commissioner of Social Affairs Advocate Bience Gawanas and the German Ambassador to Ethiopia Mrs Lieselore Cyrus. The conference is being jointly organized with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

The aim of the conference is to share best practices on how individuals and organizations have confronted the task of eradicating harmful traditional practices on the continent so that the continent can benefit from them, and to congratulate those who have undertaken campaigns in this regard. The discussions at the conference will also focus on the instruments and tools that are currently being used to combat harmful traditional practices by Member States, civil society organizations, stakeholders, religious leaders and other social actors.

The discussions are also expected to increase 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 harmful traditional practices (HTPs).

During the opening ceremony of the conference at the AU today, it was mentioned that as per UN estimates, harmful traditional practices especially female genital mutilation, affect an estimated 130 million girls and women, mainly in Africa, and often leads to serious health problems and/ or death. In Africa, women and girls are most often the victims of harmful traditional practices which take various forms of physical or psychological violence. Some of the harmful practices 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.

Speakers at the conference emphasised that, while the meeting aims to changing certain negative aspects of African culture, it does not intend to attack the positive aspects. Indeed, it intends to promote the positive aspects while seeking ways to overcome the negatives. The conference will focus on solutions rather than reiterating the problems. In that respect, the African Union recognizes the urgent need to mobilize African Union Member States, Civil Society Organizations, NGO's, traditional and religious leaders and communities to embark on social actions with a view to eradicate harmful traditional practices in Africa.

“There is no excuse which can justify such kinds of practices which will impact negatively on the upbringing and social welfare of our children, communities and societies” stated Advocate Bience Gawanas, AU Commissioner for Social Affairs, while emphasizing that there is a “need to transform societies that are deeply rooted in negative cultures and traditions into societies that respect the dignity of all its members, irrespective of their gender or social class”.

The Commissioner identified the thematic areas of the conference as human rights and legal protection of women and girls with regards to HTP; positive and negative cultural practices and traditions; and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Case studies of best practices will be presented on Thursday 5 October. She stated that the Commission has adopted shared values as part of its Strategic Plan. She further stated that plans of action should be translated into concrete actions so that the AU remains accountable to the women and the children and as well as to the men of the continent. She concluded by saying that “We at the African Union renew our commitment to continue to coordinate our actions to eliminate harmful traditional practices. Together we can make a difference.”

Mrs. Lieselore Cyrus the German Ambassador in Ethiopia also spoke at the opening session. She reiterated Germany's support to AU organs with regard to upholding the human rights of women and girls. “A lot of challenges remain on the way forward, but they will be overcome by joint efforts”.

Dr. Cheikh Ould Zein, representing the religious leaders stated that Islam and other religions have to take responsibility in promoting and ensuring women's rights and eradicating HTPs.

The opening session of the conference was moderated by the Director of Social Affairs Ambassador Olawale Maiyegun. Participants are drawn from African ministers and experts from selected AU Member States, parliamentarians, traditional and religious leaders and representatives of international organizations and civil society organizations.

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