



... because every one counts

**SPEECH BY BABATUNDE AHONSI, UNFPA REPRESENTATIVE, GHANA
AT THE CAPACITY BUILDING SESSION FOR AFRICAN
PARLIAMENTARIANS ON ADDRESSING CHILD, EARLY AND FORCED
MARRIAGES - HOSTED BY PARLIAMENT OF GHANA
ON WEDNESDAY, 3RD MARCH 2016 AT PARLIAMENT OF GHANA**

- Honourable Speaker of Parliament
- Honourable Majority Leader
- Honourable Minority Leader
- Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs & Regional Integration
- Honourable Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection,
- Honourable Members of Parliament,
- Nananom, Niime, Naamei,
- Distinguished Heads and Executives of State Institutions,
- Distinguished Executives and Representatives of the
NGO/CSO/FBO Community,
- Friends from the Media,
- Ladies and Gentlemen
- All Other Protocols Duly Observed.

I am making this statement on behalf of Babatunde Ahonsi, UNFPA Representative in Ghana, who would have delivered this himself but is away on a long-scheduled mission. He sends his regrets and apologies for being absent.

It is indeed a great honour for UNFPA Ghana to be part of this seminar that seeks to build the capacity of Parliamentarians to address **child, early and forced** marriages in Africa. Only two weeks ago, the Executive Director of UNFPA and UN Under-Secretary General was in Ghana and held many conversations around this issue with very high level stakeholders including the Parliament of Ghana. One of his key messages during this visit was that perpetrating child, early and forced marriages in Africa, was sure to make the continent miss the demographic dividend. Today's event is important to UNFPA as it is an indication of the Government's commitment at the highest level to address this very critical issue.

We at UNFPA are therefore particularly glad that this seminar comes at a time when global and continental calls have been intensified for integrated approaches to end the practice of early and forced marriages of girls, a practice which is also prevalent in Ghana.

Statistics from national 2014 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicates that 27.2 per cent of women 20-49 years were married by age 18. This statistics however, may not reflect the true picture because many of such unions escape the eye of the public and official documentation.

Child marriage is a violation of the fundamental human rights of the adolescent girl who is often the victim. It compromises her development and often results in early pregnancy and social isolation. Child brides tend to have little or no education and also receive poor vocational training. These features reinforce the gendered nature of poverty. Most child marriages are

also forced, and the consent of the child is not considered before the consummation of the union. The situation aggravates the violation of several international laws and protocols which the government of Ghana has signed. Two key conventions being Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

The consequences of this practice are as damaging as they are far reaching. Child brides are pulled out of school and denied their rights to education. The denial of this basic right leads to several other consequences including domestic violence and poverty. Research has shown that girls' education, especially at the secondary level, is a powerful transformative force that leads to poverty reduction and ensures desired development outcomes. Child brides are exposed to frequent pregnancies and childbirth before they are physically mature and psychologically ready.

The pregnancies are thus very risky and complicated by conditions such as fistula, hemorrhage and malnutrition. With little or no access to reproductive health services, child brides face higher risks of pregnancy-related deaths. Such deaths are the leading causes of mortality in 15-19 year old females.

In the face of these alarming statistics, it is refreshing to know that efforts are being mobilized globally and continent-wide to ultimately eradicate this practice by various stakeholders. Key among these are the Global Parliamentary Campaign to end **child, early and forced** marriages and the

African Union Campaign to end child marriages. These are opportune as they will enhance the policy processes needed to end the practice.

With a mandate to deliver a world where every young person fulfils her potential, UNFPA Ghana has been collaborating and building partnerships with the AU and Parliamentarians to end child marriages.

In 2015, UNFPA strengthened its strategic partnership with the AU through targeted high-level advocacy and policy engagement at the first-ever African Girls' Summit on Ending Child Marriage and through two continental training programmes for member states on ending harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and FGM. UNFPA was one of the main financial and technical partners in the organization of the African Girls' Summit which brought together over 1,000 participants from across the continent and beyond, including government representatives, parliamentarians, UN agencies, donors, CSOs and young people.

With a focus on building the agency of the girl to say no to these harmful practices and stand for her rights, UNFPA led and contributed to parallel sessions spanning a range of subjects that are central to the organization's mandate: comprehensive sexuality education, SRH services, working with traditional leaders and the media, humanitarian situations, and legal and policy frameworks to end child marriage and empower youth.

UNFPA is currently implementing a joint global initiative with UNICEF, aimed at accelerating action at different fronts to end child marriages. Some of these actions are: strengthening critical institutions and systems in

countries and localities to deliver quality services and opportunities for girls; advocating for positive attitudinal change among families and communities; enhancing investments by governments and donors in girls at risk of being married off; engaging young people as agents of change for positive gender norms; and strengthened political support, policies and frameworks and production of data and evidence to measure effective interventions so that girls will enjoy their childhood free from the risk of marriage.

Ghana as one of the 12 countries implementing the programme has been engaging different constituencies of girls at risk of child marriage and gender-based violence such as the migrant female head porters or *kayayei* as they are called in Accra, in legal literacy and livelihood empowerment skills. These are aimed at improving their economic status and reduce their vulnerability to gender-based violence and its consequences including early and forced marriages and co-habitation.

UNFPA Ghana has commissioned community-based consultations in three regions, namely Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions of Ghana which are known to have the highest prevalence of child marriages. The consultations are to help identify the factors that account for child marriages and find solutions that may be adopted to address the phenomenon.

Finally, a research study is currently being conducted with UNFPA support, aimed at identifying and analyzing the major trends of issues on adolescent girls and young women in Ghana, especially the factors that perpetuate the phenomenon of child and forced marriages.

The research, under the title; *In-Depth Situational Analysis of Adolescent Girls and Young Women in Ghana-Synthesizing Data to Identify and Work with the Most Vulnerable Young Women* will produce a synthesis report, drawing from the various national data sources in a desk review as well as focused group discussions and key informant interviews. The study will analyze the correlation and effects that various indicators such as education, teenage pregnancy reproductive health services and information have on child marriages and will proffer context-specific interventions that can best address the phenomenon.

The role of Parliamentarians is critical in accelerating the end to child marriages. As legislators you can facilitate and enhance the impact of such interventions by advocating and pushing through targeted legislations, policies and frameworks that will enforce minimum age of marriage laws and close loopholes such as parental consent.

We therefore consider this seminar that will build the capacity of African Parliamentarians on how they can contribute to end this menace timely, opportune and relevant. I have no doubt at all that at the end of this seminar, our distinguished legislators will identify some of the most effective models that work to eradicate the phenomenon to guide their deliberations and motions. One such model is the UNFPA supported Southern African Development Commission (SADC) Model Law on Child Marriages and Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) could use this as one of the tools to guard the sessions. We will also like to emphasize, that much more will

be gained if Parliamentarians work together with young people as agents of change to end child marriages in Africa.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, permit me to use this opportunity to thank the Parliament of Ghana and Parliamentarians for Global Action for organizing and coordinating such a timely seminar in Ghana. I am sure our concerted efforts will benefit not only the girls of Africa but the entire world.

I thank you very much for your attention.