High-Level Continental Dialogue on The State of World Population (SWOP) Report 2020 and Launch

Against my will: Defying the practices that harm women and girls and undermine equality

REPORT

STATE OF WORLD POPULATION 2020
UNFPA would like to express its deepest appreciation to all those who participated and shared their insights and perspectives during the High-level Continental Dialogue on the State of World Population Report (SWOP) 2020. Deep gratitude is extended to UNFPA’s Deputy Executive Director of Programmes, Dr. Diene Keita, for her support and technical guidance before and during the dialogue; to H.E. Mrs. Amira El Fadil for her engagement, participation and officially launching the 2020 State of World Population (SWOP) Report titled, Against my will: Defying the practices that harm women and girls and undermine equality; and to Dr. Monsamanda Koyoute, 2020 United Nations Nelson Mandela Prize Laureate and Executive Director of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC), for his special address during the virtual high-level continental dialogue.

Special appreciation is extended to the panel moderators – Mr. Mabingue Ngom, Regional Director, UNFPA West and Central Africa Regional Office; and Dr. Julieta Chabanje, Regional Director, UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office. Immense gratitude is extended to all our speakers, collaborators and development partners who closely worked with us to make this significant virtual dialogue a reality. They include: Madame Madeline Ouedraogo, Director for Gender Promotion, Ministry for Women, National Solidarity, Family and Humanitarian Action, Burkina Faso; Ms. Faith Kasiva, Secretary Gender, Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs, Kenya; Dr. Wilberforce Oti, Religious leader and Influencer, Nigeria; Ms. Flavia Mwangovya, Global Lead – End Harmful Practices, Equality Now, Kenya; Rev. Bafana Khumalo, Co-Executive Director, Sonke Gender Justice, Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality, South Africa; Ms. Nankali Maksud, Senior Child Protection Advisor responsible for Harmful Practices at UNICEF, New York, USA, and Dr. Mariam Dahir, Chairperson, Youth Anti-FGM, Hargeisa, Somaliland.

UNFPA would like to also extend its gratitude to the vibrant young people in the creative arts who performed in a musical interlude that gave the event an exciting atmosphere and were also active participants in this dialogue -Ms. Erica Tandoh (DJ Switch) from Ghana and DJ Kaliwa from Zambia.
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• Based on the work and experiences of Equality Now, what will you say are three imperatives for eliminating harmful practices in Africa?
• How is Burkina Faso working to end harmful practices against women and girls? Are there any lessons that other countries can learn from you?
• Often, some people use religion as justification to carry out various practices that harm women and girls and infringe upon their human rights and development. How are you working to address this? In particular, how do you convince other religious leaders to abandon such practices?

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Discussion Points

• Men and boys have an important role to play in ending harmful practices against women and girls. What are some of the key actions men and boys can take to be allies in the fight to end these practices?
• UNICEF is working closely with UNFPA and AUC on two joint programmes to end child marriage and female genital mutilation. Why is it so important to eliminate these practices if many societies feel they are important parts of tradition and culture of some communities?
• What role can young people play in ending FGM in their communities? If you have 3 main things to share with governments on how to end FGM, what will they be?

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Background and Introduction

In October 2018, the first continental launch of UNFPA’s flagship report, the State of World Population (SWOP) was held in Addis Ababa led by the UNFPA’s Deputy Executive Director – Programme and African Union Commission’s Deputy Chairperson in the presence of the diplomatic community in Addis Ababa, international development partners, civil society representatives, among others. In 2019, a continental commemoration around the 25th anniversary focused on the 2019 theme of the State of the World’s Population Report and was led by the Executive Director of UNFPA and the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. These continental events have provided an important platform to disseminate the report and show at a very high level, the leadership and political pull of UNFPA on issues of population and development in Africa.

It is against this background that the UNFPA Liaison Office to the African Union and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNFPAELO) convened a High-Level Continental Dialogue for the launch of the State of World Population Report (SWOP) 2020 in Africa. The virtual meeting was held on the 28th of August 2020 and gathered over 120 participants from different backgrounds. The dialogue was significant in providing a platform for partners and stakeholders to assess the findings of the SWOP 2020 report in relation to the trends on harmful practices, which revealed that child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and son preference were regrettably still prevalent and commonly practiced in most societies including in the African continent. The meeting also sought to investigate the remaining gaps in addressing harmful practices and possible solutions to these challenges even in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The dialogue proposed a list of concrete actions and recommendations to be taken which included: strengthening inclusion and engagement of men and boys in addressing harmful practices, increasing advocacy efforts aimed at yielding strong political commitment, enforcement and formulation of laws that address harmful practices and the reinforcement of the implementation of a strong and robust multi-sectoral response to harmful practices from grassroots level to the continental level.

This report provides a summary of the presentations submitted during the webinar and evaluates discussions and key recommendations that were proposed during the panel discussions and in the chat boxes dedicated to specific questions around the topic from participants in attendance. The appendix will provide an overview of the social media platforms outreach during the event.
Opening Session:

Ms. Ngolze, (UNFPA Resident Representative to the African Union and United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Chief). The opening segment of the dialogue included insights from Dr. Diene Keita, (United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UNFPA), H.E. Mrs. Amira El Fadil, (Commissioner for Social Affairs of the African Union Commission), and Dr. Morissanda Kouyate, 2020 United Nations Mandela Prize Laureate and Executive Director of the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (AC).

Introductory Remarks

In her opening remarks, Dr. Diene Keita (United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director of UNFPA), began by highlighting findings of the State of World Population (SWOP) Report 2020 and revealed that despite the report noting 19 harmful practices against women and girls, three practices persisted namely: child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM) and son preference in gender inequality and advancement in health, wellbeing and empowerment of women and girls. Her Excellency recalled the 2018 SWOP report which ran under the theme “My Choice” and connected how this year’s report “Against my will” resonated with and reflected lifelong equality, advancement of health, wellbeing and empowerment of women and girls. Her Excellency reiterated the strong commitment from UNFPA to continue assisting the African Union in realizing all 7 aspirations of Agenda 2063 for a prosperous Africa which relies on the potential of Women and Youth and added that eliminating harmful practices was at the heart of the quest in regard to cultural attitudes and practices that dehumanize and commoditize all women and girls. She encouraged all stakeholders including African Heads of State and Government to enact and enforce laws against harmful practices including female genital mutilation and child marriage.

Dr. Keita underscored the importance of inclusion and engagement of men and boys in advocacy efforts for equal rights and treatment of women. She called on everyone to step up investments to “Respect, Protect and Fulfill” rights of all women and girls in order to bring real change and real results in regard to cultural attitudes and practices that dehumanize and commoditize all women and girls. She emphasized that child marriage was another prevalent harmful practice in the African continent and that almost 60% of these women and girls were all living in the Africa. She also emphasized that child marriage was another prevalent harmful practice in the African continent and as evidenced by the report which also revealed that Sub-Saharan Africa had the second largest number of child brides with 115 million women and girls who were married as children. Dr. Keita underscored the importance of inclusion and engagement of men and boys in advocacy efforts for equal rights and treatment of women.

In order for the world and the African continent to end harmful practices, he recommended the implementation of a strong multi-sectoral response and coordinated, effective implementation of existing policies and programs. He concluded by reiterating the need for a strong commitment to the achievement of gender equality and empowerment for women and girls in Africa and the world.

H.E. Commissioner Amira El Fadil (African Union Commission, Department of Social Affairs) commended UNFPA for its critical role in convening multiple stakeholders at all levels – globally, regionally and locally - and facilitating consensus to solve common challenges by some countries and regions. She further highlighted the long-standing partnership between the African Union Commission and UNFPA, which is a collaboration of shared commitment to equality, advancement of health, wellbeing and empowerment of women and girls. Her Excellency recalled the 2016 SWOP report which ran under the theme “My Choice” and connected how this year’s report “Against my will” resonated with and reflected lifelong wellbeing and empowerment of women and girls. She further noted that ending harmful practices to secure good health and wellbeing of women and girls which is also a significant lever for societal development.

The Commissioner concluded by commending UNFPA and the various divisions within the Department of Social Affairs for their ongoing collaborative work being carried out through the four flagship projects that UNFPA and the African Union Commission are currently implementing, namely the Campaign to accelerate reduction of maternal mortality in Africa (CARMMA), the AU-UNFPA Campaign to End Child Marriage, the UNFPA-UNICEF Joint Programme on FGM, and the African Union’s Saleema Initiative to eliminate female genital mutilation (FGM). H.E. Amira El Fadil called on stakeholders to accelerate efforts in addressing harmful practices against women and girls despite the Covid-19 pandemic whose impact would reverse the progress made in past decades.

Interactive panel discussion – 1: Moderated by Mr. Mabingue Ngom, Regional Director, UNFPA West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO)

Ending harmful practices in Africa will need the concerted efforts of a wide-range of stakeholders. What key steps has the Government of Kenya taken to mobilize the different actors needed to bring about an end to harmful practices such as female genital mutilation?

Ms. Faith Kasiva, Secretary for Gender in the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs of the Republic of Kenya, shared the experiences and challenges encountered by Kenya in addressing harmful practices in particular female genital mutilation (FGM). At the end of her presentation, she stated that female genital mutilation was a gross violation of human rights which no woman or girl should ever be subjected to. She went on to state that in recognition of these human rights violations multiple stakeholders in Kenya embarked on a journey to address and end these harmful practices and norms that undermine women and girls rights to equality. This included the government of the Republic of Kenya which showed its commitment by prohibiting FGM nationally in 2011 through the enactment of a comprehensive legal and policy framework, as well as a Presidential commitment by Mr. Uhuru Kenyatta to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of girls and women. The government of the Republic of Kenya has embarked on a journey to address and end these harmful practices and norms that undermine women and girls rights to equality. This included the government of the Republic of Kenya which showed its commitment by prohibiting FGM nationally in 2011 through the enactment of a comprehensive legal and policy framework, as well as a Presidential commitment by Mr. Uhuru Kenyatta to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of girls and women.
had witnessed an unusual spike in cases of female genital mutilation over a 4-month period of lockdown and movement restrictions. She went on to state that Kenya’s Covid-19 pandemic had created an enabling environment for an increase of harmful practices, especially FGM, due to various aspects of lockdowns and a reduction and, in some cases, stopped government-initiated programs aimed at addressing female genital mutilation. She further revealed that the police and other stakeholders had observed a gradual decline in FGM cases. She also urged other stakeholders and partners to adopt this model in their efforts against harmful practices such as FGM. She further revealed that the government of Kenya had also embarked on a massive behavior change program meant to alter negative gender norms about women and girls in 22 counties, through massive deployment of “Change Agents” at community level who would raise awareness about the negative effects of FGM to the general public. She added that these programs were implemented with the assistance and inclusion of young people, civil society, and community gate keepers including religious and traditional leaders, which made the programs a success. She also highlighted that in 2019, Gambia, Senegal and Jordan had been removed from the list of harmful practices, whereas Nigeria, in 2019, had been marked as “under investigation” in their aggressive efforts to end FGM, with Nigeria having previously been classified as “endangered.”

Ms. Mwangovya, Equality Now Organization, began by reiterating the importance of political will as a yardstick in ending harmful practices in Africa. She concluded by saying that the law is only the first step in creating an enabling environment that would guarantee much needed resourcing for all actions and programmes to finally succeed in criminalizing harmful practices such as FGM and Child Marriage. She recalled the well-coordinated response of Republic of Kenya that had been presented beforehand by Ms. Msia and backed the idea of a multi-sectoral approach in the formulation and implementation of policies and laws to address harmful practices. She further said that this model of a multi-sectoral response would result in drastic reduction of cases of harmful practices. In her suggestion, Ms. Mwangovya proposed adoption of gender transformative approaches that seek to ensure structural gender equality. She added that harmful practices were caused by an ideology of patriarchy and therefore needed to be addressed through dealing with the root causes of inequality by reshaping unequal power relations and also increasing awareness to all people. Ms. Mwangovya commended the different continental frameworks and policies that were put in place by governments and development partners with the aim of addressing harmful practices which include: Maputo Protocol and African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa and other relevant frameworks. She, however, added that there was a need to contextualize other global instruments against harmful practices to apply to the living realities of heterogeneous African countries.

Lastly, she recommended all stakeholders pull together sufficient resources to sensitize communities on harmful practices and formulate messages that resonate with the different communities during the advocacy campaigns. By doing so, she added that the government would be able to discern the effectiveness of the strategies employed by the different countries. She also urged other stakeholders and partners to adopt this model in their efforts against harmful practices such as FGM.

Based on the work and experiences of Equality Now, what will you say are three imperatives for eliminating harmful practices in Africa?

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Dr. Oli, Senior Pastor of House of Kings and Priests as well as State Chairman of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), began by reiterating his commitment in addressing harmful practices. He further went on to highlight a list of activities that he and other religious leaders have engaged in to combat this crisis, including a series of religious discussions and seminars. Dr. Oli emphasized the importance of addressing the root causes of harmful practices, which often stem from a lack of understanding and education. He highlighted the need for the church to collaborate with other sectors, such as government and international organizations, to develop comprehensive strategies for change.

He added that religious leaders play a crucial role in shaping society, and it would be a mistake to leave them out of the conversation on harmful practices. He argued that a truly transformative change requires a collective effort from all stakeholders, including religious leaders, who can use their influence to promote awareness and advocate for change.

Rev. Bafana Bafana Khumalo, Sonke Gender Justice, also backed the recommendation made by Dr. Diene on inclusion and engagement. He mentioned that, despite their efforts, some religious leaders still believe in harmful practices. He emphasized the importance of training religious leaders to understand the negative impacts of these practices and how to counteract them. He also highlighted the role of community engagement and the need to involve men and boys in these efforts.

Dr. Julitta Onabanjo, UNFPA Regional Director, UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)

Dr. Julitta Onabanjo, in her remarks, stated that there was no justification at all in either religion or culture for performing harmful practices that curtail the rights of women and girls in public and private spheres. She commended the panel discussants for their efforts and in addressing harmful practices in Africa and proceeded to open the interactive session with a presentation from Rev. Bafana Khumalo.

In his intervention, Rev. Bafana Khumalo, Sonke Gender Justice, also backed the recommendation made by Dr. Diene on inclusion and engagement. He mentioned that, despite their efforts, some religious leaders still believe in harmful practices. He emphasized the importance of training religious leaders to understand the negative impacts of these practices and how to counteract them. He also highlighted the role of community engagement and the need to involve men and boys in these efforts.

Interactive Panel discussion – 2: Moderated by Dr. Julitta Onabanjo, UNFPA Regional Director, UNFPA East and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO)

UNICEF is working closely with UNFPA and AUC on two joint programmes to end child marriage and female genital mutilation. Why is it so important to eliminate these practices if many societies feel they are important parts of tradition and culture of some communities?

Ms. Nankali Maksud, UNICEF Senior Global Advisor, expressed her gratitude for the long and fruitful partnership that has existed between UNICEF and UNFPA especially in regard to the Joint Programmes on Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage that have been running for almost 10 years now. She emphasized that cultural rights were human rights but were not unlimited. She went on to provide examples of multiple cases in Kenya where certain individuals have taken the government to court stating that abolishing female genital mutilation went against their rights to practice their cultures. She however highlighted that according to international statutory instruments these cultural rights were not unlimited as they limited and infringed on other human rights of women and girls. In her intervention she quoted one of the renowned Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi, who asserted that, “culture does not make people, but people make culture”. Based on this assertion, Ms. Maksud underscored the importance of working with communities to challenge harmful social and gender norms that sustain harmful practices using various advocacy methods that are dynamic and contextualized to the needs of the specific community. She concluded with a call to keep all girls in schools as these institutions provided a safe space for these young people, minimizing the risk of FGM and Child Marriage.

What role can young people play in ending FGM in their communities? If you have 3 main things to share with governments on how to end FGM, what will they be?

Dr. Mariam Dahir, Child Champion, UNICEF, from Hargeisa Somalia, began by providing a brief background of how difficult it was back in 2012 for women in Somaliland to be vocal in society about any issue, especially speaking out against female genital mutilation, which was considered a taboo. She further added that since then women have been able to speak up, despite all the challenging circumstances, but because of the lack of access to information for all women and girls. She went on to encourage other young people to always speak up and speak out against inequalities in their respective societies.
proposed solutions to ending harmful practices that she recommended included young people playing an active role in sensitizing their communities about harmful practices such as FGM and Child Marriage. Secondly, she also emphasized the importance of inclusion and participation of women in decision making processes from a national level down to grassroots level. She encouraged women to get into parliament and also seek the highest office of presidency in their countries. She highlighted that participation in these platforms would assist in formulation of policies and laws that were in line with the practical needs and strategic interests of women and girls. She ended her presentation by underscoring the importance of using mass media during the Covid-19 pandemic to reach people with messages that assist in addressing harmful practices. She recommended the use of television, social media and radio platforms to reach a wider audience in countries.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

• Strengthen inclusion and engagement of men and boys in addressing harmful practices which include female genital mutilation (FGM), Child Marriage and Son Preference.
• Increase advocacy efforts aimed at achieving a strong recommitment and political will to end harmful practices by African Leaders.
• Strengthen implementation of laws and policies against harmful practices at member state level.
• Reinforce implementation of a strong and robust multi-sectoral response to harmful practices from grassroots level to the continental level.

Closing Session

H.E Commissioner Amira El Fadil presided over the official launch of State of World Population (SWOP) Report 2020 in Africa. She encouraged all stakeholders to ensure that they use the findings of the report to guide their work in the fight against harmful practices in Africa. Dr. Julitta Onabanjo then gave the closing remarks. She thanked everyone on behalf of UNFPA for their commitment to end harmful practices in Africa and concluded by stating that the key take-away from the dialogue against harmful practices was the need to “Respect, Protect and Fulfill” the rights of women and girls. She finally called on all stakeholders to join hands in the fight for a better Africa.

Appendix 1

Social Media Outreach Background

UNFPA Liaison Office to the AU and ECA, in its bid to increase visibility around the launch of the 2020 State of World Population (SWOP) Report in Africa, conducted a social media outreach campaign using mainly the twitter platform to engage all stakeholders including other UN agencies, civil society, young people, women and girls in Africa. The campaign began on the 24th of August and ended on the 27th of August 2020. At the onset of the campaign, the messages that were posted on the timeline mainly consisted of information related to the event such as zoom registration links, Save the Date digital poster and infographics related to the event. On the 28th of August 2020 during the event, the office made outreach to a wider audience through posting live tweets of the event proceedings as they happened, including of the various opening sessions, interactive panel discussions and the closing segment. This move assisted in generating increased traffic to the UNFPA-LO timeline. After the event the Office also decided to run a post webinar outreach on the 29th of August 2020 highlighting the discussions and key outcomes of the dialogue.

Twitter overview

A snapshot survey by Google analytics revealed that the UNFPA Liaison Office twitter account generated a total of 379.1K impressions which increased the number of impressions from previous engagements by over one thousand five hundred and seventy three percent. In the same period the account had a total of 101 visitors, this also reflected an increase of over four hundred and ninety four percent and lastly the account due to these engagements gained an additional 14 followers. The table below shows a summary of the account’s major Tweet impressions.

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@Nigina_Muntean posted a promotional video of DJ Switch advocating for an end to all forms of harmful practices. 276 views
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