Joint Statement on Ending Child Marriage in Eastern and Southern Africa by Civil Society Organizations from Eastern and Southern Africa Region

Civil Society Organizations from Eastern and Southern Africa Region during the regional CSO forum convened by Equality Now in Nairobi between 22-23rd August

We, the undersigned civil society organizations, activists and advocates, gathered in Nairobi, Kenya for the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional CSO Forum on Ending Child Marriage on 22nd-23rd August 2023, jointly issue this statement.

Child Marriage remains an urgent human rights issue in our region. Over 50 million girls in Eastern and Southern Africa - nearly one third (32 per cent) of the region's young women - were married before age 18. The current rate and pace of progress towards ending child marriage in the region disturbingly continue to be slow. We call for accelerated action to end child marriage and protect our girls from sexual and gender-based violence; and other effects of this harmful practices now, not 200 years later (which is when latest research from UNICEF shows that child marriage will end in the region based on current progress).

Multisectoral Approach is required to End Child Marriage

This means that child marriage needs to be addressed as a key priority on the political agenda at the regional, sub-regional, national, district and community levels. All stakeholders including government actors, policy makers, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Religious Leaders, Private Sector, activists, United Nations Agencies, regional mechanisms, survivors, girls, and young people, need to come together to work together in co-ordinated partnership to address child marriage. This also requires centering survivor voices and voices of girls and young people in all policy efforts and programmes to address child marriage.

As civil society organizations, we also commit to increase collaboration and joint efforts at both the regional and national levels, to share knowledge and learnings and strengthen our collective action to demand accountability from their leaders in one voice.

National Coordinator for Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe, Sally Ncube speaking during a session at the Regional CSO forum for civil societies from the Eastern and Southern Africa region.

The recommendations for tackling child marriage which were agreed on at the Forum, addressed to governments, parliamentarians, donors, religious and traditional leaders, and civil society organizations, are set out below:

Recommendations

Laws and Policies

1. **Strong Harmonized Laws:** We need harmonized laws in every country which set the minimum age of marriage at 18 without exceptions, which have specific penalties. The same standards should apply for religious and customary marriages as well. Countries without any laws on child marriage (like South Sudan) and countries where amendments to marriage laws have been pending for a long time (like Lesotho and Tanzania) need to accelerate the law enactment and reform process.
2. **Comprehensive Approach:** Laws surrounding issues related to child marriage such as those which limit access to abortion or which require parental consent to access healthcare must also be amended, so there is a comprehensive and progressive legal and policy framework.
3. **Improve Political Will:** Governments must demonstrate political will to address child marriage (including through promoting high-level political champions for addressing child marriage) and domesticate and implement international and regional human right treaties; including the SADC Model Law to Eradicate Child Marriage.

Implementation of National Action Plans by Governments and State Actors

4. **Role of Policy Makers:** Policymakers need to be capacitated, sensitized, and engaged in the development of costed national action plans. They must hold regular meetings to monitor implementation of laws and policies on child marriage, as well as engage with non-state actors; and ensure decentralization of roles.
5. **Research and Data:** Establish intentional research programs and depository hubs at the national level for research and data on child marriage
6. **Co-ordinated and Inclusive Civil Society Movements:** There is a need for CSOs to strengthen local co-ordination amongst themselves, and ensure that workplaces of CSOs and other stakeholders towards addressing child marriage align with national action plans to end child marriage.
7. **Center youth and survivors:** All advocacy and programming to end child marriage should center youth and survivor-led organizations. We must also build their capacity to lead this work.

Social Norms and Education

8. **Long-term and Collective Action:** To change social norms and achieve behavior change, there is a need for support for long-term programming and collective action, which brings together all stakeholders as agents of change, including men and boys, religious and traditional leaders, young people and survivors. Behavior change programming must also incorporate anticipated crisis situations.
9. **Education:** Governments must invest in formal and informal education for both boys and girls, make education compulsory and advocate for adequate budgetary allocation for education. This includes programmes to integrate teenage mothers and married girls in schools to ensure continued access to education. Education at school must include compulsory comprehensive sexuality education programs from a young age (potentially around 10 years old).
10. **Involvement of Religious and Traditional Leaders:** Traditional and religious leaders must be engaged to co-create laws and policies on child marriage to improve implementation; including through by-laws that prohibit child marriages. At the same time, the government must monitor and regulate religious groups that may interfere with the rights of children.

Funding and Financing

11. **Partnerships with Civil Society and Grassroots organizations:** Donors, government and parliamentarians need to work in partnerships with CSOs and ensure that CSOs are meaningfully involved in decision-making regarding funding and financing for ending child marriage. Funding needs to be directly provided to national and local civil society organizations who are working in the grassroots and with communities. Funding towards ending child marriage should also prioritize funding coalitions that promote movement-building; advocacy to demonstrate the effects of child marriage; justice for girls and survivors; to improve data and research; to support economic empowerment programs for girls; and to mobilise the community in the fight against poverty
12. **Budgeting and Government financing:** It is critical for governments and parliamentarians to dedicate adequate financial resources to implement national action plans, laws and policies against child marriage. CSOs need capacity-building to engage in the budget process; and we need to map organizations which are already doing so to take advantage of their expertise.
13. **Innovative financing:** Governments and CSOs need to partner with African philanthropists and explore innovative financing to fill in the funding gap that is necessary to ensure adequate funding for child marriage interventions at all levels.

Partnerships, Collaboration and Movement-Building

14. **Establishment of a Regional Platform in Eastern and Southern Africa:** As civil society organizations, we will come together to create a joint platform, solidarity space and coalition for CSOs across Eastern and Southern Africa. We commit to map and identify strengths of different CSOs which may specialize on specific aspects, to prevent duplication and overlap of work and siloed working.
15. **Establishment and Strengthening of National networks:** We commit to establishing national networks in countries without such networks to facilitate collaboration and joint advocacy, prevention and response service provision support on child marriage. Existing networks to address child marriage need to be transparent and accountable to increase trust in the network. Functioning of these networks will be enhanced by monitoring and evaluation, and creation of a database of resources and documentation to promote best practices and knowledge sharing.
16. **Co-ordination and Capacity Building:** There is a need to leverage the strength of the existing national networks to link interventions on ending child marriage, to advance a common agenda, and facilitate lesson-sharing. Governments should also promote cross-border coordination with the neighboring countries to ensure effective prevention and response efforts to child marriage and FGM. The capacity of national networks on various aspects, including the multi-sectoral approach, engaging parliamentarians, religious and traditional leaders and the regional accountability mechanisms is key so that they can collaborate to influence programming and policies on child marriage.

SIGNATORIES TO THE STATEMENT:

1. ASSEMAJI/Share-Net - Burundi
2. Associação Coalizão da Juventude Mocambicana
3. Boys and Girls Education Foundation - South Africa
4. BRAC Uganda
5. Children's Dignity Forum - Tanzania
6. Community In Need Aid - South Sudan
7. East Africa Child Rights Network - Kenya
8. Equality Now
9. Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA)
10. Generation Alive (GAL) - Zambia
11. Girls Leaders Forum (GLF) - Rwanda
12. Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage
13. HAGURUKA/Rwanda
14. Help Lesotho
15. Joy for Children - Uganda
16. Msichana Initiative Organization - Tanzania
17. Núcleo Das Associações Femininas Da Zambézia (NAFEZA) - Mozambique
18. Rozaria Memorial Trust, Zimbabwe
19. She-Hive Association - Lesotho
20. SRHR Africa Trust (SAT) - Botswana
21. STEWARDWOMEN - South Sudan
22. Tanzania Media Women's Association, Zanzibar (TAMWA ZNZ)
23. The East African Centre for Human Rights - Kenya
24. Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe
25. Women's Leadership Centre Namibia
26. Women's Legal Resources Centre (WOLREC) - Malawi
27. Women Unlimited Eswatini
28. Young Feminists Movement (Y-Fem) - Namibia
29. YWCA Madagascar
30. Plataforma Mulheres em Acção - Angola
31. Hope Restoration -South Sudan
32. Hope Beyond Foundation- Kenya
33. Advance Africa Initiative (ADAFIN) - South Sudan
34. Women Against Rape- Botswana