

Psychosocial Support Forum for Children and Youth, *Breaking Barriers, Creating Connections*  
Windhoek, Namibia 24<sup>th</sup> - 26<sup>th</sup> August 2019

YOUTH ADVOCACY MESSAGES



*The First Lady of Namibia with Children and Young People at their Forum*

**What priority actions should government take to end child violations in Africa?**

All governments can do is figure out what they want to do from a policy and legislative framework perspective, with a focus on having them as helpful as possible in dealing with these issues. However, the best laws are irrelevant if they are not adequately enforced and practiced. Ensure there is enforcement at all levels – police, judiciary, prosecutors, law enforcement offices, which all have a certain value system about enforcement of laws that there is no room for subjectivity in the enforcement of laws. Unfortunately, the subjectivity is greatly influenced by social norms and values. A lot still needs to be done in changing our mindsets in terms of what we find acceptable as definitions of what is harmful for children. One of the biggest conflicts is we are very clear about what we will not accept publicly, for instance if someone were to publicly express the desire to molest their child we would be very reprehensive towards it, but if the same person has an incestuous relationship with their child it is normally the family that works very hard to protect the perpetrator and not the child, going as far as making sure it doesn't get to court. This is normally driven by the fact that the perpetrator is usually the breadwinner or a powerful individual within the family in terms of their work as they could be a police officer, a teacher, etc. we tolerate too much in what we term to be our private sphere such that we end up not addressing ourselves as people. Government cannot come into our private houses; they deal with the response side. Each and every one of us has the responsibility to improve the prevention side, which includes not accepting behaviour that facilitates harm to children, reporting incidents to authorities and once reported the authorities must do everything in their power to make sure the perpetrators are put to book.

### What possible actions do you think traditional and religious leaders should take to prevent child violations within the African context, seeing as they play such a pivotal role within communities?

To note is that even in Western countries where there are no traditional leaders, harm is being done to children. The social norms that bring harm to children are often linked to tradition but not necessarily the leaders themselves. Traditional, religious and community leaders need to ensure they make child violations unacceptable and we need to ensure these leaders are included in these conversations. A good example is the Namibia legislation which has an express provision within child care and protection which names traditional leaders and states that if a traditional leader presides over or come across an incident where a child is being harmed, have participated in it and not reported it then the leaders are guilty of complicity and are liable to either a fine or imprisonment. The law is therefore advising that traditional leaders beliefs and activities should be in line with the legal framework and if they are not then they will be prosecuted. Traditions are not static, they evolve with time and society has a big role to play within that revolution. For instance, some groups in Namibia were as recently as 50 years ago still killing girls who fell pregnant outside of marriage but this has since been stopped. Nothing in our traditions and society cannot evolve, particularly if it is harmful to children, women or anyone else. There is nothing generally wrong with religious and traditional beliefs, they are often very good practices, however should there be any practices that cause harm to anyone, such as traditional leaders who allow child marriage, then these are what would be considered wrong. An example outside of Africa which highlights harm to others is in the State of Alabama in the United of America which allows for child marriage as they allow for children to be married off as early as the age of 16 years, with a clause that they can be married off even younger with the consent of their parents. However, Namibia which is an African country with traditional leaders, only allows for marriage after the age of 21 years. We therefore need to also ask the American countries about child marriage in their country and why it is happening, not only to concentrate on countries with strong traditional values as they clearly do not conform to some of these harmful realities. This means we should not be accepting of any harmful practices in any form, no matter where they happen or the jurisdiction. If it is due to religion we need to change the religion, if due to culture we should change the culture and if due to the law then we should change the law. There is no justification for any harm to a child.

### How can we as children take part in changing the environment and accepting the violation of our own rights?

Looking at my own children who have been raised in a multi-cultural, multi-racial society tend to push back any value beliefs and values that are incongruent to the way they have been brought up. For instance, should I say something that is not correct according to their current system, my children will tell me that I am wrong and in a way force my values to change. No child is born

homophobic, racist, tribalist or discriminating against handicapped people – a child is taught and whatever is taught can be untaught. The role of the younger generation would then be to unteach the older generation what was acceptable in the older days but is no longer acceptable now. The young generation therefore have a huge role to play. Looking at a headman, you notice that he leads his cattle from behind, which means it is possible to lead from behind. Therefore, a young person can exert leadership upon the older generation by being clear about what is wrong or right and by not allowing anyone to violate what they believe to be right or wrong.

### Message to the children of Africa

You must be proud of your Africanness. The problem is every time we hear about Africa, it is on a negative term and there is no way that does not affect young people's self-belief of who they are. Who they are is associated with their nativity. There is so much pride that comes with being an African, there is so much history and culture that children and young people need to know and be proud of.