

TALKING POINTS

UNICEF Representative Rudolf Schwenk

Workrock: Faith and Positive Change for Children in Malawi

Monday, 11 November 2019

Linde Motel, Dowa

The Principle Secretary in the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare

Madam Erica Maganga

The Chairman for the Public Affairs Committee, Reverend Dr. Felix Chingota

Colleagues from UNICEF Malawi Country office as well as from the Regional Office

Colleagues from UN agencies

Religious bodies here present

Ladies and Gentlemen

All protocols observed

- Today's event is so timely as it is taking place just a week prior to the global event when the world will be celebrating 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In 30 years, much has changed, especially for children – and in another 30 years, things will continue to change in unforeseeable ways.
- Malawi is one of **the first countries out of six** in the region which is conducting the WorkRock with early adapters for positive change in close collaboration with National Social Mobilization Committee (NSMC).
- The initiative that has gathered us together embarked in 2018 on a global initiative on Faith and Positive Change for Children. The purpose of the initiative is to support systematic and large-scale engagement with faith-based communities to influence positive social and behaviour change towards improving the wellbeing of children, youth, women and families.
- Among the most powerful influencers of individual behaviours, social norms and collective action at community and societal level remains religion, and it can also be a

powerful catalyst for positive action to improve the lives of women and children, especially the most disadvantaged and vulnerable ones.

- There are great efforts already undertaken by the faith community to support children’s protection and wellbeing in Malawi. Some of which are the efforts of the faith community in education (which is key to delaying marriages), research, advocacy for legislative reform, and participation in the multi-sectoral response to violence against children.

- In 2015 and 2016, there was a commitment made by religious leaders on preventing violence against children through the signing of declarations, which have served as a basis for strengthening their work in enhancing a protective environment for children.

- UNICEF came up with some specific ‘calls to action’ for leaders and members of faith communities to end child marriage, given the power and authority faith leaders hold in conducting marriages, teaching virtues of marriage, counselling children and couples on what marriage entails and hosting marriage ceremonies. In previous engagements, during 2018’s **Day of Prayer and Action for Children**, we called for action to:
 - i. Deepen awareness and knowledge on child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence.
 - ii. Speak up against child marriages and mobilize moral authority on the issue to influence thinking, generate debate and setting standards for the community to follow.
 - iii. Create a safe and supportive environment within the churches, mosques and other faith settings for children and community members to report cases of child marriage and refer to secular authorities such as police and social welfare as necessary.
 - iv. Map and publicize services available to survivors of violence within faith community and in the wider community.
 - v. Give parents counselling and advice on parenting including on the importance of birth registration as a key strategy for better protecting children from child marriage and other forms of violence.
 - vi. Provide counselling for all who are affected and referrals to other services as required.

- No child – girl or boy should face a challenge of or bear a burden of heavy responsibility as early marriage. Before the age of 18, it is time for children to play, to learn to grow physically and emotionally – and to reach their full potential.
- When a girl delays marriage and finishes her education, everyone benefits – family, community, society, nation and government.
- The efforts of partnership to ending child marriage is already showing good progress in the Eastern and Southern Africa region, as we are witnessing some decreases in the rates of child marriages. While this is an encouraging development, the rate of progress has been slow or has even stagnated in some cases.
- The rates of child marriage for girls continue to remain unacceptably high in countries like Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda. The percentage of child marriages is very high in Southern Africa, including **Malawi (47 %)** and **Mozambique (48%)**.
- Girls who are married at a young age experience lifetime negative consequence, including negative educational outcomes, poor physical and mental health, poor nutrition of their children as well as poor economic prospects.
- Partnerships are fundamental to achieving ground-level results and meaningful changes are being made by global networks, non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, academia and the private sector.
- Conversely, faith-based leaders can be a source of detrimental influence which perpetuates harmful traditional practices, gender inequity and restricted access or resistance to life-saving and health-promoting behaviours, products and services.
- The social and political will to eliminate child marriage is stronger than ever. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a dedicated target to eliminating child, early and forced marriage and other harmful practices as a key component of advancing gender equality and the rights of women and girls.
- In 2019 and beyond, we must look ahead to the future of childhood and commit to fulfilling the rights of every child, now, and for generations to come.

Each of us can contribute to ending child marriages in capacities and roles we are holding.

Thank you very much - Zikomo!