

Ethiopia: A Focus on Child Marriage I

By Hajiya Bilkisu (mni)

The weather was cool and nice although it was wet and the cloud cover shielded the ray of sunshine that lighted the serene atmosphere. I arrived Addis at dusk and went straight to the informal dinner hosted by the Elders at the Jacaranda Restaurant. The Elders are a group of twelve globally recognised and trusted world leaders who have been and continue to be drivers of change. They were brought together by former President Nelson Mandela in 2007. They are men and women who no longer hold public office and are not bound by the interests of any nation. They are independent, can act boldly and can speak difficult truths. The Elders offer their collective experience to guide and inspire individual and international action on issues of rights and development of the people. Among them are, Kofi Anan, Jimmy Carter, Ela Bhatt, Martti Ahtisaari, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Lakhdar Brahimi. From June 7-9 2011 they hosted a meeting to discuss what they consider a very serious development issue that has not received the attention it requires-child marriage. The Elders were represented at the meeting by three members and their Chairman, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Dr. Gro Brundtland, Mrs. Graça Machel and Mrs. Mary Robinson. They invited 70 women and men from more than 55 grassroots and global organisations working to end child marriage around the world to a strategic planning. The event was held at the Hilton Hotel in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

The meeting was called to order by the Coordinator Mabel van Oranje. She gave a brief highlight of two day meeting and called on the Chairman of the Elders Archbishop Desmond Tutu who welcomed participants and noted their immense contributions to ending child marriage. He expressed hope that the meeting would come up with the way forward on building synergy to address the issue. The major agenda was to the formation of an ‘Alliance to end child marriage’. The aims of the meeting were to share information about effective approaches that address child marriage; explore how to work together to give child marriage more visibility on the global policy agenda; discuss the mission, objectives and practicalities of forming an alliance and how creating an alliance can support each others’ work and accelerate the pace of change on child marriage.

The right people did turn up at the historic women event. They included programme implementers, experts and advocates from 23 countries. They brought a wealth of expertise and experience on the issue of child marriage, a harmful traditional practice that affects millions of children, predominantly girls, in many countries and across religions. As participants came into the meeting hall, we engaged in interesting conversation about our work. I met two partners with whom some of my NGOs had implemented projects, Seri Wendoh of International Planned Parenthood Federation IPPF London which supported a reduction of maternal mortality project in Nigeria. The other was Naana Otoo-Oyortey of Forward Foundation UK which has supporting Forward Nigeria in the implementation of a Vesico Vaginal Fistulae VVF repair clinic and rehabilitation centre in Dambatta , Kano State. We had useful discussions.

When I received the invitation to the meeting, my mind went back to the controversy on the Child Rights Act, which pegged the age of marriage at 18 years and the opposition to the passage of the Bill in the House of Representatives. There were two Nigerians at the meeting. Professor Friday Okonofua, a gynecologist from the University of Benin. He represented the Ford Foundation, one of the donors working in Nigeria for the past fifty years, funding various development projects. He had served as former President Obasanjo's Adviser on Reproductive Health. I was invited to the meeting as a Chairperson, Project Committee of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria FOMWAN which is promoting girl child education through advocacy for the enrollment and retention of girls in schools. The federation has established 120 nursery, primary and secondary schools nationwide. It is also implementing a girls' scholarship project the Ambassador Girls Scholarship Programme AGSP with support from the US government in four states, FCT Abuja, Nassarawa, Niger and Ogun. Another initiative Girl Child Concerns GCC was established by Dr. Mairo Mandara, Dr. Hamid Bobboyi and my humble self. It awards scholarships to brilliant but indigent girl children in secondary schools who are also given life skills during the holidays.

As the participants introduced themselves and their areas of work, the Elders were impressed with the various approaches used in reaching the common goal which is to end marriage. Statistics collated by those working in the sector shows that child marriage which is a fundamental breach of human rights affects an estimated 10

million girls per year. It curtails their education, endangers their health and impedes efforts to fight poverty. It hinders the achievement of six of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Participants agree that delaying marriage, investing in girls' education and their development can bring significant benefits to girls, their families and their communities.

The strategic planning meeting began with a forthright discussion by the four Elders. Archbishop Tutu described the scale of the problem of child marriage as devastating and said he was "shattered" to meet Ethiopian women and girls who had married as young as 8 or 10. Archbishop Tutu spoke positively about his conversations with Orthodox Christian and Islamic representatives in Ethiopia who have spoken publicly against child marriage. Graça Machel, an international advocate for children's and women's rights, was passionate about the importance of giving a voice to the millions of girls who are "a silent part of our society". She addressed the issue of tradition, arguing that, as traditions are made by people, they can be changed. "We must be respectful," she said, "but we must also have the courage to say that change is necessary in relation to harmful traditional practices." Dr. Gro Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway and a doctor by profession, described child marriage as a hidden, yet central issue in reaching fundamental development objectives such as health and education. She said that it deserves far more attention than it currently receives. Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, highlighted the importance of empowering girls. She encouraged the Alliance to work towards ensuring that girls are not married before the age of 18, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The group brainstormed potential names for the Alliance, with a rich variety of ideas for further development. Participants stressed the importance of being able to communicate in multiple languages. At the end of the meeting, participants declared their support for the creation of an Alliance and willingness to work together to achieve it. They expressed their commitment to the establishment of an Alliance that embraces values of trust, transparency, collaboration and respect. Dr. Brundtland said: "The word I want to focus on at the end of this meeting is 'achievable'. We want to work for results. Now is the time to break the silence, break down the barriers to ensuring that women and girls

can be empowered and educated to make decisions about their own lives.” Next week the column will share with readers the presentations from participants.