

PRESS RELEASE

The Republic of Sierra Leone Launches the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa



Freetown, Sierra Leone, 17 August 2016 – As part of a comprehensive strategy to fast-track the development of Sierra Leone - post Ebola, the Government of the Republic of Sierra Leone in collaboration with her development partners, launched the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa, with the theme, "Ending Child Marriage for Sustainable Development of Sierra Leone".

On behalf of the President, in his keynote address, the Vice President of Sierra Leone, Dr. Victor Bockarie, thanked the African Union for pushing for the launch of the Campaign in Sierra Leone thus, reminding the government of its firm commitment in ensuring the protection of girls by putting an end to the practice of child marriage in the country. He expressed the Government's concern about the increased incidences of teenage pregnancy and child marriage and reaffirmed its commitment through the Government's 'Agenda for Prosperity', to work with everyone - especially, girls, parents, traditional and religious leaders, the legislature, judiciary and the civil society, in ending the practice of child marriage.

Recent studies in Sierra Leone by UNICEF shows that over 10% of girls are married before age 15 and over 30% are married before age 18. Noting that the Ebola outbreak disrupted the interventions of Government to reduce child marriage and teenage pregnancy, though the outbreak has ended, teenage pregnancy and child marriage still remain a challenge in the country. These and several other factors, the UN Resident Coordinator, Mr. Sunil Saigal, said, puts Sierra Leone on the list of priority countries of the UN Joint Child Marriage Program led by UNICEF and UNFPA.

The First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Her Excellency, Madam Sai Nyama Koroma, in alluding to the effects of child marriage, stated that, "the cost of Child marriage is high and we cannot afford it. Child marriage compromises a girl's development, interrupts her schooling, limits her career,

provides the opportunity for teenage pregnancy to occur, exposes her to the risks of fistula, HIV/AIDS and STDs, domestic violence, emotional and psychological stress and trauma, and isolates her socially. Child marriage negatively affects our country's economy and will lead to an intergenerational cycle of poverty". She called on the legislature to enact and harmonize the laws protecting women and girls, and the Paramount chiefs and religious leaders to ensure that no marriage involving a minor is sanctioned or presided over.

The AU Campaign launch was preceded by Girls' Summits organized in the in four regions of the country by Plan International, Save the Children, World Vision and UN WOMEN. The summits brought the voices of the girls affected by child marriage to the Campaign launching. Over 250 girls and boys engaged in role-plays, expressive art, poems, statement drafting, and discussed child marriage causes, effects, perpetrators and solutions. They children also identified the target audience in responses to end Child Marriage.

On behalf of the African Union Commission, the Commissioner for Social Affairs, His Excellency, Dr. Mustapha Sidiki Kaloko congratulated the Government and people of the Republic of Sierra Leone on the bold step of launching the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage. "With the right attitude and determination, just as was shown in the fight to end Ebola, child marriage can be eradicated in Sierra Leone" he noted. The Commissioner emphasized the need for all stakeholders to work towards translating the commitments made at the launch in developing a national strategy and Action Plan, to ensure that the Campaign reaches the communities mostly affected by the harmful practice of child marriage and assuring that the campaign launch delivers the required change and relief for young girls and adolescents.

The Republic of Sierra Leone is the 15th African Nation to launch the AU Campaign, following from the launches in Ethiopia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, DRC, Madagascar, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Mali, Sudan, Ghana, Eritrea, The Gambia and Senegal.

About the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa:

The AU Campaign to End Child Marriage was launched at the continental level in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on 29 May, 2014, during the Conference of Ministers of Social Development. The Campaign is aimed at ending child marriage by means of supporting and advocating legal and policy actions in the protection and promotion of human rights; mobilizing continental awareness of the adverse socio-economic impact of child marriage; fostering social movement and social mobilization at the grassroots and national levels; and amplifying the capacity of non-state actors to undertake evidence based policy advocacy including the role of youth leadership through new media technology, monitoring and evaluation - amongst others.

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