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## **CHILD MARRIAGES IN AFRICA: INTERFACE WITH AFRICA'S AGENDA 2063 AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

*Sophia Chirongoma*

### **Background**

This chapter is written in honour of Nyambura Njoroge, a human rights activist, an ecumenical leader, a passionate advocate for gender parity, as well as inclusive and effective leadership in Africa. She is a mother, a sister and a friend to all. Her conscientious advocacy for children's rights enshrined in life giving and life affirming theologies has inspired the focus of this chapter. Wearing gender activist and religio-cultural hermeneutical lens, the chapter interrogates the ugly face of child marriages in Africa. It lays bare how not only in Africa but globally, religion and culture are often used to justify the contentious practice of child marriage. The multifaceted factors perpetuating this practice, which robs young girls of their childhood whilst exposing them to various forms of human rights violations, are deliberated upon. Acknowledging that both boys and girls are susceptible to the clutches of child marriage, this chapter focuses specifically on the girl child who bears the brunt of burden of this practice in Africa. Tapping into the United Nation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs), the chapter bemoans how the prevalence of child marriages in Africa threatens the achievement of five SDGs, focusing on poverty eradication (SDG1), achieving food security (SDG2), ensuring equitable access to health care (SDG3), facilitating universal access to education (SDG4) and attaining gender equity (SDG5). The chapter also articulates how the practice of child marriage presents major barriers in eliminating the harmful cultural traditions and inadvertently stifles the realization of our cherished dream of the "Africa we want," as expressed in the Africa Agenda Vision 2063. Perched firmly and confidently on Njoroge's shoulders whilst embracing her avid and fervent advocacy for children's sexual and reproductive health and rights, the chapter calls for multi- sectoral collaboration towards ending child marriages in Africa. In unison

with Njoroge's consistent advocacy for prophetic leadership, the chapter concludes by reiterating that a prophetic church and visionary leaders cannot afford to be oblivious to the harmful effects of child marriage which are denying fullness of life to millions of young girls.

## Introduction

Despite the numerous global, regional and national legislations against child marriage, this practice has persisted in our contemporary times. Although some boys are also subjected to child marriage, the reality of the matter is that girls are disproportionately affected, hence the focus of this chapter. According to a UNICEF report (2013), while the age at marriage has been rising, over a third of African women are married before their 18th birthday. Several factors provide fertile ground for the prevalence of child marriages. Millions of adolescent and teenage girls have fallen prey to being forced into early marriages against the backdrop of socio-economic challenges compounded with a rigid adherence to religio-cultural traditions. Civil war, displacement and the fear of family dishonour through the girl child's falling pregnant out of wedlock often pushes some parents to withdraw their daughters from school and offer them for marriage to older men (in most cases) in exchange for payment of *lobola/roora*, (a dowry for the bride). In response to the negative impact of child marriage, advocacy work for girls' and young women's sexual, reproductive health and other social and human rights has taken centre stage in our current times. It is against this backdrop that worldwide, women are raising a clarion call for putting our heads and hands together in an endeavour to amplify our voices in saying no to child marriages. As the old adage goes, "united we stand, divided we fall." There is strength in numbers, hence, a united front from all women of the world, whether directly or indirectly affected by this practice, will go a long way in changing communities' perceptions about child marriage. The contention of this chapter is that the scourge of early child marriage is bedeviling human societies and derailing economic progress. Hence, if we are to envisage successfully attaining all the SDGs by 2030 while seeking to realize the vision of Africa's Agenda 2063, it becomes mandatory for us all to work together in eliminating the detrimental practice of child marriage. Since the effects of child marriage are not only confined to the African continent, it is also important to take a glimpse of the practice from a global outlook. In this

light, the next section of this chapter presents a global purview of child marriage.

## **Child Marriage: A Global Challenge**

The pervasive practice of child marriage spans the global divide. This was made apparent by Anju Malhotra, the Vice President of Research, Innovation and Impact International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) whilst delivering an impassioned appeal to the U.S. House of Representatives Human Rights Commission in July 2010. He foregrounded the urgent need for eliminating child marriage in the following words:

Forced child marriage is a life-changing reality for many of the world's girls. Some as young as 8 or 9 are forced to trade their childhoods for a life that can be defined by isolation, violence and illness. It is a practice rooted more in tradition than religious custom, and one that spans the globe, from Asia to Africa to the Americas. The number of girls who are married as children is astounding (Malhotra 2010:2).

The above citation clearly reveals the complex nature of the problem confronting us, with some of the child brides as young as eight or nine.

An ICRW review shows that the rates of child marriage are highest in parts of Africa, and in South Asia, where one-half to three-fourths of girls are married before age 18. Niger, Mali and Chad have the highest rates (ICRW, 2007). In 2012, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) produced a report revealing that every year, about 15 million girls aged under 18 are married worldwide with little or no say in the matter. The pervasiveness of child marriages is more pronounced in the developing world (middle-income countries) where the proportion of young girls being married before their 15th birthday is one in nine. Prevalence is even higher in the least developed countries where nearly one in two girls become child brides. More often than not, young girls are married off to older men and majority of them have to endure the detrimental social effects embroiled with most inter-generational marriages. Reflecting on the available statistics, a UNFPA report released in 2012, warned that if current trends continued unabated, by the year 2020, approximately 42 million girls will be married by their 18th birthday. This translates to 14.2 million girls married each year or 37 000 girls married each day. Girls living in rural areas of the developing world are twice as likely to be married before the age of 18 as their urban counterparts, and girls with no

education are over three times more likely to do so than those with secondary or higher education (UNFPA, 2012).

Regional and International legislations ratify that child marriages are wrong. The right to 'free and full' consent to a marriage is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) prohibits child marriage and forbids the mistreatment of girls. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), governments have committed to ensure the overall protection of children and young people aged under 18, however, child marriage and the range of rights implications it has, substantially infringe these protections. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child also disallows child marriages in article 21. Despite these national laws and international agreements, child marriage remains a real and present threat to the human rights, lives and health of children, especially girls, in more than a hundred countries (UNICEF, 2012).

Child marriage is often perceived as a safeguard against premarital sex, and the duty to protect the girl from sexual harassment and violence is transferred from the father to the husband. In conflict-ridden zones or during times of natural disaster, parents may marry off their young daughters as a last resort, either to bring the family some income and alleviate some economic hardships, or to offer the girl some sort of protection, particularly in contexts where sexual violence is common. These girls are called "famine brides", for example, in food-insecure Kenya (North, 2009). In the aftermath of the most destructive tsunami in 2004, young girls were married to "tsunami widowers" in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and India as a way to obtain state subsidies for marrying and starting a family (Krishnamurthy, 2009). During the conflicts in Liberia, Uganda and Sudan, girls were abducted and given as "bush wives" to warlords, or even given by their families in exchange for protection (Plan International, 2011).

Having delineated how child marriage presents a challenge at a global level, as well as highlighting how the practice is an affront of regional and international legislations on children's rights, below the chapter proceeds to discuss the causes and effects of child marriage focusing particularly on Africa.

## **Interrogating the Causes and Effects of Child Marriages in Africa**

Although child marriage is now widely recognized as a violation of children's right, it continues being practiced globally. According to a British community development charity, one girl below the age of 18 is married off every three seconds worldwide (Plan UK, 2011). Despite its strong association with adverse reproductive health outcomes, lack of education depriving girls of equality, the practice of child marriage continues to be fuelled by tradition, religion, cultural and economic reasons (Sibanda, 2011). In most parts of the developing world, particularly in Africa, underage girls are often married off without any recourse. The high prevalence of child marriage in the sub-Saharan region of Africa is a matter of grave concern. The available statistics indicate that 39% of girls in sub-Saharan Africa are married before their 18th birthday; 13% are married by their 15th birthday. In Malawi, 51.8% of the girls are married off before they are 18 years old. Zambia stands at 46.3% while Mozambique is at 43.9% and Zimbabwe 30.7% to name a few. It is therefore worrisome that child marriage robs millions of girls in Africa of their childhood; it forces them out of education and into a life of poor prospects with increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health or early death (UNFPA, 2012).

According to a collaborative study conducted by the Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) Belgium-Zimbabwe mission and the University of Zimbabwe's Centre for Applied Social Sciences, poverty is one of the key factors precipitating young girls' and women's vulnerability to early marriages. In some rural communities, out of desperation, some hunger-stalked families, who cannot afford to send their girl children to school, ultimately marry them off to a potential suitor who can provide them with food or cattle. Additionally, the rural setup in most African communities tends to privilege the boy child to the detriment of the girl child's sense of self-worth. Resultantly, some underprivileged young girls will end up aiming for no greater achievement beyond getting married. In their perspective, being married at a younger age provides them with an escape route in the hope that their husband will take care of all their unfulfilled material and emotional needs. Moreover, poor and uneducated parents, battling to support all their children, might consider marrying off their underage daughters hoping to relieve themselves from the burden of keeping and feeding them. Usually, the affected family will ne-

gotiate with a wealthy, elderly man who is either already married or widowed so that they can give away their young daughter to him as a wife and he will provide them with some material goods in exchange. This practice of marrying off a young girl in order to avert a crisis or to facilitate some form of barter trading is referred to as *kuzvarira* (pledged marriage) among the Shona people in Zimbabwe (Chitakure, 2016).

The patriarchal system which is deeply entrenched in most traditional African societies also plays a focal role in perpetuating child marriages. Male heads of patriarchal structures in Africa often treat young women and girls in their families as commodities that can be dispensed of according to the family's needs. According to Shoko (2007), this can be illustrated through some common Shona people's practices such as *roora* (charging of bride price) whereby young women or underage girls are often forced to marry a certain man simply because he can afford to give her family the desired bride price. Chitakure (2016:38-50) provides an informative discussion of similar practices which include *kuripa ngozi* (giving away a young girl as a wife to the afflicted family in order to propitiate an avenging spirit), *kusimbisa usahwira* (giving away a young girl as a token wife for purposes of cementing relations), *makasi/chimbadzo* (paying off a debt by giving away your daughter to the creditor as compensation), *chimutsamapfihwa* (replacing a deceased sister/aunt), *chigadzamapfihwa* (when an elder sister/aunt is unable to conceive or produces female offspring only, her younger sister or niece might be offered to the husband so as to produce particularly male offspring on her behalf) and *musengabere* (a man kidnapping a girl of his choice then forcibly taking her to his homestead as his wife.) This patriarchal tendency of treating women and girls as commodities exposes them to various forms of violations such as domestic violence, rape and lack of access to basic human rights all in the name of culture and tradition (IYWD, 2014).

Religion is also often used as a tool for coercing young women and girls into the snare of early marriages. All the three major religions on the African continent, African Traditional Religion, Christianity and Islam are in certain ways used by some unscrupulous religious leaders as a bait to entrap young women and girls to be married off to elderly men within their community of faith. Being young and naïve, as well as being susceptible to religious gullibility, they are often made to believe that certain individuals have a special ability to be 'shown' (through divine/spiritual revelation) who should be married off to whom. Through manipulation and intimidation, they will be made to believe that if they defied the spiritual

‘calling’ to be married off to these elderly men, then they will bring a curse not only upon themselves but their families at large. Consequently, most young girls, bereft of no other sanctuary, they will grudgingly accept marriage as their “allotted fate” and go off to become one of the several wives to the elderly man. Clearly, this is a violation of the child’s right, depriving her of an opportunity to choose her life partner. Often times, they end up entangled in polygamous marriages riddled with strife and wrangling since the elderly men will already have other wives. Once married, girls are likely to feel, and in many cases are, powerless to refuse sex. They are likely to find it difficult to insist on condom use by their husbands, who commonly are older and more sexually experienced, making the girls especially vulnerable to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (UNFPA, 2010).

It is irrefutable that child marriage is a direct form of discrimination against the girl child, who, as a result of the practice, is often deprived of her basic rights. It stands in the way of girls’ education, health and productive lives. It also excludes girls from fundamental decisions, such as the timing of marriage and choice of spouse (Sibanda, 2011). At its worst, child marriage can be tantamount to bonded labour or enslavement. It can be a sentence to regular exposure to domestic or sexual violence, and a pathway to commercial exploitation (UNICEF, 2010). On this note, the next section of this paper focuses on elaborating how this contentious practice is thwarting the attainment of five key SDGs focusing on children.

## **Child Marriage Obstructs the Attainment of Five Crucial SDGs**

Child marriage is recognized as a social evil in most countries of the world. It directly hinders the achievement of five out of the seventeen SDGs. The five SDGs mainly affected by child marriages to be discussed in this chapter are as follows, SDG1 aimed at eradicating poverty in all its forms everywhere by 2030. Forcing young girls into early marriages compromises their chances of enjoying equal rights to economic resources, presents fertile ground for an uneven competition in ownership of property, inheritance, utilization of appropriate new technology and financial services. Being denied access to poverty alleviation opportunities and economic upliftment prospects keeps them ensnared in a web of poverty,



making it difficult to adequately fend for their offspring. Inadvertently, this will negatively affect the economic status of their offspring, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and economic vulnerability. It is, therefore, apparent that if the international community is really committed to eradicating global poverty, it must be equally committed to ending child marriage (UNICEF, 2007).

The state of being trapped in poverty and economic vulnerability also hinders the accomplishment of SDG2 which is anchored upon ending hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition and protecting sustainable agriculture. Being forced into early marriages often exposes young girls to the vulnerability of having no access to land of their own. This impinges on their chances of being agriculturally productive. Furthermore, the lack of agricultural productivity impacts heavily on their ability to maintain a balanced nutrition for themselves and their children. All these factors inevitably make them susceptible to food insecurity. Hence, addressing the negative impacts of child marriage have a correlation with the realization of this particular SDG.

Vulnerability to hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity has a huge bearing on the attainment of SDG3 which envisages the provision of good health and well-being for all at all ages by 2030. Due to their constrained socio-economic opportunities, young girls forced into early marriages are the majority of those heavily impacted by the health care challenges such as HIV & AIDS related ailments, tuberculosis, malaria, neglected tropical diseases and other diseases. Besides, the available statistics indicate that the majority of young girls who have been forced into early marriage experience major complications during pregnancy or childbirth consequently increasing the percentage of maternal and infant mortality. Additionally, due to financial constraints and lack of access to adequate information, young pregnant girls often have limited or erratic access to maternal health care facilities causing several of them to suffer from permanent health challenges. Resultantly, their health and well-being and that of their offspring becomes compromised.

The first three SDGs discussed above all directly affect the realization of SDG4 which calls for access to inclusive, quality and equitable education for all. Attaining this goal by 2030 entails ensuring that all boys and girls complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. Unfortunately, the majority of young girls forced into early marriages have also been forced

to drop out of school in order to take up responsibilities for household chores and childbearing. Having been forced to drop out of school deprives the child brides of the chance to pursue further education and robs them of the opportunity to attain life giving and life enhancing knowledge. Forcing them out of school also stifles their chances of attaining higher education, posing major impediments on their capacity to be remuneratively employed. With limited access to paid employment, their chances of economic independence and rising up from the doldrums of poverty become very limited. The old age, “educate a woman and you educate a nation” denotes that educated mothers have higher chances of financially sponsoring their children’s education as well as assisting the children with their schoolwork which generally increases the success rate for their school going children. Regrettably, an uneducated mother usually battles with constrained resources which compromises her ability to adequately cater for her children’s educational needs.

SDG5 is hinged upon achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. Among the targets for this particular SDG is the advocacy for ending all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere; eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking, sexual and other types of exploitation. The elimination of all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage enshrined in this SDG is the core of the present chapter. Clearly, being forced into early marriage is an outright denial of one’s legal and human rights, hence infringing on gender equality, social and economic empowerment for the young women. It is a paradox that some poor families coerce the girl child to get married while underage so as to escape from poverty, however, the harsh reality of the matter is that most child brides remain entangled in both intellectual and economic impoverishment. Usually, the young girls forced into early marriage find themselves in a situation that denies them rights to access basic health care and other opportunities in life. Worse still, they will be robbed of their childhood. With little access to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty (Chirongoma, 2016). Neither physically nor emotionally ready to become wives or mothers, the girls are at far greater risk of experiencing domestic violence. With heightened chances of susceptibility to physical injury or exhaustion, incidences of mental health challenges become rife and chances of those marriages breaking down are very high (UNFPA, 2012). Hence, perpetuating the practice of child marriages clearly jeopardizes

the attainment of the five SDGs discussed herein. After expounding on how the practice of child marriage frustrates the attainment of the above mentioned five SDGs, below the chapter goes on to illuminate how the same practice militates against the realization of the precepts of Africa Agenda 2063.

## **Child Marriage: Blurring the Vision of Africa's Agenda 2063**

Africa's Agenda 2063 is presented in the form of seven aspirations/goals charting the hopes and yearnings for a united and progressive African continent. While all the seven goals are crucial for Africa's renaissance and their intertwinement makes them relevant to the lived realities of young women or girls forced into early marriages, however, for the purposes of this chapter, the discussion shall focus only on three of these aspirations. The practice of child marriage clouds the achievement of the aspirations echoed in the African Agenda 2063. At the core of Agenda 2063 is the "desire for shared prosperity and well-being, for unity and integration, for a continent of free citizens and expanded horizons, where the full potential of women and youth, boys and girls are realized, and with freedom from fear, disease and want" (Agenda 2063: 1). As has been reiterated above, most young women and girls forced into early marriage are inevitably deprived of the chance to enjoy the envisaged prosperity and well-being. More so, their full potential for growth would have been quashed. Child marriage also makes them susceptible to a life of perpetual fear, insecurity and the outbreak of diseases finds fertile ground under such circumstances.

The first aspiration of Agenda 2063 (Aspiration 1) envisages a prosperous African continent based on inclusive growth and sustainable development. Attaining this goal by 2063 entails a resolution to eradicate poverty in one generation as well as building shared prosperity through social and economic transformation of the continent. This aspiration also expresses the desire for African people to enjoy a high standard of living, quality of life, sound health and well-being by 2063. Another target included under this goal is to work towards ensuring that by 2063, Africa will be the nerve center of well-educated and skilled citizens. Such a commitment calls for safeguarding against any children missing school due to poverty or any form of discrimination. Furthermore, within this goal is affixed the target that by 2063, African countries will be amongst the best performers in

global quality of life measures. This target can only be attained through implementing strategies of inclusive growth, job creation, increasing agricultural production; investments in science, technology, research and innovation; gender equality, youth empowerment and the provision of basic services including health, nutrition, education, shelter, water and sanitation. All these are well intentioned targets but unfortunately the entrenched practice of child marriage in Africa presents a major stumbling block in attaining the tenets of these targets. Poverty eradication, youth empowerment, assurance of being protected from discrimination, equitable access to education, health and well-being, all these become veiled in obscurity the moment one has been forced into an early marriage. Clearly the practice of child marriage is a mirage of attaining this first aspiration.

The third aspiration (Aspiration 3) towards hewing “the Africa we want” by 2063 envisions an African continent imbued with a universal culture of good governance, embracing democratic values, gender equality, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law. If the practice of child marriage persists, the targets enshrined in this goal will remain as a measly pie in the sky especially for the affected women and girls. It is apparent that forcing someone into child marriage infringes upon their human rights and it is an affront of democracy since it denies the affected women and girls the freedom to choose whom and when to marry. It also frustrates the upholding of gender justice and gender equality principles because in most cases, the marriage negotiations are conducted by elderly men and women who will impose their decisions on the young women or girls. The principles of good governance should entail free and fair decision-making processes which prioritizes protecting the rights of the weaker and vulnerable groups such as the young women and girls who are often forced into early marriages against their wishes. It therefore needs no genius to discern that perpetuating the practice of child marriage in Africa goes against the realization of the third aspiration for Africa Agenda 2063.

The sixth aspiration towards carving Vision 2063 (Aspiration 6) visualizes an African continent whose development is people driven. At the heart of this goal is the vision of Africa relying on the potential of all its people, especially its women and youth, and this is fostered through caring for children. Amidst the targets of this goal is the resolution that by 2063, all African citizens will be actively involved in decision making in all aspects. The realization of this target by 2063 entails Africa transforming into an

inclusive continent where no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded, on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic affiliation, locality, age or other factors. This goal also envisages the empowerment of all African children through the full implementation of the African Charter on the Rights of the Child. Additionally, it is targeted that youth unemployment will have been eliminated by 2063, and Africa's youth will be guaranteed full access to education, training, skills and technology, health services, jobs and economic opportunities, recreational and cultural activities as well as financial means and all necessary resources to allow them to realize their full potential. Another target inscribed in this goal is the vision that by 2063, young African men and women will be the path breakers of the African knowledge and society whilst contributing significantly to innovation and entrepreneurship. In this light, it is envisioned that the creativity, energy and innovation of Africa's youth will be the driving force behind the continent's political, social, cultural and economic transformation. Reflecting on this goal and its targets, it becomes crystal clear that abandoning the practice of child marriage in Africa should become everyone's responsibility because if young women and girls remain trapped in this retrogressive practice, they will be inhibited of their potential for creativity, innovation and growth. Child marriage also barricades them from pursuing further education which will limit or deny them any prospects for gainful employment, and this will present a major barrier towards the possibility of becoming pacesetters.

Having articulated how the practice of child marriage is blurring the realization of Vision 2063, the next section of the chapter focuses on discussing the immense power of collaborative efforts in eradicating child marriages in Africa.

## **Collaborative Efforts in Eradicating Child Marriages in Africa**

As has been noted above, forcing young girls into early marriages has devastating consequences for their health, education and wellbeing. In an endeavour to eradicate the abhorrent practice of child marriage in Africa, numerous programs spearheaded by local, regional and international organizations are making some headway. These programmes and initiatives are targeting individuals, religious and community leaders to advocate for a paradigm shift regarding child marriage. For instance, educative programs on the harmful effects of child marriages are ongoing. The focus

on parents and communities is premised on the conviction that once these stakeholders understand the irreparable damage that the practice of child marriage can inflict on girls, this can persuade them to realize the need for abandoning such a practice. Some of the programs aimed towards ending child marriage are being spearheaded by international organizations such as Girls Not Brides, a global movement campaigning to end child marriage in all parts of the globe; Girl Child Network Worldwide, another global movement advocating for the rights of the girl child, Plan International, also a global movement defending children's rights and the Institute For Young Women Development (IYWD). All these noble initiatives are commendable; however, they need to be complemented by local and pragmatic programmes starting from the grassroots.

There is also an urgent need for transforming harmful social norms and perceptions that tolerate inequity in gender roles and responsibilities. This is crucial because gender disparities provide fertile ground for perpetuating child marriages, not only in Africa, but the world over. In view of the fact that some young girls opt for an early marriage as a pathway to escape from poverty and societal stereotypes, it is pertinent that intervention programs focus on proffering alternative girl empowerment strategies. This entails implementing livelihood strategies and income-generating initiatives which build up girls' assets. Such mitigation measures should focus on ensuring that girls can enjoy the childhood to which they are entitled, and have the space to grow, learn and be a girl. Just as important is instilling the notion that every person is endowed with inalienable human rights and should be treated with dignity and respect (UNFPA, 2012).

Cognizant of the harsh reality that 15 out of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage are in Africa, in May 2014, the African Union (AU) launched a first-ever campaign of its kind in Africa to end child marriage. The two-year campaign, organised in partnership with UNICEF and UNFPA focused on 10 African countries; Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia, Mauritania, Mozambique, Malawi, Niger, Sierra Leone and Zambia. The vantage point for selecting these ten as focus countries for the campaign was based on their high prevalence rate of child marriage. The main aim of the campaign was to accelerate the end of child marriage in Africa by enhancing continental awareness of the harmful impact of child marriage and by taking appropriate legal, social and economic measures (African Union, 2014). Marking the end of this two-year campaign, in November 2016, the first ever African Union (AU) Girls'

summit dubbed “Ending Child Marriage” was held in Lusaka, Zambia. The ground-breaking event managed to attract over 1000 delegates from across Africa. Among the delegates who attended were traditional leaders, Civil Society Organisations, government officials, activists, television personalities, religious leaders and some leaders from the AU. A number of issues were raised concerning drivers of child marriages and possible solutions. One of the key resolutions made at this summit was to challenge African countries to make a commitment not only to come up with policies and laws to safeguard the rights of the girl child, but to ensure that these policies and laws were adhered to. This was aimed at preparing the ground for shovelling the practice of child marriage into the annals of history (African Union, 2016).

Commenting on the causes, effects and progress made so far in addressing the pervasive practice of child marriage, Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda, a Zimbabwean human rights lawyer serving as the African Union Goodwill Ambassador for Ending Child Marriage at the time of writing aptly put it across as follows:

Across continents and in the regions of the developing world, child marriage occurs at high rates bringing the gravest consequences for the poorest, the least educated and those living in rural and isolated areas. There is evidence of some small shifts of prevalence in a handful of countries, in a few areas, and for some age groups, notably girls under 15. However, the pace and reach of change is neither fast nor far enough (Gumbonzvanda, 2014).

Whilst human rights activists and think tanks of the empowerment programs realize the importance of educating and empowering girls about the far-reaching repercussions of child marriages, they also acknowledge the fundamental need for including men and boys as an indispensable cog for moving the vehicle of change. Gumbonzvanda (2014) poignantly states this point in the following words:

I am looking for male responsibility and accountability and indeed a re-socialisation of boys. Each year, 15 million men are directly responsible for marrying girls under the legal age of marriage, committing crimes of sexual abuse, rape, abductions, and modern forms of slavery and even trafficking. In addition, this is aided and abetted by another circle of men who are either family members, (fathers, uncles, traditional or faith leaders) who give a blessing to such a marriage. I am asking for these men to be responsible adults, fathers and community members. My call goes beyond general involvement for gender equality, but practical action to stop violence against women and girls...We strive for human dignity and human

rights from the womb of patriarchy. Men and boys permeate all the spaces that control power, resources and voices. They make laws and policies, define norms, distribute economic wealth, control women's bodies and make wars. All human beings, all institutions, and all in their daily lives must respect each other; must strive to end discrimination against women and girls. Each and all must strive for gender equality, peace and development (Gumbonzvanda, 2014).

The foregoing citation has been quoted verbatim at length to illustrate the vital importance of male involvement in taking the practice of child marriage to a grinding halt. There is therefore need for concerted efforts in addressing the underlying causes of child marriage such as poverty, entrenched social norms and practices, gender inequality and a lack of protection for children's rights. Hence, families, communities, religious and political leaders, law enforcement agents, educators, essentially all global citizens have a role to play in stemming the tidal wave of child marriage which is threatening to continue wreaking havoc at our doorsteps. Each individual, institution and each sector has a crucial role to play in eradicating the cancerous parasite in our midst. On this note, below the chapter proceeds to present African women's prophetic voices as they denounce the practice of child marriages in Africa whilst proffering ways of transforming norms and values which inculcate life-giving traditions that will unshackle the African girl child from the chains of early marriage.

### **A Clarion Call against Child Marriage: African Women's Prophetic Voices**

As we honour Nyambura Njoroge in this volume, her prophetic voice against social injustices and untiring protests against human rights violations continue to inspire fellow African women in raising voices of lament against the detrimental effects of child marriage in Africa. Njoroge (2014) pinpoints skewed power structures as the furnace where the fire of gender-based violence is kept alive while rearing its ugly head which emits the venomous poison of sexual violence. Resultantly, the practice of child marriage in Africa is engulfed in these numerous violations, hence, she restates the issues in the following words:

Power inequality between women and men - as dictated by tradition, culture, religion, and economic status - gives rise to gendered violence, in-



cluding sexual violence. In some cultures, this includes female genital mutilation, early marriage, sexual trafficking, forced sterilisation, and abortions, and breast ironing (in Cameroon) ... Sexual violence is a crime. It is sinful, and injures the creation in God's image. It violates human dignity, and diminishes life. It should not be tolerated under any circumstance... The social organisation of the family unit is marked by the supremacy of the male, and the legal dependence of children and wives... In Christianity, this supremacy is emphasised through the headship of the husband in marriage, and, consequently, some Churches do not allow women in all ecclesiastical leadership positions (Njoroge, 2014).

As reiterated by Njoroge above, the exclusion of women from domestic, communal and ecclesiastical leadership positions puts them in a precarious position such that major decisions about their lives end up being made by other people, particularly their male counterparts. These power imbalances are a violation of not only humanity created in God's image but it extends to violating the rights of the girl child, putting her on the altar of sacrifice by being forced into child marriage. Affirming the same issues raised by Njoroge in the above citation, Gumbonzvanda, (2014) puts it across as follows:

It is time to end child marriage, simply for the sake of those who are subjected to it. Yet, the costs of inaction extend far beyond the price paid by girls themselves. The costs of inaction, in terms of rights unrealized, fore-shortened personal potential and lost development opportunities, far outweigh the costs of interventions. It is time to end child marriage, also for the sake of families, communities and countries...Such investments are a sure and certain means by which to turn the tides of gender inequality, illiteracy, adolescent pregnancies, and the associated rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. In today's demographic realities, reducing child marriage, delaying pregnancies and securing the rights of young women to education can also help offset population momentum (Gumbonzvanda, 2014).

The issues raised by Gumbonzvanda in the citation above challenge us as responsible citizens of the world whilst spurring us into action as sons and daughter of "Mother Africa" to work tirelessly towards ending the practice of child marriage for our own good and for posterity.

Although Njoroge penned the following words within the context of interrogating the HIV epidemic, they still speak pertinently to the challenge of child marriages in Africa.

Regrettably, a focus on empowering women and girls has been understood by some people to mean that gender discourse refers only to women's issues, rather than to human issues and to the underlying oppressive structures and systems that fuel power imbalances between women and men. Reductionist ways of understanding gender inequality demonstrate either naivety or a deep-seated ignorance of the oppressive and dehumanising nature of patriarchy and sexism in our families, societies and religious communities. It is of great importance that when we engage in gender discourse in theology, in the search for recognition, reconciliation, healing, justice and fullness of life, that we confront the fundamental problems of patriarchy and sexism... (Njoroge, 2009:3)

In the above citation, Njoroge is inviting us as men and women of faith in Africa to go back to the drawing board and rethink the way we have erroneously perpetuated gender-based oppressive norms and values which act as manure in the garden of manipulation and violation of the girl child's rights. Denying justice and fullness of life to the girl child in Africa has brought us to where we are now, the doldrums of child marriage and its attendant vices. Njoroge argues that placing the female folk on a lower pedestal whilst hiding behind the finger of religion and culture is unnecessarily tainting religion and culture as sources for female suffering. It is these myopic tendencies that have been used to rob women and girls their God-given right to make decisions over their lives particularly in matters relating to their sexual and reproductive health. By stripping them of decision-making powers over their lives, young and innocent girls continue being yoked to the heinous acts congruent to the practice of child marriage in Africa. Appealing to the biblical story of creation as a resource for rejecting female subordination and their exclusion from ecclesiastical leadership positions which pushes young girls into the dungeons of child marriage, Njoroge (2009:5) contends that:

From a Christian perspective many women do not accept that patriarchy and other dehumanizing structures render them powerless and less than equal as human beings. Men and women are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27).

Hence, Njoroge (2009:5) enjoins us to "provide effective and collaborative leadership that leads to changed lives and changed communities."

Concurring with Njoroge's assertions as discussed above, Gumbonzvanda, (2014) concludes that:

Bringing an end to child marriage, therefore, is a matter of national priorities and political will. It requires effective legal frameworks that protect

the rights of the children involved and it requires enforcement of those laws in compliance with human rights standards. It requires the engagement and support of families and communities who, when they do stand up for their daughters and granddaughters, will win change in otherwise longstanding but harmful social norms and traditions. Most of all, it requires the empowerment of girls themselves; empowerment so that girls are positioned to make decisions at the right time; empowered so that, exercising free and informed consent, girls can make the decisions that will safeguard their own futures, transform their own lives and enable them to live in the dignity to which they, as human beings, are entitled (Gumbonzvanda, 2014).

It is therefore apparent that abandoning the practice of child marriage in Africa will reap more rewards, hence the prophetic voices being echoed by African women as they appeal to all who have endearing ears to respond to their bidding. On this note, the chapter draws to the concluding section.

## Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was to honor Nyambura Njoroge by discussing one of the key themes that lies close to her heart, namely, children's rights. In order to achieve this goal, the chapter has interrogated the causes and effects of child marriage in Africa. The chapter has also iterated how child marriage in Africa presents a major impediment for realizing the aspirations/goals for Agenda 2063 as well as the SGDs. Elucidating how the girls involved in child marriages end up in violent marriages, experiencing birth complications, as well as becoming likely candidates for high maternal and child mortality rates, the chapter has raised a voice of lament and protest against the practice of child marriages in Africa. Echoing the voices of fellow African women of faith as we honor our sister Nyambura, this chapter has reiterated that Africa and the world at large is capable of implementing effective interventions and strategic policies to avert the human tragedy of child marriage and to put girls on another path instead, a path for prosperity, progress and peace. It has also been restated that when as Africans we make investments targeted towards supporting married girls as well as coming up with interventions to reduce vulnerability to early marriage for the poorest, least educated and rural or isolated girls, we will be depositing into the banks of social justice and human rights whilst producing benefits for the individual, their families and for

generations to come. As the chapter draws to a close, we listen to the following words of counsel from Njoroge (2006:11) who cautions that “in life especially within Africa, there are many challenges that produce enormous pain, suffering and indignity.” Clearly, being forced into an early marriage as a young and aspirant girl is one of such experiences. As such, she summons us to “provide a prophetic voice to resist and reject social and ecclesiastical injustices and to announce that neither” gender-based violence nor child marriage have the last word (Njoroge, 2009:7). In closing, Njoroge beckons us to:

Advocate for justice and empowerment of girls, with a clear mandate from Jesus, who called to life Jairus’ daughter and demanded that she have food to empower her to embrace the gift of life (Njoroge, 2009:7).

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