

Joint Statement by the ACERWC's Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage and Other Harmful Practices, Hon. Hermine Kembo Takam Gatsing, and Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Children, Hon. Satang Nabaneh

**On the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child,
11 October 2026**

'End Child Marriage and Invest in Girls' Rights'

Today, we join the international community on the commemoration of the International Day of the Girl Child 2026, as the Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage and Other Harmful Practices, and Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Children of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). This year's theme 'End Child Marriage and Invest in Girls' Rights' is a timely theme that adds to the ongoing continental efforts to eliminate child marriage and increase resources for the realisation of girls' rights.

Africa is home to approximately 160 million adolescent girls aged between 10 and 19 in our continent. These millions of girls represent a demographic dividend for the Continent and form part of Africa's future. However, child marriage shatters the future of our girls, violates their rights in various dimensions, and poses a huge risk on Africa's development. Statistics show that there are over 130 million girls between the age of 20-24 who were married before the age of 18 in Africa. As of 2025, estimates show that the rate of child marriage is approximately 30% in Africa with Western and Central Africa regions having the highest prevalence followed by Eastern, Southern, and Northern Africa regions.

Child marriage is a severe form of violence against girls that violates numerous fundamental rights and diminishes their future potential. It poses health and development risks by causing teenage pregnancy, complications at birth, premature birth and malnutrition among the children born to adolescences, resulting in generational impact. Its interrupts the education of girls as most often girls dropout of school after marriage and pregnancy. This robs their future depriving them the opportunity for literacy, accumulate critical life skills, and continue higher education. Moreover, girls married as children are mostly victims of domestic gender-based violence with research revealing that child brides experience significantly higher rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse from their partners. They bear heavy economic and societal burdens without having the required skills which results in the poor health outcomes and psychosocial challenges among themselves and their children. Crucially, as digital access expands across Africa, we are witnessing the emergence of technology-facilitated dimensions of child marriage, where digital platforms, social media, and encrypted channels are increasingly exploited to facilitate, arrange, and conceal child unions and evade legal oversight

We African Union Member States for their ongoing efforts in addressing the scourge, which has contributed to an overall decline in child marriage rates in the Continent. We note with appreciation the legislative reforms that have taken place in prohibiting child marriage and the various campaigns launched by several Member States. Nevertheless, we remain concerned that progress is very low sometimes with regressions driven by conflict, extreme poverty, and the compounding impacts of humanitarian crises and pandemics (such as COVID-19). While legislative reforms are impressive, we also note that several African States have laws that enable child marriage through exceptions of parental consent or other conditions or through customary laws.

Our continental instruments are unequivocal about the prohibition of child marriage without any exceptions. Article 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Article 6 of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa outlaw child marriage and betrothal of children. Furthermore, the Joint General Comment on Ending Child Marriage of the ACERWC and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights explain the nature and scope of obligation of States in combating child marriage. We emphasize that investing on girls' rights sits at the heart of the obligation of States in eliminating the practice as explained in the General Comment.

Evidence shows that child marriage is prevalent in economically disadvantaged communities. This sheds light on the inevitable role of investment in girls' rights in addressing child marriage and intergenerational poverty in Africa. On this International Day of the Girl Child, we call upon Member States of the African Union to:

- Undertake harmonized legislative reforms to fully prohibit child marriage without any exception
- Invest in education and address factors that lead to dropout from schools among girls by removing school fee, providing cash transfers for girls from economically disadvantaged families, and guarantee gender-responsive Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructures, including free menstrual health products in all schools, aligning with the 2020 AU Theme.
- Provide financial and in-kind support for girls who fall pregnant while in school and ensure that laws and regulations as well as school administrative practices enable and support pregnant girls to continue their education
- Enhance investment in birth and marriage registration systems
- Develop robust social protection mechanisms, emergency cash transfers, and community safety nets to protect girls and vulnerable households from resorting to negative coping strategies during economic and climatic shocks.
- Expand vocational, digital, and financial literacy training programmes to enable girls with market-relevant skills for productive employment and financial independence.
- Increase the availability of sexual and reproductive health rights education and services for girls by making the services gender responsive and accessible economically and physically
- Invest in programs and campaigns that challenge harmful norms against the equality of girls and funding community-based advocacy programs that engage men, boys, religious and traditional leaders to challenge inequitable gender norms and practices

- Integrate child marriage prevention in budgets allocated for humanitarian crisis, food insecurity, and climate-change response
- Allocate sustained national budget lines for training police officers, judges, and community leaders to properly identify, prevent, and prosecute incidents of child marriages
- Invest in accessible, multi-sectoral support services for girls escaping child marriage or gender-based violence, including toll-free 116 helplines, temporary shelters, legal aid, and specialized trauma care. I
- Ensure comprehensive healthcare, psychosocial counselling, educational re-entry, and livelihood assistance for girls who have already been subjected to child marriage

We cannot overemphasize that investing in and empowering our girls from early childhood ensures they know, assert, and defend their rights, recognise violations, and possess the agency to thrive. We cannot achieve our shared aspirations of a prosperous Africa under Agenda 2063 and an Africa Fit for Children Agenda 2040 if millions of girls continue to be left behind.

Let us invest in our girls, let us invest in Africa!

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