

West African girls' Manifesto on ending harmful traditional practices

Calling on Leaders **ACT NOW** during the African Girls' Summit – Niamey 16-18th Nov. 2021

As the 3rd African Girl Summit focusing on **“Culture, Human Rights and Accountability; Accelerating End to Harmful Practices”** starts in Niamey, we, African Girls from Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Chad and Liberia met together on November 12, 2021 to ensure our voices and our solutions are heard by African leaders during the summit. This Manifesto is our collective call to action.

Leaders, ACT NOW, our lives are at risk !

The role of education:

“Education can be a weapon to drive away poverty. If communities are educated, that can help chase away child marriage. Education is the only weapon to escape poverty.” Kadiatu (Sierra Leone).

“Educate all African girls to offer them a future as leaders and integrate the consequences of harmful practices in our curricula at school”

“It's not about going to school; it's about staying in school, the longer girls stay in school, the less likely they would be engaged in child marriage - Kadiatu, 22 (Sierra Leone).

“Access to free Education is critical to reduce violence against Girls. The more girls are educated, the more protected they will be”

“Education can eradicate forced marriages because a girl who has been educated knows what is good for her and also knows where and how to get assistance when at risk”

“If there are girls who are not in school, they must be enrolled in training centres so that they are self-sufficient and this can reduce marriages, pregnancies and so much other violence. There is a need to further raise awareness of the harmful consequences of female circumcision.”

Accountability:

“If the laws were applied, the rights of children would be respected.” - Fatou, 23 (Senegal).

“Children are better able to advocate for their own rights, to lead the fight against violence against them. Children must be the drivers of their future, the actors of their own development. To achieve these objectives, they must be involved in all programs, activities and decision-making, especially those concerning them. The oppressor never fights against oppression. If it is adults who rape children, we cannot count on them to eradicate violence. It is then necessary to empower children, to empower them to defend their own rights.” – Babacar.

“The laws in our countries are not strong to protect girls since the laws themselves are unequal. In some countries like Niger and Mali, the law does not give equity between the ages of girls and boys to marry or to be considered mature.”- Mariamar (Benin)



To ensure social accountability, our leaders need to

- Harmonise the laws across Africa, in alignment with Convention on the Rights of the Child and setting the minimum legal age of marriage 18 years
- Ensure the laws are socialized, translated into local languages and respected and parents educated on these laws
- Government needs to address the root causes of poverty which push parents into giving their girls out in marriage
- Implement existing laws and ensure defaulters are systematically sanctioned
- We need to translate the laws into our local languages for the benefit of the indigenous people. It is also important to set up district child protection committees who will be the focal points in our various districts

Addressing culture

- We need to scale up proven approaches and good practices against Child Early and Forced union/Marriages and Female Genital Mutilation
- It is important to increase access to hotlines for reporting all forms of violence
- We need to run campaigns to end violence against children and apply sanctions against FGM
- Children and youth participation in the decision-making process should be prioritized including involving them in the communities' protection mechanism
- The production of birth certificates should be compulsory for any marriage to be officiated and marriages should be contracted in the magistrates where legal documents can be verified
- Social Workers should visit homes regularly to identify girls at risk of child marriage/ FGM and take action to prevent them
- Women constitute more than 51% of the population, therefore, their role is central in building the society as a whole. We should resist and counter all types of exploitation and violence against girls.

West African Girls Manifesto Recommendations

1. Harmonize all laws so that child marriage is set at 18 years in all countries in Africa
2. Include Child marriage and FGM in school curricular – There is the need for children to be trained on the impact of child marriages and for parents through Parent Teacher Association (PTA) to also learn about the negative effects of these practices
3. Governments should build more schools in rural areas so girls can remain in school
4. NGOs need to protect homeless girls as they could face a lot of dangers
5. Government should employ more social workers so they can be deployed to the local communities in order for girls in non-urban areas to be equally protected
6. Duty bearers should establish a mechanism to raise awareness of the harms of these practices and penalize perpetrators
7. Duty bearers to increase funding towards community sensitization on issues affecting children's wellbeing, especially the most vulnerable
8. Promote the creation of counselling and reporting centers
9. Governments need to create awareness about the reporting and referral mechanisms available to girls to denounce the practices they are subjected to

