

**STATEMENT DELIVERED BY HON. NANA OYE LITHUR, MINISTER OF GENDER,
CHILDREN AND SOCIAL PROTECTION AT THE NATIONAL LAUNCH OF THE END
CHILD MARRIAGE PROJECT.**

MR. CHAIRMAN

H.E. JOHN DRAMANI MAHAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA

**H.E LORDINA MAHAMA, FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF GHANA AND
PRESIDENT OF OAFLA**

YOUR EXCELLENCIES, FIRST LADIES AND MEMBERS OF OAFLA

REPS FROM THE AFRICA UNION

OUR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS

THE MEDIA

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN

I welcome you all to this evening's event. This event is bringing to fruition, our collective zeal to bring a complete end to a practice that has brought despair to many young but hopeful girls. And I am elated at the personal commitment of H.E President John Dramani Mahama and the First Lady, H.E Lordina Mahama to the fight against child marriage in Ghana. I am also glad at the collective response to by your Excellences, members of OAFLA to end the phenomenon of child marriage in Africa. I thank you all for honouring our invitation to be here tonight.

We are gathered here tonight to launch the National Ending Child Marriage Campaign. We are doing this today because the consequences of child marriage are sometimes irreversible. Child marriage effectively ends a girl's childhood, curtails her education, minimizes her economic opportunities, increases her risk of domestic violence, and puts her at risk for early, frequent, and very high-risk pregnancies. Our gathering here today, together with the campaign that will follow this launch would effectively undo or prevent the life sentence to despair, abuse, impoverishment, disease, pain and shame that most victims of child marriage have had to endure.

The world as a whole has recognized the need to stamp out child marriage. What we are doing here tonight therefore is in sync with both international and national commitments that should contribute to ending child marriage. 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 and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (among other charters and conventions) all directly or indirectly forbid the degrading and mistreatment of girls inherent in child marriage.

Ghana has legislated to outlaw the marriage of persons under the age of 18 years. The Children's Act of 1998 (Act 560) was enacted for the protection of children throughout the country. Specifically, Section 14 states that "No person shall force a child "to be betrothed, be subject of a dowry transaction or to be married". Another key legal instrument in Ghana is The Criminal Code of 1960 (Act 29). In Section 109, the Code writes, "Whoever by duress causes a person to marry against his or her will shall be

guilty of a misdemeanour.” Furthermore, Article 28 of the Criminal Code states that, “No child shall be deprived by any other person of medical treatment, education or any other social or economic benefit by reason only of religious or other beliefs”. These key components of both international and national legal provisions work to protect girls and women from unwanted marriages. The Government of Ghana’s strict legal framework against the practice is thus obvious.

According to the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) Report of Ghana, on average, 1 out of 5 girls (21%) in Ghana are married before their 18th birthday. This equals to 256,780 girls. However, for girls living in the three Regions of Northern Ghana, this number increases to 1 out of 3 girls (34%). The national prevalence of child marriage in Ghana has not declined between 2011 and 2014, remaining stable at 21%. However, the regional trends show some difference, with a significant widening of the gap between the Northern and Central and Southern Sectors of the country.

Ladies and gentlemen, the causes of child marriage are not far-fetched. We know them, yet the solution to the problem seems a bit complex and elusive. The following quotation from a father of more than 50 years in the Upper East Region of Ghana sums up the root causes of the problem of child marriage.

“I gave my daughter into marriage at the age of 13 to prevent her from sleeping around with irresponsible men. It is also to get others (the future husband) to contribute in bringing up the child into a good woman. Some of the young girls don’t have interest in education, so in order to stop them from engaging in reckless lifestyles, it is better to marry them off to men and be assured that they are in safe hands.”

It is obvious then, that the fear of teenage pregnancy, fear of stigmatization by the society in case of pregnancy, protecting virginity and unwanted pregnancy and the urge to conform to tradition/religion, Poverty at the family and community level are some of the reasons why child marriage is still prevalent. These reasons are so deep rooted in our societies that only a collective response like what are seeing today is a sure way to combating the challenge. In many cases, parents assert that it is in their child’s best interest to marry at a young age, believing that this will protect them against physical or sexual assault. This belief is however misguided. On the contrary, child marriage puts victims in particular risk of sexual, physical and psychological violence throughout their lives. Child marriage is a serious human rights concern and constrains the social, educational, health, security and economic advantage of girls, women, their families and communities.

Your Excellences, the Government of Ghana has intensified efforts to eradicate child marriage in Ghana. This is being done through direct intervention programs developed by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection in collaboration with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), to coordinate national efforts to reduce the high rates of Child Marriage. Our efforts have yielded the following results.

We have 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 also established 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/ 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 are also using mass media communication through the production of documentaries and videos touching on various aspects of child marriage, including the victim's experience and messages from traditional and religious leaders. These documentaries and videos will be screened on radio and television networks across the country to galvanize support, and to stimulate a national dialogue on the subject.

We have used international day celebrations such as the Day of the African Child to campaign for an end to child marriage. We engage senior high school students in varied activities to solicit their ideas on best ways to end child marriage.

The Ministry supported the Moremi Initiative for Women's Leadership (Moremi Initiative) to host the maiden edition of the Africa Rising Gender Equality Series in Accra to engage and mobilize various actors in the fight against child-marriage on the continent.

We have organised a series of training and dialogue sessions for key media personnel across the country. The media have gotten on board the campaign with increased reportage and discussions on child marriage issues.

We are developing a national strategic framework with a Core Working Group of experts to support with the drafting process. This is being done in consultation key stakeholders across board: traditional and religious leaders, community members, the youth, and victims of child marriage, civil society organisations, state institutions, legislators and development partners.

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 and 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.

Distinguished invited guests, by this launch today, we are officially announcing to the world Ghana's commitment to end child marriage. The Government of Ghana under the able leadership of H.E John Dramani Mahama is committed to increasing support for the Ending Child Marriage campaign. Ghanaian girls and boys can rest assured that under this Government, their future will no longer be left to chance.

I thank you very much for your attention.