

AFRICAN UNION

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**PAN AFRICAN CONFERENCE ON CELEBRATING COURAGE AND
OVERCOMING HARMFUL TRADITIONS**

5 – 7 OCTOBER 2011

ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

**STATEMENT OF THE
COMMISSIONER FOR SOCIAL AFFAIRS
AFRICAN UNION COMMISSION
ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA 5th OCTOBER 2011**

**His Excellency, Mr. Jean Ping, Chairperson of the AU Commission,
Her Excellency, Mrs Lieselore Cyrus, Ambassador of the Republic of Germany
Dr. Cheikh Ould Zein, religious leader from Mauritania**

Your Excellencies, Ambassadors,

Dear Participants

Allow me to start by welcoming you to the “New Flower” city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a country with impressive history and rich culture, to the African Union Commission headquarters, and to the 1st African Union Pan African Conference on Celebrating Courage and Overcoming Harmful Traditions.

I wish to thank our Chairperson for having blessed the occasion with his presence. Allow me also to thank Ambassador Cyrus and through her the Government of Germany for supporting the holding of this Conference. I also wish to thank everyone present here today for participating at the Conference as your contributions will be valuable to the outcomes.

This Pan-African Conference could not have been held at a better time, as the debate and actions on the promotion of our African cultural traditions, values and the Pan-Africanism spirit as well as the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) particularly related to health, gender, education and poverty eradication are taking centre stage at continental and global levels.

The Pan-African Conference is being organized under the theme

CELEBRATING COURAGE AND OVERCOMING HARMFUL TRADITIONS

The African Union Commission’s main aim in organizing such an important Pan-African Conference is to acknowledge the work and congratulate all those individuals and organizations who spared no effort and took up the courage and initiative to embark on programmes and campaigns to combat these harmful traditional practices. At the same time we wish to share best practices so that all of us can benefit from experiences throughout the continent and elsewhere which will inform decision makers in the development and adoption of legal and policy tools and

instruments and give voice to the voiceless, to mitigate and ultimately eradicate these harmful traditional practices in our continent.

We would argue that there is an 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 these harmful traditional practices once and for all. A lot has been done, but a lot more remains to be done so that our continent overcomes these Harmful traditions.

Excellencies

Ladies and Gentlemen

Girls in many parts of Africa are victims of early marriages and female genital mutilation. As per the UN estimate 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. Early marriages put the African girls at a risk of exposure and contracting HIV since most husbands are older and sexually experienced. The girls chance to have access to education is also very limited by this practice.

Three-quarters of all Africans between the ages of 15 and 24 who are HIV-positive are women. Why are women and girls disproportionately affected? Could culture and traditions have a role in this? In Africa, as in other parts of the world, cultural norms and values interact with the AIDS epidemic on many levels and in many different ways. However, in Africa many of the cultural factors influencing the epidemic and response are specific to the continent. Thus, confronting the epidemic requires an understanding and acknowledgement of these particular cultural determinants and norms.

Parents and families often justify child marriages by claiming it ensures a better future and security for their daughters. Insecurity, conflict and societal crises also support early marriage. In many African countries experiencing conflict, where there is a high possibility of young girls being kidnapped and raped, marrying them off at an early age is viewed as a way to secure their protection. 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.

It is unfortunate that in the 21st century when the world is involved in innovations, integration, technological breakthroughs, discoveries and research for the benefit of humankind, and there is a gradual realization of the need to promote positive African cultural traditions while at the same time changing certain negative aspects of Africa's cherished culture, Harmful Traditional Practices such as early marriages, abduction, widow inheritances and female genital mutilation are still continuing.

It is incumbent upon those of us as African women and men to continue promoting and undertaking national, regional and continental initiatives and programmes to overcome these harmful traditional practices. We 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. Hence, governments, organization and individuals with a track record of championing the fight against Harmful Traditional Practices need to be applauded, commended and encouraged to continue intensifying their efforts in this regard.

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As guardians of our traditions and positive cultural values, keeping tradition and cultural heritage rich and vibrant means adjusting them to the current dynamics of the world and discarding what has ceased to be useful or relevant.

If I were to ask women and girls what to say at this Conference, they would most likely have said:

We are powerless and voiceless victims- please help us;

We are powerful and have the will to overcome – make our voice loud and our vulnerabilities visible;

We have overcome – celebrate with us and help us to sustain our victories;

Allow me to conclude by reading to you a quotation by Dr Assefa Bequele, Former Executive Director of the African Child Policy Forum as quoted in the Concept Note for this Pan-African Conference on Celebrating Courage and Overcoming Harmful Traditions:

“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...

I wish ***the Pan-African Conference on Celebrating Courage and Overcoming Harmful Traditions*** the success that it richly deserves.

I THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR KIND ATTENTION!