

CONTRIBUTION ON THE MOTION ON CHILD MARRIAGES IN NAMIBIA AND THE ROLE POTENTIALLY HARMFUL CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL PRACTICES MIGHT BE PLAYING IN PROMOTING CHILD MARRIAGES

HON. ELMA DIENDA: 27 SEPTEMBER 2017

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members

The National Gender Policy (2010-2020) Of The Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare has highlighted several priority areas; this includes various critical *issues affecting the girl-child*.

I quote from page 10 of the Policy: “Although Namibia has made progress in terms of the enrollment of girls in primary school, they tend to gradually drop out in upper primary and high school as a result of pregnancy, poverty, HIV and AIDS, sexual harassment, early marriages and **other cultural practices**. **Early marriage** is yet another factor in female school drop-out rates. Although there are laws in place that set the minimum age for civil marriage at 18, girls as young as 13 are being married under customary law. In the age group 15-19 years, 1.7% of girls are married compared to 0.1% of boys” – end of quote.

It is our role as Parliamentarians to make sure that laws are implemented. We must use our oversight powers to monitor issues like these ones in our countries. We must hold government to account regularly on the implementation of our laws. It will not help us to come and mention all these beautiful laws that we have in place, yet we do not have monitoring and evaluation programmes in place, and we also don't report on these matters on a regular basis to the public.

For laws to be effective and to make an impact, they must be known and understood. Legislative reform must therefore be accompanied by campaigns to raise awareness and educate our women and girls about their rights. Boys and men should also be targeted. Laws must be easily accessible and translated into local languages, otherwise they just become thick documents which people might as well start using as scrap paper.

Not all children in Namibia are born with equal access to opportunities. There are those who are fortunate enough to come into the world with well-to-do and educated parents, who live in cities and in more prosperous regions, but for far too many children their hopes of breaking the cycle of abuse, poverty, disease and poor education are dashed by being forced into early marriage.

These are the children that require extra attention and cannot be forgotten. Children in Namibia have the right to grow up free from physical, emotional and psychological violence. This includes the right to be grow up free from the abuse that comes with harmful cultural practices.

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members

We must give up harmful cultural practices, not our culture. A culture that is static and does not evolve and adapt to a changing modern world will die out. The reason why more and more young people are not interested in certain cultural practices and traditional norms is because we have failed to evolve those cultural practices and norms. If we are honest with ourselves, what percentage of young people actively part-take in practices such as Olufuko and other initiation ceremonies? It is a very very low percentage. Why is it that many are not interested at all? The question we need to be asking is why when the vast majority of those to whom a cultural practice is aimed at have effectively rejected it – why do we insist on persisting with it? Especially when that practice has the potential to negatively affect the future prospects of girls who may fall victim to early marriage.

I believe in the proverb which says that: "Don't do unto others that which you don't want to be done unto you".

Many today will defend certain cultural practices, but I want to challenge any of you to follow through on your words and send your own children to participate in these traditional activities. If you have no objection to it, then you should also have no problem with your own children taking part.

Otherwise, it is unfair to defend practices which negatively affect the lives and livelihoods of other people's children when you are in the position to shield your own children from part-taking in these practices.

What can be done to change harmful practices?

1. **Efforts to change harmful traditions are most effective when they originate within the cultures that practices them:** a culture must develop and adapt organically. Those who practice the culture are the only ones who can change and adapt the culture so that you retain what is good about a specific cultural practice, but ensure that you also remove those elements which have negative human rights consequences.
2. **Educate and sensitize.** – Change starts at birth. From a very early age, children (girls and boys) should be educated about human rights and gender equality. Families should be encouraged to create their own awareness about women's rights and challenging social stereotypes. Parental education on women's right should also be developed.

Hon. Speaker, Hon Members; with these few remarks, I support the motion.

