

Africa Health, Human & Social Development Information Service (Afri-Dev.Info) and Partners Media / Public Statement

On United Nations General Assembly Designated Day of November 25 as International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women

Afri-Dev.Info, Africa Coalition on Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, with Pan African Campaign Against Forced Marriage of Under Age Children - Publish Two New 2013 Africa Region Multiple Indicator Scorecards on Violence Against Girls and Women

Highlights and findings from scorecards are:

- Available recent data and research for new scorecards underlines that **Violence Against Girls and Women has become more sophisticated** - encompassing a wider spectrum of interconnected harmful practices impacting negatively on their rights, health and human development.
- **State certification of forced 'marriage' of under age girls has created a false legitimacy for institutionalized sexual violation of / sexual violence against under age girls greater and more widespread than sexual violence in conflict zones** - becoming the new fulcrum around which a more diversified continuum of violence against millions of African girls and women rotates.
- **Forced 'marriage' of under age girls and accompanying continuum of violence, injury to health, and increased maternal death risk underpins lower life expectancy for females through** - increased beatings and intimidation to 'tame' girls from a young age; forced domestic labour; repeated sexual violations; resulting in multiple under age child bearing and higher total fertility rate of between 4 and 7 children per girl child or woman; increased regional maternal death risk as high as 1 in 39 deaths from under age pregnancy, and multiple un-spaced pregnancy; and for many that survive, serious injuries such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF); and increased HIV risk through inability to negotiate safe sex.
- Under age girls forced into 'marriage' and brutalized with little or no protection from the state are more likely to accept violence against them as normal.
- ECOWAS sub-region, with Central Africa are worst regions for growing epidemic of forced 'marriage' of under age girls and accompanying continuum of violence
- Along with Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, widespread forced 'marriage' of under age girls and accompanying continuum of violence constitutes an unacceptable epidemic of gender-based violence.
- Research and data underline that neither the Millennium Development Goals on reducing maternal mortality, improved girl child education, and reduction of HIV - nor the new Post 2015 Development Agenda Goals will be met in Africa for as long as forced 'marriage' of under age girls is tolerated.
- **Advocates call on all African governments to uphold the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child - to recognize and declare forced 'marriage' of under age girls as a form domestic trafficking of girl children, and a source of institutionalized violence against girls and women.**

Speaking to the new scorecards, spokesperson for the publishers - Africa Health, Human & Social Development Information Service (Afri-Dev. Info); Africa Coalition on Maternal Newborn and Child Health, and Pan African Campaign Against Forced Marriage of Under Age Children Mr Rotimi Sankore stated:

“Violence is universally recognised as behaviour or action having the consequence of intimidating, inflicting psychological or physical abuse, torture, damage or injury to health, or leading to death of someone, or a specific group of people.

“In this context, state certification or tolerance of a continuum of behaviour and actions resulting in injury to health, or death of hundreds of thousands of African girls and women has to be recognised as gender based violence on a mass scale. A situation in which 30, 40 or 50 year old men coerce millions of 13, 14, or 15 year old girls in individual countries into forced ‘marriage’ is clearly infliction of violence of epidemic proportions, especially when it is clear this will result in mass psychological or physical abuse or injury, beatings and intimidation; repeated sexual violations, repeated underage child bearing leading to higher total fertility rate of between 4 and 7 children per girl child or woman; increased maternal death risk from under age pregnancy, and multiple un-spaced pregnancy; and for many of those that survive, serious injuries such as Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF); and increased HIV risk through inability to negotiate safe sex.”

A combination of this continuum of gender-based violence has contributed to shortening the average life expectancy of African girls to 20 to 21 years less than girls and women in countries where their rights and human development are better protected. In the Africa region female life expectancy is an average of 58 years, whereas in the Americas and Europe it is 79 years, and in Western Pacific 78 years.

“On this evidence the majority of African governments have not only created a false legitimacy for mass gender based violence, most have abdicated their responsibility to protect girl children from violence, injury to health and increased death risk from pregnancy and HIV. It is impossible to imagine a reversed scenario in which 40 or 50 year old African women decide to coerce hundreds of thousands 14, or 15 year old boys into forced ‘marriage’ without this being recognised immediately as a form of domestic trafficking and abuse of boy children for purposes of domestic labour and sexual violation”.

The evidence is as clear as can be. The 30 countries where between 30% - 75% of underage girls are forced into ‘marriage’ also include 26 of the 30 countries with the highest maternal mortality: Chad, Somalia, Central African Rep, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Cameroon, Nigeria, Guinea, Niger, Zimbabwe, Congo, DRC, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, Cote ‘d Ivore, Senegal, Gambia, Benin, Ethiopia, Uganda and Burkina Faso. In these countries, between 1 in 15 and 1 in 67 females will die in each country as a result of under age or adolescent pregnancy, multiple un-spaced pregnancies and related causes worsened by weak health systems.

In all of the 30 countries where 30% - 75% of under age girls are forced into ‘marriage’ (except two, being Madagascar and Somalia) – girls and women aged 15 years and over constitute the greater majority of those living with HIV – approximately between 55% and 74% of all people 15 years old and above living with HIV.

In addition, the 30 countries where between 30% - 75% of under age girls are forced into 'marriage' also include 24 of the 30 countries with the highest child mortality."

The evidence further underlines that if forced marriage of under 18 girls is bad enough, widespread forced marriage of under 15 girls is even more despicable

"Very worryingly, state certification of violence against girls and women means that in the 30 countries where 30% to 75% of young girls under 18 years are forced into 'marriage', at least a quarter to half were forced into 'marriage' before or by 15 yrs of age, indicating a deeper rooted trend. The worst 15 countries for under 15 forced marriage being Niger, Chad, Guinea, Central African Republic, Mali, Mozambique, Malawi, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Eritrea, Uganda, Somalia, and Zambia."

Sankore also emphasised that in absolute numbers there are at least 10 African countries in which well over a million girls each are subjected to this continuum of violence indicating that sexual violence against girls in forced 'marriage' situations is now more widespread than sexual violence in armed conflict.

"In at least 10 countries African countries, an estimated over one million girls each were forced into 'marriage' before age of 18 topped by Nigeria, with an estimated 6.8 million girls; Ethiopia 5 million; DRC, 3 million; Tanzanian 1.8 million; Uganda 1.8 million; Mozambique, 1.4 million; Niger, 1.3 million; Egypt 1.3 million; Madagascar 1.1 Million; Kenya 1.1 million which has robbing them of education, skills and human development; of an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to Africa's development; and condemning them to essentially a life of dependence, domestic slavery, unmitigated violence, sexual abuse, high maternal death, birth related injury, and HIV / AIDS.

In these circumstances no Health Minister regardless of how hardworking can be expected to perform miracles on girls, women and children's health - if the Justice sector and others fail to protect girls and women from being flung onto the downward spiral of injury to health.

In terms of regional distribution, ECOWAS is the sub-region is most affected by this continuum of gender based violence. In the 30 countries where 30% to 75% of young girls under 18 years were forced into 'marriage' 11 of these countries are from the 15 member ECOWAS sub region being – Niger, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Senegal, Liberia, Gambia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Benin – Along with 6 Central African Countries - Chad, Central African Republic, Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Sao Tome – making West and Central Africa the sub regions with the highest collective concentration of countries where forced marriage is practiced."

Not coincidentally, all ECOWAS Countries except Cape Verde are in the group of countries with highest total fertility rate of 4.0 to 7.0 children per girl or woman. (Nigeria Africa's most populous country has a total fertility rate per woman of 5.5)

Speaking to key evidence on why forced 'marriage' of under age girls underpins the continuum of violence against women, Sankore elaborated on psychological damage and indoctrination of girls to accept violence as normal.

“Forced ‘marriage’ of under age girls has also resulted in a deeply damaging socialisation and indoctrination of girls and women to accept violence against them as ‘normal’. In 34 of the 37 countries for which data is available between 30% to 87% of girls and women aged 15 yrs to 49 yrs consider a husband justified in beating a wife - for at least one of these reasons – (1) Burning the Food; (2) ‘Argues’ With Him; (3) Goes Out Without Telling Him; (4) Neglects the Children; (5) Or Refuses Sexual Relations. This in turn has serious negative consequences for women’s human rights, gender equality, women’s education and development, ability to contribute to social and economic development, and overall health. Without an iota of doubt, protection of girls and gender equality are key social determinants of women’s health.”

Impact Of Violence Against Girls And Women On Millennium Development Goals And Post 2015 Development Agenda

“This psychological and physical damage to girls and women is not consequence free for African development goals. There is a correlation between the institutionalisation of this continuum of violence against girls and women, poor social and economic development, and entrenchment of poverty.

All the research and data available underlines that neither the Millennium Development Goals on reducing maternal mortality, improved girl child education, and reduction of HIV - nor the new Post 2015 Development Agenda Goals will be met in Africa for as long as forced ‘marriage’ of under age girls is tolerated.”

Forced Marriage of Under Age Girls, and Female Genital Mutilation / Cutting - a Brutal Combination.

“Combined with the brutalisation of girls through female genital mutilation and cutting especially in the 16 countries where between 30% to 98% of women suffer terribly mostly in the Horn, North ,Central and West Africa the future of the African girl is really looking bleak unless citizens convince governments to redress gender based injustice.”

The Arrangements Surrounding Most Forced ‘Marriage’ Of Under Age Girls, Can Be Likened To Domestic Trafficking

“Without any doubt, both the circumstances surrounding forced ‘marriage’ of most under age girls, and the subsequent continuum of violence against them is indicative of a domestic trafficking scenario on a mass scale. The attempts to describe forced ‘marriage’ of under age girls as legitimate ‘marriages’ is a shallow attempt to sanitise gender based violence against girl children with the name of marriage.”

The individual components of the continuum of violence against girls are already recognised by the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child as forms of abuse, torture, injury to health, and violence.

“Article 2 of the charter for example is clear that “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years.” Article 16 on Protection Against Child Abuse and Torture underlines that states shall take “ specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to

protect the child from all forms of torture, inhuman or degrading treatment and especially physical or mental injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment including sexual abuse”

Article 21 on Protection against Harmful Social and Cultural Practices emphasises that *“States shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices ... prejudicial to the health or life of the child... discriminatory to the child on the grounds of sex or other status” and more clearly that “Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years.”*

Article 27a on Sexual Exploitation further clarifies that *states shall take measures to prevent “the inducement, coercion or encouragement of a child to engage in any sexual activity”*

Article 14 on Health and Health Service caps it all by stating un ambiguously that *“Every child shall have the right to enjoy the best attainable state of physical, mental and spiritual health”.*

We call on all African governments to uphold the *African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child* - to recognize that taken together, the circumstances of the continuum of violence around forced ‘marriage’ of under age girls equates with domestic trafficking of girl children, and is a source of institutionalized violence against girls and women; and for African Union member states to take necessary legislative, judicial, administrative, and law enforcement actions to end these evil practices.

ENDS

**For further information please contact
Ms. Ogechi Onuoha, Ag Partnerships and Communications Manager**

Tel: +23417601902

Email: [media\[at\]afri-dev.net](mailto:media[at]afri-dev.net)

14 Akintan Street, Lagos, Nigeria