

SPEECH

BY UNICEF REPRESENTATIVE CARRIE AUER AT THE COMMEMORATION OF THE DAY OF PRAYER AND ACTION FOR CHILD PROTECTION IN MALAWI

Thursday 24th November 2011,

Cross Roads Hotel, Lilongwe.

The Minister of Gender, Child and Community Development, Hon. Reen Kachere, (MP)

The Executive Director of the Malawi Interfaith AIDS Association, Mr. Robert Ngaiyaye;

Distinguished Pastors, Priests, Imams and Sheikhs

All children gathered here,

Members of the press,

Invited guests, ladies and gentlemen

Greetings to you all and welcome to this very special occasion. I am delighted that you could all join us to commemorate the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children and to renew our commitment to protect all children

from violence and its negative effects. Today, we have an opportunity to rekindle our resolve to ensure that no child in Malawi is subjected to violence regardless of his or her socio-economic status.

It is hugely significant that we are commemorating this Day of Prayer to coincide with the 22nd anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Since its adoption by the UN General Assembly on 20th November 1989, the CRC has become the most ratified human rights treaty in history. Not only has it become the gold standard by which nations measure their treatment of children, it has also enabled us to have a common understanding of what child rights are all about. Because of the CRC, millions of children today are able to enjoy their rights to survive, develop, be protected from violence and abuse, and express their views freely on important issues affecting their lives.

Honourable Minister, distinguished members of the clergy, protecting children from violence is a major challenge that requires everyone's involvement. This is so because from what evidence we have available, there are so many children in Malawi living with violence or the fear of violence every day.

Many of the country's one million orphans live in poor communities that are unable to provide optimum care and protection, leaving the children vulnerable to violence. Equally troubling is the prevalence of child labour in Malawi. With 25 per cent of children engaged in it, mostly in the agricultural

sector, child labour is a complex but urgent issue that needs to be tackled with speed.

Sixty five per cent of girls – 2 in 3 - experience some form of child abuse during their lifetime, compared with 35 per cent of boys. One in three girls between the ages of 15 and 19 is married, in all likelihood to a man much older than her. For many of these girls, given a choice, they would rather have stayed in school but, unfortunately, existing socio-cultural practices mean that they have very little say in who they marry and when.

Early marriage is a problem compounded by the rather gloomy statistics on gender-based violence. In Malawi, half of all women suffer violence at the hands of their partners. This is an epidemic that is not just an affront to the dignity of the women involved, but it also leaves a negative psychological impact on the children who witness it, estimated at 3.1 million.

In spite of these challenges, the policy and legal framework for developing a robust child protection system in Malawi already exists. Malawi is a signatory to the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and has ratified various other international protocols and conventions for the protection of children and women. Locally, the government has passed the National Registration Act, the Child Care Protection and Justice Act, and laws against gender-based violence, all of which are intended to strengthen child protection in Malawi.

Honourable Minister, distinguished members of the clergy, laws and systems alone are not enough if communities and their leaders are not involved in their enforcement. Much of the violence against children is hidden, perpetrated in homes far away from the long reach of the law. However, where violence is laid bare, quite often, the child is denied justice because the family decides not to press ahead with litigation. This practice not only deprives the child of justice, it also creates a culture of tolerance under which impunity continues to thrive. This is regrettable and should not be allowed to continue.

Let me therefore take this opportunity to appeal to you to take an active role in preventing violence against children. Your voice, premised on the moral authority and reverence that African societies accord to their faith leaders, can go a long way in challenging the norms that make violence against children acceptable. I appeal to you to use the power of the pulpit to speak out against all forms of violence and abuse perpetrated against children. I also implore you to treat any incidents of violence against children as a criminal act. If you reported any such incidents to law enforcement officers, you will not only have fulfilled your sacred duty to protect life, but you will also be taking a clear stand against violence. Nobody who sees their pastor or imam report violence to the police will be left in any doubt as to its wrongness morally and spiritually.

I am informed that you have developed a three year plan to support child protection in Malawi. This is commendable but the challenge you now have is

to translate that plan into concrete actions for children. We stand ready to support you in this effort.

Zikomo!