



**Ending child marriage in West and Central Africa: The Dakar call to action  
Outcome document of the high-level meeting on ending child marriage in West and Central Africa  
Dakar, Senegal – 23-25 October 2017**

We the participants of the High-Level Meeting on Ending Child Marriage in West and Central Africa, including First Ladies of the Republic of Sierra Leone and the Republic of Burkina Faso, Ministers and other high-level government officials from 24 countries in West and Central Africa; high-level representatives from the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and United Nations agencies; representatives of local, national, regional and international non-governmental and civil society organisations; young activists and representatives of youth-led organisations; religious and traditional leaders; and key strategic partners including technical and financial partners; have gathered in Dakar, Senegal, from 23 to 25 October 2017 to collectively recognise the importance of the issue of child marriage in the development agenda in West and Central Africa, to recognise existing progress and learn from one another about successes and challenges in addressing child marriage, and to strengthen the region's alignment with commitments to end child marriage made at the national, regional, continental and global levels, through relevant frameworks at the African Union, ECOWAS, ECCAS, and the United Nations, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and to build consensus on what it will take to translate existing and future commitments into tangible, measurable actions aimed at ending child marriage in the region.

1. **Reaffirming** the rights of women and children to exercise their human rights, including the right to health, education, equality, non-discrimination and to live free from violence and exploitation; these rights are enshrined in international and regional instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa and the Africa Youth Charter;
2. **Recognising** that child marriage, a harmful practice defined as any formal marriage or informal union in which at least one party is under 18 years of age is a violation of these rights, is entrenched in gender inequality, is linked to poverty and social norms, and is exacerbated by humanitarian and security challenges;
3. **Expressing concern** about the high prevalence of child marriage in West and Central Africa, which is the highest in the world and affects four in ten girls, and the continued slow decline rates, combined with projected estimates of a growing population of girls;
4. **Acknowledging** that child marriage curtails girls' education, putting them at higher risk of dropping out of school and facing barriers to completing primary and secondary education; that it exposes girls to increased risks of violence; and that complications from adolescent pregnancies and childbirths have health risks such as obstetric fistula and are the leading cause of deaths among adolescent girls worldwide;

5. **Recognising** that child marriage deprives girls and women of access to paid employment and economic opportunities, thereby hindering their decision-making ability and earning over their lifetimes, as well as perpetuates inter-generational poverty among families, communities and countries at large, thus severely impeding West and Central Africa's economic development, poverty reduction and achievement of the demographic dividend;
6. **Recognising** that effective responses to the complex and multiple causes and consequences of child marriage must be multi-sectoral, integrated, sustainable, evidence-based and taken to scale, combining approaches that aim to empower girls, mobilising families and communities, providing quality education, protection and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services to married girls and girls at risk of marriage, and establishing an enabling policy and legal framework;
7. **Recognising** that government leadership and political championing of ending child marriage is essential to make child marriage a priority on the national agenda of states and all other relevant actors, to initiate an inter-sectoral response;
8. **Recognising** that providing such responses requires a partnership between various sectors including health, education, justice, and between key actors including governments, civil society, regional and continental institutions, UN agencies, development partners, religious and traditional leaders, the media, men and boys, and most importantly girls and young people; themselves;
9. **Recognising** that religious and traditional leaders play a critical role in mobilising communities to change social norms related to child marriage by engaging their communities, including through dialogues;
10. **Reaffirming** the commitments made by states across West and Central Africa to accelerate and coordinate efforts to end child marriage, through regional and global frameworks including African Union Agenda 2063, the African Common Position on Child Marriage, ECOWAS Strategic Framework for Strengthening National Child Protection Systems to prevent and respond to Violence, Abuse and Exploitation against Children in West Africa, and the Sustainable Development Goals whose target 5.3 calls for an end to all harmful practices, including child marriage, by 2030;
11. **Welcoming** the African Union's leadership in bringing child marriage to the forefront of the continental development agenda through the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, as well as the national leadership by countries in West and Central Africa to design and implement targeted strategies to ending child marriage;

We call upon governments to work in collaboration with all key stakeholders mentioned above to:

- a. Reaffirm the leadership of government in addressing child marriage as a national priority and develop and strengthen a national, multi-sectoral, integrated, sustainable, evidence-based, girl-centred and gender responsive at scale response to child marriage, including through developing, resourcing, implementing and monitoring specific national strategies or costed action plans for ending child marriage, and through integrating action to end child marriage into sectoral strategies, with clear indicators;
- b. Strengthen their legal and policy frameworks, which should reflect their commitments to ending child marriage, by establishing and enforcing 18 as the legal minimum age of marriage applicable without exception and harmonized across all legal systems including customary laws, and by

developing and implementing policies that prevent marriage for girls and provide targeted support to married girls;

- c. Develop, implement and scale up sectoral interventions and programmes based on robust data and integrate efforts to prevent child marriage and support married girls, including interventions that ensure girls can access and complete primary and secondary education, promote, youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health education and services, implement and strengthen birth and marriage registration policies and services;
- d. Mobilise and allocate specific technical and financial resources, including from national budgets, to policies, strategies and programmes aiming at ending child marriage, and earmark budget for child marriage-specific intervention in broader funding initiatives;
- e. Monitor progress of implementation of, and identify gaps in the national response across sectors and develop a comprehensive monitoring and reporting framework which is aligned with existing regional and international frameworks mentioned in para. 6;
- f. Strengthen the data and evidence base for the development, implementation and monitoring of policies, strategies and programs to end child marriage
- g. Ensure that religious and traditional leaders play a central role in informing and mobilizing on the dangers of child marriage, and in changing social norms, including through fostering inter-religious dialogue across countries;
- h. Ensure that young people, especially young girls, are key actors in national efforts to end child marriage, and are meaningfully involved in decision-making processes at local, national, regional, continental and global levels;
- i. Continue to work with UN agencies and development partners, for example through the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Actions to End Child Marriage, to accelerate actions, and scale up evidence-based interventions to end child marriage;
- j. Meaningfully involve civil society including community-based organisations, national and international NGOs as strategic partners in the development, implementation and monitoring of national initiatives to end child marriage, leveraging their understanding of the realities of child marriage in the daily lives of girls, boys and communities;
- k. Foster and facilitate collaboration and partnerships, including through well-functioning coordination mechanisms, to ensure alignment and maximise the impact of their efforts, by bringing together relevant ministries and governmental bodies working on issues related to child marriage at the national and sub-national levels, as well as key actors, particularly civil society, girls and young people, UN agencies and development partners;
- l. Strengthen collaboration between regional bodies and institutions to garner high-level political support for ending child marriage from political leaders, including through initiatives such as the African Union Campaign, and use existing regional reporting and accountability frameworks such as the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights;
- m. Encourage the African Union, ECOWAS, ECCAS, to reinforce knowledge sharing and learning among member states about successes and challenges of national responses to child marriage.

This call to action aims to galvanize local, national and regional actions to end child marriage in West and Central Africa, and to contribute to the continued continental momentum driven by key continental initiatives such as the African Union Campaign to end child marriage in Africa, including during the 2018 Second African Girls Summit in Kigali, Rwanda.

Dakar, 25 October 2017