As “The Hands off our Girls” campaign get intensifies, NMDHR suggests a robust war on ‘early/child marriage’ as one of the ways of actualizing the government’s initiatives.

Three Intern students at Network Movement for Democracy and Human Right (NMDHR) in Sierra Leone share their views on the effects of child marriage and proffers solutions to ending it in Sierra Leone and around the world.

Social Work, Final year General Students, FBC, University of Sierra Leone

Ezekiel Tamba Boima; Social Work Final Student, opened:

“The hands off our girls campaign is a very good initiative launched by the first lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Madam Fatima Bio at a time when the cases of sexual based violence across the country keep getting alarming on a daily basis. It becomes even more frustrating after the launched of the “hands off our girls campaign”, when there wasn’t a day without having a reported case/cases of ‘rape and early marriage’ on our local media houses. It is now obvious that this good initiative launched by the government will not achieve its goals if certain key elements containing “the hands off our girls” document are not specifically figured out.”

One of such elements in the “hands of our girls” campaign document that needs to be treated with utmost interest is “early/child marriage”. This particular aspect of child right violation needs special audience by all actors simply because many violators of this child right in our society do not even consider it as any big deal. As a matter of fact, some set of people in our society takes honors by marrying underage girls. And as a result of that, the future of many girls in our society today has been doomed which in turn poses economic and security threats to our society.
Sylvian P.P. Sheriff; Social Work Final Year Student writes “It is very disheartening to know from UNICEF sources that Sierra Leone as of 2017 has the 19th highest child marriage rate in the world, with 13% of girls married before age 15, and 39% before age 18. These statistics only provide a partial picture of the extent of the problem, as many young people enter unions that are not registered as formal marriages.

Being that Sierra Leone is one of the 12 countries selected to be part of the UNFPA and UNICEF’s global programs to accelerate actions to end child marriage in the world, the government of Sierra Leone should immediately review the 2007 customary marriage act which allows parents and local government officials to consent to a child’s marriage which contravene with the child’s right act 2007, which states that; “all marriages below the age of 18years should be prohibited in the country”. From findings, it is believed that many perpetrators of child marriage in Sierra Leone build their case on the 2007 customary marriage act which gives parents and local authorities the right to consent to a child’s marriage. Therefore, if the government must succeed with “the hands off our girl's campaign” this act must be reviewed immediately.

Abibatu Koroma; Social Work Final Year Student shares:

“Talking about child marriage, one will be keen to know the prevalence causes of child marriage in our society. According to UNFPA and UNICEF reports, child marriage is influence by the following:

1. Poverty and economic survival strategies;
2. Gender inequality;
3. Sealing land or property deals or settling disputes;
4. Control over sexuality and protecting family honor;
5. Tradition and culture;
6. Insecurity; particularly during war,
7. Ignorance/lack of education
8. Loss of parents
9. Famine or epidemics.
10. Other factors include family ties in which marriage is a means of consolidating powerful relations between families

**Solutions to End Child Marriage**

- In recent years child marriage has gained increasing prominence on international and national development agendas. Today, we have a unique opportunity to act on this momentum and accelerate our efforts to help change the lives of girls and young women all over the world.
- Ending child marriage requires work across all sectors and at all levels. It requires us to understand the complex drivers behind the practice in different contexts and adapt our interventions accordingly.
- Ending child marriage also requires increased, targeted investments from both international donors and governments in high prevalence countries
- Even though the rate of child marriage in Sierra Leone has reduced considerably from 56% in 2006 to 46% in 2008 and currently to 39%, it remains still alarming to have such percentage of child marriage cases in our country in the 21st century.
Therefore, the following steps were suggested by the “Girls Not Brides” to be instituted in order to end child marriage in our society:

Ezekiel Tamba Boima; I think “ending child marriage and supporting married girls require work across four areas:

1. Empower girls
2. Mobilize families and communities
3. Provide services
4. Establish and implement laws and policies

And the impact will go down to achieve the following

- Will help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.
- Ending child marriage is not only the right thing to do, but is also an economically practical decision.
- Child brides are less likely to participate in the workforce once they become adults. When they do, it’s usually in lowered skilled and lower paid jobs.
- When girls have the skills and opportunities to secure a job, they can support themselves and their families and break the cycle of poverty.
- Child marriage is costing countries trillions of dollars through its impact on fertility, population growth, earnings and child health, according to the World Bank and ICRW

Recommendations

Therefore, if the government, civil societies NGOs and all other partners involved are to succeed in “the hands off our girls campaign” and other related child rights violation in the country, more premium should be given to child marriage.

- "At the national level, we need new policies and legislation protecting the rights of girls and women to live free from violence and discrimination. To be effective, their plans must include budget lines dedicated to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health, education, social welfare and legal services.

- "Locally, we need religious leaders to strike down myths that early marriage has a basis in religion. Because societal pressures often drive the practice, individuals and families need more information about the benefits of abandoning it.

- "Parents' pledges to abandon early marriage – particularly pledges by entire communities – are an effective model of collective commitment. But public pledges must be paired with comprehensive strategies for challenging the social norms, practices and behaviors that condone female genital mutilation.

To learn more about our work visit us at www.nmdhr.org
Facebook: Network Movement for Democracy and Human Rights