

THE KEYNOTE ADDRESS
DELIVERED BY HON. NANA OYE LITHUR AT THE CAPACITY BUILDING
SEMINAR FOR AFRICAN PARLIAMENTARIANS ON ADDRESSING CHILD,
EARLY AND FORCED MARRIAGE (CEFM), ORGANISED BY THE
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MR. CHAIRMAN
THE MEDIA
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

I want to thank you for inviting me once again to speak at this very important seminar. I am especially glad, that the PGA has chosen a theme that truly resonates with the Government of Ghana especially the President, H.E John Dramani Mahama who just about a month ago launched Ghana's National campaign against child marriage together with the First Lady, H.E Lordina Mahama. Indeed, the theme ***“Recommendations to strengthen national legal and policy framework on CEFM and improve coordination among all key stakeholders”*** gladdens my heart because I believe that as legislators, your commitment to the strengthening of the legal and policy framework will make the fight against child marriage much easier. This seminar coming on the heels of the national launch of the campaign against child marriage gives credence to the global resolve to end child marriage, and I am glad to be here.

Distinguished guests, the causes of child marriage require a legal and policy framework that addresses not just the issue of early, child and forced marriage, but also the very causes of the phenomenon. This is because

whereas the phenomenon is illegal in many countries, it still persists. Global statistics, according to data released by UNICEF in July 2014 indicate that each year 15 million girls marry before the age of 18. The breakdown reveals a rather startling reality: Each day 41, 000 girls get married; every minute 28 girls get married and every two seconds a girl gets married. These are girls who are still dreaming of a great future but are forced to abandon these dreams. The global statistics further reveal that more than 700 million women living today were married before they celebrated their 18th birthday. This is equivalent to 10% of the world's population. Out of this number around one in three (about 250 million) enter into the union before the age of 15.

Ladies and gentlemen, UNICEF further identifies South Asia and Africa as regions with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage. The statistics indicate that, due to population growth, the devastating consequences of child marriage are likely to affect an even larger number of girls in Africa in the coming years. It is estimated that the number of child brides in Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to double by 2050, and sub-Saharan Africa will overtake South Asia to become the region with the largest number of child brides in the world. This projection is very alarming and I challenge everybody here today, let us not allow this to happen.

Ladies and gentlemen, my recommendation for the strengthening of national legal and policy framework on CEFM and improve coordination among all key stakeholders would be this: Let us pass laws and policies that would eliminate poverty and address educational gaps as we continue to engage traditional stakeholders so as to eliminate the social and cultural underpinnings.

Ghana has legislated to outlaw the marriage of persons under the age of 18 years. Section 14 of the Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560) states that "No person shall force a child "to be betrothed, be subject of a dowry transaction or to be married". Section 92 of the Act further states, that "A person is guilty of abduction of a child who with intent to deprive any person entitled to the possession or control of the child or with intent to cause the child to be carnally known or unnaturally carnally known by any person, unlawfully takes the child from the lawful possession, care or charge of any person; or detains the child and prevents the child from returning to the lawful possessions care or charge of any person." Another key legal instrument in Ghana is The Criminal Code of 1960 (Act 29). In Section 109, the Code states, "Whoever by duress causes a person to marry against his or her will shall be guilty of a misdemeanour." These key components work to protect girls and women from unwanted marriages. The Government of Ghana's strict legal framework against the practice is thus obvious.

In addition to the above the Government of Ghana has developed a policy framework that is helping to address child marriage with a comprehensive approach. For instance, as part of the strategy to implement the Child and Family Welfare Policy launched last year, early interventions through social protection are to be adopted. This is because the Government of Ghana has identified direct links between social protection and reduced child protection risks such as unnecessary separation from family, child marriage and child labour. The objective of social protection interventions is primarily to reduce poverty amongst the extreme poor which is found to be a key factor that promotes child marriage. Ghana's new National Social Protection Policy therefore provides a framework for delivering social protection coherently, effectively and efficiently in a way that is holistic and properly targeted.

Furthermore, as part of the objective to ensure strategic partnerships and support for Ghana's Women's Machinery, the National Gender Policy aims at promoting educational and issue-related programmes for total elimination of harmful practices including child marriages with focus on source, transit and destination regions. The Gender Policy Also provides periodic assessment and education on the implication of cultural practices that undermine women's rights and impede their rights to certain categories of economic activities, especially child marriage.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, within the ambit of Ghana's legal and policy system, the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection has developed a National Strategic Framework on Child Marriage in Ghana. This was done through an inclusive process of consultations with all relevant stakeholders. This has become an important tool to raise awareness, highlight the benefits of preventing the recurrence of this practice, and ensuring a common and coordinated plan among Ministries and key agencies to address it. We have also set up the Ending Child Marriage Coordinating Unit under the Domestic Violence Secretariat of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection to promote and coordinate national initiatives aimed at ending the practice in Ghana. We have an Advisory Committee made up of influential individuals within their respective communities and technically oriented officials to provide guidance on interventions being proposed by the Ministry to end child marriage in Ghana. We have formed a network of stakeholders on ending child marriage in Ghana. This is a group of actors and organizations who play a key role in ending child marriage at the different levels: national, regional and community. This network serves as a platform for experience sharing on best practices, lessons learnt and guidance on what works and what strategies do not work.

In addition, we have identified and engaged goodwill ambassadors who have produced endorsement videos on ending child marriage.

We recognise the effectiveness of the media in this campaign. We have therefore organised a series of training and dialogue sessions for key media personnel across the country. They are on board the campaign with increased reportage and discussions on child marriage issues.

Ladies and gentlemen, ending child marriage is the right thing to do. Our girls deserve to live full childhoods. They deserve to go to school. They deserve to be free of the violence and negative health consequences associated with child marriage. They deserve the right to choose for themselves without violence or coercion, when and whom they marry. Not only does child marriage negatively impact the lives of girls themselves, it also directly hinders the accomplishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which set development priorities for the world. Efforts to end child marriage and advance the health and rights of girls must be at the center of the global development agenda in order to end extreme poverty and ensure human rights for all.

Ending child marriage is also the smart thing to do because a focus on child marriage could ensure that goals on issues as diverse as education, health, violence, and economic advancement are met for both this and future generations of girls, their families, communities, and countries.

Honourable members of PGA, I am of the firm belief, that the purpose of this seminar, to follow-up on the commitments adopted by Parliamentarians in

Ghana (2014) and Tanzania (2015) on CEFM, build political support to foster an enabling legal and policy environment that protects women's and girls' rights and facilitate engagement between members of Parliament (MPs) and all relevant stakeholders working in this field, especially between MPs and civil society among other laudable objectives will surely be achieved. I am sure that your decision to discuss at this forum, strategies on how to implement and monitor at the national level PGA's Global Parliamentary Declaration to End Child, Early and Forced Marriage in line with Sustainable Development Goal's target 5.3 calling to an end of this practice, would be fruitful. And I want to thank you, especially members of Parliament of Ghana for willing to build capacity and political support to harmonize the Children's Act with the Child and Family Welfare Policy adopted by Cabinet in 2015.

May the rest of your deliberations be fruitful.

Thank you