



Spotlight Initiative
To eliminate violence against women and girls

Initiated by the European Union and the United Nations:



Press Release

Date: 19th October 2021

Venue: Addis Ababa- Ethiopia

Traditional, religious and civil society leaders of Africa vow to take bold action to end violence against women and girls in Africa

Traditional, religious and civil society leaders of Africa gathered in Addis Ababa on the 19th of October, to confirm their commitment to join hands with the African Union Commission, the United Nations and the Spotlight Initiative, and taking bold action to end child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and other harmful practices.

On behalf of the African Union Chairperson, Prudence Nonkululeko Ngwenya, Ag. Director, Women, Gender Youth Directorate in her opening remarks stressed that *“violence against women and girls remains as one of the critical impediments to the realization of their fundamental rights, including the rights to life, human dignity, peace, justice, and socio-economic and political development.”*

Thomas Huyghebaert, the Head of Policy Cooperation at the EU Delegation to the African Union observed that *“We can change legislation, or improve access to services, but to change mindsets and challenge stereotypes, we need to engage at the community level - engage men, boys, traditional and religious leaders at the grassroots level”.*

Across the continent of Africa, traditional leaders, including religious leaders, continue to play significant roles as influencers and custodians of cultural practices within communities. As attention grows to the slow progress on ending gender-based violence, including child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), traditional leaders have a critical role in shifting the deep-rooted cultural beliefs that justify the perpetuation of these harmful practices.

“Investing in preventing violence against women and girls is a critical investment for upholding the rights of women and girls and traditional leaders have the power to call out the patriarchy embedded in cultural practices and traditions. At UN Women, we know we cannot go far if we go alone in our efforts to end violence against women and girls. We are excited that we are now partnering with religious and traditional leaders and we need to hear your experiences and solutions to make the partnership a partnership for change”, said Letty Chiwara, UN Women Representative to Ethiopia, the African Union Commission and the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

Following a series of dialogue sessions facilitated by UN Women with over 300 traditional leaders from various countries across Sub-Saharan Africa, the Council of Traditional Leaders of Africa (COTLA) was established in February 2019. As a network of leaders, COTLA aims to drive the transformation and eradication of negative cultural practices, customs and traditions to end child marriage, FGM and other harmful practices.

King Adedapo Aderemi of Nigeria, Convenor General of COTLA, is one of the most powerful allies on this journey. *“When we cooperate, we operate. We need to plan and walk the plan to end harmful practices in Africa,”* he said.

The meeting provided a range of opportunities for traditional and religious leaders to exchange strategies they are using and discuss partnership opportunities with key stakeholders. The gathering also created space to celebrate achievements. Through partnerships such as the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative, traditional leaders are engaging with UN Women and other partners as agents of change. In Malawi, chiefs working with police, mother groups and child protection workers dissolved 1,893 child marriages. In Mozambique, traditional leaders agreed on an action plan at a national forum to address child marriage and gender-based violence in their communities. In Liberia, traditional chiefs in the 11 FGM practicing counties signed a Seven County Policy banning FGM.

The three-day meeting also provides a platform for traditional and religious leaders to voice their Generation Equality commitments.

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