

PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR ON COMBATING EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE IN GHANA

PARLIAMENTARIANS FOR GLOBAL
ACTION(PGA)

***KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED BY THE RT.
HON EDWARD K. DOE ADJAHO, SPEAKER OF
THE PARLIAMENT OF GHANA AT A
PARLIAMENTARIANS FOR GLOBAL ACTION
SEMINAR ON "COMBATING EARLY AND FORCED
MARRIAGE IN GHANA", AT THE LA PALM ROYAL
BEACH HOTEL, ACCRA ON 3rd MARCH 2014.***

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Honourable Ministers and Deputy Ministers of State

Honourable Members of Parliament

Chairman of the National Population Council

Country Director of UNFPA

Officials of PGA International

Distinguished Participants

I deem it a great honour to have been invited to deliver the keynote address at this all important seminar. I would like to specially thank the sponsors and organizers of this seminar who found it worthy to create this important platform to deliberate on the critical issue of early and forced marriage.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, studies indicate that in Ghana early marriage, which refers to marriage involving persons under eighteen (18) years of age, occurs more frequently among girls who are the least educated, poorest, vulnerable and living in rural areas.

Undoubtedly, early marriage is inimical to the child's development because it denies the young person the opportunity of being physically, psychologically, emotionally and financially ready for the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing. Additionally, the education of such children may be terminated, thus compromising their chances of being economically empowered. This phenomena also has major consequences for public health, social and economic development of the country.

I am informed that Ghana unfortunately has one of the highest child marriage prevalence rates in the world. On the average, one out of every four Ghanaian girls will be married before they turn eighteen (18) years of age. This compounds further

the unequal power relations between men and women and perpetuates the low status of some women in Ghana.

The Parliament of Ghana has been at the center of efforts to find solutions to the practice of early and forced marriage in Ghana. As part of efforts to uphold the rights of the girl child, the Parliament of Ghana has ratified a number of United Nations conventions and treaties requiring member states to take active measures to ensure that child marriage is eliminated. Indeed, Article 28 (d) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana mandates Parliament to enact such laws as are necessary to ensure that children and young person's receive special protection against exposure to physical and moral hazards.

In compliance with its mandate under the constitution, Parliament has over the years contributed its quota to combating early and forced marriage through the passage of a number of relevant legislations. For example, the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560) sets the minimum marriage age at 18 years and prohibits forced betrothals and early and forced

marriage of children in Ghana. Under the Criminal Code Amendment (Act 554) 1998, it is illegal to force a person into marriage under duress or without the person's consent.¹

While acknowledging that more work needs to be done, I must state that Ghana has through a set of conscious decisions and actions, made significant progress towards the goal of attaining the status of a Gender Sensitive Parliament. The purpose of having the Women's Caucus as well as the Gender and Children Committee in Ghana's Parliament was to place the subject of gender and children on the front burner and empower its Members to raise major issues during the budget debates, develop coordination mechanisms with other Committees, and serve as conduits between civil society organizations which focus on women and children issues and Parliament. The exercise of Parliamentary oversight by the Committee on Gender and Children is one key working method of ensuring gender mainstreaming in national policies, programmes and budgets as well as holding the Government to account for its actions vis-a-vis its national and

¹ See sections 100 and 109 of the Criminal Code Amendment (Act 554) 1998

international commitments. Parliamentarians in Ghana have several tools at their disposal to enable them carry out their oversight function. These include the power to communicate oral and written questions, as well as the right to summon ministers to answer those questions or make statements in the House on relevant matters. Some Parliamentary Committees also invite Ministers and other Government Officials to attend upon them and assist them in their deliberations.

It is precisely because of the premium that Parliament places on resolving the humongous problem of early and forced marriage, particular among some of the poorer and most vulnerable sections of our society, including the Head Porters, otherwise known as Kayayei, that I invited the Honourable Minister for Women, Children, Gender and Social Protection to Parliament only last week Thursday, 27th February 2014 to brief the House on social intervention programmes aimed at dealing with the root of the menace.

The Honourable Minister assured the House of the Government's commitment to enforce the provisions of the Childrens Act, 1998, Act prohibiting Children from engaging

in any work exploitative or hazardous to their health, education and development. The Chair directed that the entire document be forwarded to the Committee for Gender and Children for scrutiny and its report submitted to the House within two weeks.

Undoubtedly, early and forced marriages are incompatible with the rights of boys and girls not only because they deny them the right to freely decide whether or not to marry and to choose one's spouse, but also because they entail serious risks to reproductive health.

The influence of traditional culture, accompanied by mentalities that are often closed to the possibilities of change, is a major challenge to overcoming the menace of early and forced marriage. In most African societies, the culture has traditionally been constructed around a predominantly "masculine" image where females are assigned a subservient role. To overcome this cultural stereotyping and the challenge of the predominant influence of patriarchal values, it is important to provide education that would promote an awareness and understanding of gender equality issues.

The right to obtain an education is a basic right of every child. Education encourages the intellectual and social development of children, and enhances their ability to earn a decent living. It is also an essential component of national development. Young girls who marry early or become pregnant generally leave school and become more dependent on their spouses. The relationship between education and early and forced marriage is an oppositional one. A UNICEF study indicates that too often premature marriage prejudices not only educational opportunity but also personal development leading to a life-time of domestic and sexual subservience.²

There is the crying need to have effective well-funded educational programmes that teach women, adolescents, social workers, law enforcement officers and journalists about the law relating to early and forced marriage. Men also need to share responsibility for promoting gender equality and child protection. Education is crucial for both men and women in order to expose them to respective obligations, equal rights

² Early Marriage, UNICEF Innocenti Digest 7, 2001, p.2

and duties in this regard, thus liberating them from previously held unhealthy perceptions and mindsets on early and forced marriage.

It is of crucial importance that, as a people, we take all necessary steps, within the context of our means, to keep all of our young persons in school for as long as possible, to enable them attain their highest level of education. Accordingly, it is important to implement a comprehensive programme to improve educational systems and facilities so as to reduce school dropout rates and significantly achieve school enrolments and attendance targets. In my considered view, this is one of the surest ways of combatting the high incidence of early and forced marriages. In other words, education is a key strategy in combatting the menace.

In Ghana, when young persons, attending School fall victim to the incidence of early or forced marriage, it is important to find ways of re-integrating them into society by:

- (1) Re-insertion into the school system, where possible, or enrolment in other programmes designed to provide

literacy and life skills and enhance self-esteem; and
/or

- (2) Providing alternative income-generating activities, apprenticeships or livelihood training.

Furthermore, as elected representatives, Members of Parliament need to strengthen their advocacy role in their respective constituencies by leading campaigns to educate constituents on legislations passed in respect of early and forced marriage and the applicable sanctions.

It behoves on the legislature to intensify its oversight of Executive agencies responsible for the implementation of policies to eliminate this practice. In this regard, the Parliamentary Committee on Gender and Children is re-positioning itself to exercise vigilance in monitoring national targets and exercising oversight on the institutions mandated to curb this practice.

Parliament can also use the power of purse to ensure that more resources are allocated to sectors which target the elimination of early and forced marriage.

Finally, distinguished participants, it is apparent that the elimination of early and forced marriage in Ghana requires a combination of strategies that include enacting and upholding women's law and rights and ensuring its enforcement; embarking on educational campaigns, formulating policy and creating institutional frameworks and rolling out specific programmes, projects and actions aimed at curbing the practice.

This Seminar is being held at an auspicious time when the problems of early and forced marriages are taking centre stage in both national and international development discourse. I am happy that you chose to assemble in Accra to share experiences, cross-fertilize ideas and adopt international best practices on ways of combatting early and forced marriage. It is my hope that you would, at the end of this Seminar, be able to adopt a comprehensive but workable plan of action and statement of commitment, and thus take back to your respective countries, new and enriched perspectives on ways of ending early and forced marriage.

On this note, I have the singular honour to declare this seminar duly opened.

Thank you!
