

Strategic discussion with key AU mandate-holders working on child marriage 29 January 2015, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Meeting summary

Introduction

Child marriage is a widespread, harmful practice that affects 15 million girls globally every year, and 40% of women in sub-Saharan Africa. By launching the first-ever AU Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa in 2014, the African Union has demonstrated increased commitment to addressing the practice. A further step was taken when the African Union appointed two new positions with a mandate exclusively focused on child marriage, namely:

- An AU Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage: Mrs Fatima Delladj-Sebaa, a member of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child; and
- An AU Goodwill Ambassador for Ending Child Marriage (Mrs Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, General Secretary of the World YWCA).

Meeting overview

On 29 January 2015, on the sides of the 24th Summit of Heads of State of the African Union, both mandate-holders were joined by Commissioner Soyata Maiga of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, also Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa, for their **first-ever strategic discussion with civil society and cooperating partners** interested in supporting the AU's work to end child marriage in Africa.¹

Convened by Goodwill Ambassador Ms Gumbonzvanda and organised with the support of Plan International African Union Liaison and Pan Africa Program Office and *Girls Not Brides*, the two-hour meeting provided an opportunity for each mandate-holder to (a) explain their views on the issue of child marriage; (b) articulate their vision and ambitions for their own mandate; (c) lay out their workplan for 2015; and (d) identify what support they need from various partners. The Coordinator of the AU Campaign to End Child Marriage, Ms Nena Thundu, also shared a useful overview of how the AU Commission intends to work with the mandate-holders. Attending CSOs and cooperating partners were able to present their ongoing initiatives and to feedback on the ideas shared by the mandate-holders.

It was generally recognised that the efforts of the AU mandate-holders will have a greater impact if their objectives are aligned and their actions are complementary, and if all partners receive the same level of information and access to the cooperation mechanisms. In that respect, the meeting was regarded as the necessary **opening chapter of a longer discussion** and collaboration.

Meeting highlight #1: How do the mandate-holders approach the issue and their own roles?

Outlining their approach to child marriage and their vision of their roles, each mandate-holder stressed their **strong commitment** to addressing the practice:

¹ For a list of organisations and institutions represented at the meeting, see the Annex.

- Recalling her experience as a psychologist of meeting with girls who had been traumatised by the physical and emotional abuse they had endured as child brides, Special Rapporteur Mrs Delladj-Sebaa expressed particular interest in working not only to prevent child marriage but to support girls who are already married.
- Commissioner Maiga reminded the group that child marriage lies at the heart of several women’s rights issues, and as such it must be addressed as a priority.
- Goodwill Ambassador Gumbonzvanda explained she was driven to address child marriage after observing the dire consequences the practice had had on members of her own family: “To me ending child marriage is about my mother, my sister; this is not just a job to be, it is my life”.

All three mandate-holders explained that they have a **rights-based approach** to child marriage, enshrined in regional human rights instruments – particularly the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The question of accountability – of perpetrators, communities, governments and regional institutions – was commonly raised as central.

Meeting highlight #2: What are the mandate-holders’ priority work areas for 2015?

Each mandate-holder outlined a number of plans or priority areas for 2015.

- **Commissioner Maiga, the AU Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa**, has planned two initiatives related to child marriage, which will be pursued in 2015:
 - Preparing an overview report on child marriage in Africa, to be submitted to the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights in 2015 (most likely during the Commission’s April session). Based on evidence gathered during a ten-country study on child marriage,² the report will include concrete recommendations to member states to eliminate child marriage and comply with their human rights obligations under the Maputo Protocol.
 - Developing a General Comment on Article 6 of the Maputo Protocol, which bans forced and child marriage.
- **Goodwill Ambassador Gumbonzvanda** highlighted her mandate as advocacy-focused, with the aim to:
 - Encourage communities and the general public to change their mind-sets – including through speaking out in the media and social media and engaging community members as agents of change;
 - Advocate for African governments to develop and implement clear national strategies/action plans with practical and measurable actions to end child marriage;
 - Advocate for the African Union to increase its commitment to end child marriage, including through an extension of the campaign and the inclusion of an indicator

² The country studies and the overview report are developed by the Gender Unit of the Centre for Human Rights (University of Pretoria). For more information, and to access the country report, see their [website](#).

of progress on ending child marriage as part of Agenda 2063 monitoring mechanisms.

- The most recently appointed mandate-holder, **Special Rapporteur Delladj-Sebaa** was still developing her workplan at the time of the meeting. Among other approaches, she plans to ensure the issue of child marriage is properly addressed in all reports submitted by African governments to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC).

Meeting highlight #3: How do mandate-holders envisage to work together and with partners?

All three mandate-holders were **keen to ensure their mandates complement one another**, and to engage in common activities. Mrs Delladj-Sebaa and Mrs Gumbonzvanda revealed that they are working on a joint workplan with the support the AU Campaign coordination team. While areas for collaboration among the mandate-holders are still to be agreed on, certain common areas of interest were mentioned during the meeting, including:

- Developing common messaging and speak collectively at key events and moments;
- Encouraging the African Union to mainstream child marriage across its programmes and departments; and
- Advocating for consistency in African governments' positions on child marriage at the national level (through national strategies and reporting to regional human rights mechanisms), the regional level (AU and RECs) and the global level (including in the Beijing +20 and post-2015 processes).
- Increasing the participation of girls, particularly current and past child brides, in all initiatives and discussions on child marriage.

All three mandate-holders expressed their **willingness to work closely with civil society and cooperating partners**. Recognising their own limited capacity, but also the richness of the existing work already achieved, they mentioned a number of potential areas of support, including sharing of information and materials about child marriage in Africa, best practices in addressing the practice, and policy developments at various levels.³ Further discussion on partners' involvement can take place after the draft workplan is made available to partners.

³ The AU Campaign team asked to be kept abreast of discussions between partners and the mandate-holders.

Annex: List of organisations and institutions represented at the meeting

1. African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
2. African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
3. African Union Commission
4. African Child Policy Forum
5. Canadian Embassy in Ethiopia
6. Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria
7. ECPAT International
8. Girls Not Brides
9. Plan International
10. Save the Children
11. UNICEF
12. World Vision
13. World YWCA