Namibia calls for end to child marriages as country commemorates Day of the African Child

Groot Aub, Namibia, 16 June 2015 – The Government of Namibia through the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, in collaboration with UNICEF and other partners have called on the acceleration of efforts to end child marriages, a practice affecting millions of children in the African Continent and 5.4% of females aged 15-19 in Namibia. This call was made in Groot Aub as the country joined other African countries in commemorating this year’s Day of the African Child under the theme “25 Years after the Adoption of the African Children’s Charter: Accelerating our Collective Efforts to End Child Marriage in Africa.”

This year’s commemorations, coincide with the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which is an important continental instrument for advancing children’s rights. Child marriage remains one of the critical child rights violations addressed by the ACRWC, affecting 38% of all children across Eastern and Southern Africa.

“Every day, our friends and our sisters are denied their childhood as they become child brides or fall pregnant before their 18th birthday. They are forced into adulthood and have to prematurely learn to cope with the social, psychological and physical changes in her life” said Hon. Norman Ndeuyeeka, Chief Whip from Namibia’s Children’s Parliament.

In Namibia, the 2011 Census findings revealed that child marriage affects both girls and boys, noting that 3,828 girls and 1,699 boys were living in a traditional marriage or consensual unions. The incidence of teenage pregnancy is also of great concern in Namibia, with approximately 26% of girls aged 18 having started child bearing, (Namibia Demographic and Health Survey (2013).

UNICEF data released in 2014 in the report on “Ending Child Marriage; Progress and Prospects”, shows that more than 700 million women who are alive all over the world were married before their 18th birthday, many of them forced into these unions even before the age of 15 years. While the median age at first marriage is gradually increasing, this improvement has been limited primarily to girls of families with higher incomes while girls from resource constrained families will suffer profound, permanent, and utterly unnecessary harm from Child Marriages.

“We have made great strides in reducing child marriage in Namibia, but without more intensive and sustained action from all parts of society, many girls can be physically and emotionally harmed as they are forced into a life of poor prospects, with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or death,” said Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Hon. Doreen Sioka.

Propagated through entrenched social norms, religious beliefs or strained economic situations, child marriage excludes young girls from school and exposes them to social and medical vulnerabilities. Child brides are often unable to effectively negotiate safer sex, leaving them vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, along with early pregnancy.
Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of mortality for girls aged 15 to 19 years in developing countries while infant deaths are 50 per cent higher among babies born to mothers under 20 than among those born to women in their twenties.

“The practice of child marriage is deeply rooted in gender discrimination, a direct violation of the main principles of human rights and child rights,” said UNICEF Representative, Ms. Micaela Marques de Sousa. “It is a direct form of discrimination against the child, often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, protection, development, and equality,”

While Namibia’s Constitution and laws are in place for a conducive legal and policy environment for the protection of children and criminalisation of child marriage, the practice is still a common occurrence. These marriages are carried out under traditional arrangements without proper documentation and little reportage of the offence is done.

“Namibia has a framework for addressing child marriage and these include the newly enacted Child Care and Protection Act, No. 3 of 2015 which prohibits child marriage in traditional unions and civil marriages. This complements the existing Married Persons Equality Act that sets a clear age and procedures for civil marriages involving children,” said Ms. Ingrid Cupido, the Children’s Advocate in the Office of the Ombudsman.

To address the causes and consequences of child marriage and teenage pregnancy, the Government of Namibia, together with its partners such as UNICEF is committed to efforts to end child marriage. This is through adoption of strategies such as economic empowerment of families, the promotion of access to social protection, maternal and child health, inclusive education and sexual and reproductive services for vulnerable girls; School Policy on Learner pregnancy to re-admit young mothers back to school. Other approaches include violence prevention and response and social mobilization initiatives that address harmful gender norms and traditional practises.

The Government is also promoting the enforcement of laws and policies which criminalize child marriage and ensuring that these are known by a greater section of the population.

This year’s Day of the African Child Commemorations has also been used to prompt national action to condemn and ultimately stop the practice by informing parents and young people about the detrimental implications of child marriage.

The commemorations in Namibia are being held at the back of continental commemorations held in Soweto, South Africa, where those affected by and working to end child marriage such as community leaders, traditional, religious leaders, girls affected by child marriage and key stakeholders converged to consult children on the issue of child marriage and other issues affecting the realisation of their rights.
Note to editors:

The Day of the African Child commemorates the 1976 march in Soweto South Africa, when thousands of African school children took to the streets to protest the inferior quality of their education and to demand their right to be taught in their own language. Hundreds of young boys and girls were shot down and in the two weeks of protest that followed, more than a hundred people were killed and more than a thousand injured. To honour the memory of those killed and the courage of all those who marched, the Day of the African Child has been celebrated on 16 June every year since 1991, when it was first initiated by the then Organization of African Unity. The Day also draws attention to the lives of African children today.

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