African Union

African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
Comité Africain d'Experts sur les Droits et le Bien-être de l'Enfant
Comité Africano de Peritos os Direitos e Bem-Estar da Criança
لجنة الخبراء الأفريقية المعنية بحقوق الطفل ورفاهه

ACERWC
African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

Statement on the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence 2026 by the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Children and the Special Rapporteur on Child Marriage and other Harmful Practices of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC)

UNITE to End Violence Against Women and Girls: Ensure Justice, Protect Survivors, End Impunity

25 November 2026

Every girl in Africa has the right to enjoy rights and freedoms enshrined in the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and other international and regional instruments. However, too many girls in Africa are denied their rights due to gender-based violence stemming from cultures, norms, standards and customary practices that discriminate against girls. We are particularly concerned about:

- Child marriage and informal unions, which cut short a girl's childhood, schooling and autonomy and expose her to sexual violence and teenage pregnancy.
- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and other harmful practices, including virginity testing, breast ironing, widowhood rites, wife inheritance and forced marriage by abduction.
- Sexual violence against girls, including rape, defilement, incest and sexual harassment, perpetrated within homes, schools, workplaces, and communities.
- School-related gender-based violence and WASH-related exclusion, including sexual coercion in educational settings, unsafe school sanitation facilities, and menstrual discrimination that humiliates girls and pushes them out of classrooms.
- Norms of silence, stigma and shame, which pressures families to "settle" cases informally and blame survivors rather than holding perpetrators accountable.
- Discriminatory laws, including exceptions to the minimum age of marriage and provisions that exonerate perpetrators of sexual violence who marry their victims.
- Emerging and compounded threats, including technology-facilitated sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking, conflict-related sexual violence, and climate-induced displacement, which disproportionately affect girls with disabilities, as well as refugee and displaced girls

As the 16 Days of Activism begin on 25 November, we, the Special Rapporteurs of the ACERWC, stand in solidarity with girls, survivors and all actors working to end violence against them. We reiterate unequivocally that practices that harm girls are not culture worth preserving.

The African Children's Charter obliges States Parties to adopt legislative and other measures to protect girls and to discourage any customs, tradition, or cultural practices inconsistent with the Charter under Article 1. Article 16 guarantees the protection of girls from all forms of abuse and requires States to establish gender responsive reporting and investigation mechanisms. The Charter under Article 21 prohibits child marriage, calls for compulsory registration and prohibits all forms of harmful practices. Moreover, Articles 27 and 29 of the Charter protect girls from sexual exploitation, and trafficking as well as ensuring their access to effective remedies and redress. Under Article 11(6), States are obligated to undertake special measures to guarantee that pregnant girls have the opportunity to continue their education. Underpinning all of these guarantees is Article 3, which enshrines the foundational principle of non-discrimination and ensures equality and equity for every girl across all provisions of the Charter.

In addition, other regional frameworks that protect the girl child include the Protocol on the Rights of Women, the recently adopted Common Africa Position on Ending Violence Against Children (CAP-EVAC), and the AU Model Law on Child Online Safety and Protection.

Our Committee, in its jurisprudence, has established that gender-based violence is a manifestation of gender-based discrimination which results from patriarchal societal values that subordinate girls, normalise unequal power relations between men and women, and perpetuate harmful stereotypes and practices that entrench the inferior status of women and girls in the family, community, and society at large. Consequently, States Parties bear a due diligence obligation not only to enact protective laws, but to transform these deep-rooted social norms.

While we welcome the progress made by several African States through legislative reform, awareness-raising, and the concrete pledges made at the recently concluded Second Global Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children, as well as the outcomes of our October 2026 Day of General Discussion on Navigating the Digital Frontier, political commitments must now translate into measurable protection on the ground.

During these 16 Days of Activism, we call on Member States of the African Union to:

- Ratify the African Children's Charter without delay and withdraw all reservations, particularly those entered against the prohibition of child marriage, and the right to education of pregnant girls.
- Criminalise all forms of violence against girls, including sexual violence, FGM, child marriage and technology-facilitated exploitation, and repeal every exception to the minimum age of marriage of 18, including those based on parental, judicial, customary or religious consent.
- Repeal provisions allowing perpetrators to escape liability by marrying their victims, prohibit informal community settlements that replace criminal accountability, and ensure courts are child-friendly and gender responsive.
- Promptly investigate all allegations of violence against girls and prosecute perpetrators to end impunity.
- Adequately fund child protection systems, expand toll-free national child helplines, and establish accessible one stop centres offering confidential reporting and coordinated

referral pathways.

- Provide free, unconditional, survivor-centred medical, forensic, psychosocial, shelter and reintegration services, while guaranteeing uninterrupted access to education for survivors, pregnant girls and adolescent mothers,
- Collect, analyze, and publish disaggregated data on gender-based violence against girls, including its structural drivers, to inform evidence-based policymaking.
- Engage families, traditional, community, and religious leaders, men and boys, teachers and the media to support community-led abandonment of harmful practices;
- Address drivers such as poverty and barriers to secondary education; and allocate adequate and dedicated national budgets for child protection.
- Fully implement the commitments made under CAP-EVAC and at the Second Ministerial Conference on Violence Against Children, backed by clear timelines and accountability mechanisms.

Our vision is a continent in which every girl can learn, speak, move safely, exercise autonomy over her body and future, and live with dignity. Achieving this requires centering girls' voices in the laws, policies, and programmes that affect them. Our duty to protect girls does not end on 10 December, let us UNiTE across all institutions and communities so that every girl in Africa grows up free from violence and fear.

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