

The Royal Commonwealth Society
High Commissioners' roundtable discussion

**Ending Child, Early and Forced Marriage
in the Commonwealth**

Briefing note

Wednesday, 10 February 2016



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

About this report

Over the last five years global efforts to combat child marriage have increased steadily. It has appeared in the last three Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meeting (CHOGM) communiqués; as an African Union (AU) campaign to end child marriage; the Kigali Declaration of Commonwealth human rights machineries; an inaugural Girl Summit in London; and the AU's first Girls' Summit in Zambia last year.

Beginning with the Perth 2011 CHOGM the Royal Commonwealth Society, in collaboration with Plan UK, spearheaded a campaign to ensure that this issue could be tabled on the Commonwealth Agenda. Most recently the two organisations launched a joint publication [Preventing Child Marriage in the Commonwealth: the Role of Education](#) at the end of 2015 Commonwealth Education Ministers' Meeting in the Bahamas. Convening the High Commissioners' roundtable is our most recent effort.

It was hosted by the Canadian High Commission in London and co-chaired by the Zambian High Commissioner, His Excellency Mr. Muyeba Chikonde and the Canadian Deputy High Commissioner, Mr. Alan Kessel. The panel included the CEO of Plan UK, Tanya Barron; the Executive Director of Girls Not Brides, Heather Hamilton; and Deputy Secretary-General, Dr Josephine Ojiambo, of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The roundtable was well attended by a wide range of High Commissioners and High Commission representatives from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia.

The Roundtable Discussion

Introduction

As host and co-chair the Canadian Deputy High Commissioner opened the discussion by emphasising Canada's ongoing commitment to ending child marriage. Canada has contributed over C\$80m in programming and sponsored a UN resolution. He considered that the Commonwealth is an important organisation acting as a bridge on this issue. As co-chair the Zambian High Commissioner highlighted his country's leadership role on ending child marriage – the highlight of which was the inaugural Girls' Summit in Lusaka where the President opened the summit with an announcement of a national strategy on ending child marriage. Zambia assisted with the UN resolution and also has a gender equality bill going through its Parliament.

Panel speakers

Panel speakers were then invited to inform High Commissioners present of the current progress and next steps. It was noted that the Zambian summit was a triumph as it demonstrated that now we have real leadership coalescing on this issue. Both Zambia and Canada were praised for showing such leadership.

It was emphasised that a holistic approach is required with an educational underpinning as it is shown clearly that better educated girls are more likely to marry later. Despite the progress more is still required in the Commonwealth. It is not yet there.

The undercurrent to child marriage is gender and economic inequality. Teenage girls drop out of school to do housework not homework thereby losing the benefits of an education. There remains a pressure to have children early which also impacts the next generation. It was recognised that there is now a target in the Sustainable Development Goals to end child marriage by 2030 but there must also be regional and national plans which translate down to local communities. Government leadership is a starting point, but this cannot remain in the Ministry of Gender or Education. It must be a holistic approach and multifaceted. Equally, the policies must be owned and implemented by departments to articulate why ending child marriage is important – for example the economic impact or that nations want their girls to remain in education first before making a life decision to marry freely.

It was pointed out that other social issues have changed over a generation and ending child marriage can also be achieved in one generation. Girls who are better educated and are economically more secure will have children later on in life and pass this experience on to their own children. This will also help break the cycle of poverty.

The Commonwealth Secretariat shared its work to date, particularly its support for member states to participate in the UN's Universal Periodic Review mechanism. The Secretariat also provides technical assistance and support for the establishment and strengthening of national human rights organisations, including protecting the rights of girls and women. This work led to the adoption of the Kigali Declaration, and the Secretariat continues to work to help member states implement its provisions. Other important engagement is with traditional chiefs as well as girl survivors of child marriage in the form of the Commonwealth Champions Against Child Marriage. It is also partnering with the University of Pretoria on child marriage dialogues. This will remain ongoing work and will be extended to other Commonwealth nations.

Open discussion

High Commissioners and others in attendance were encouraged to discuss best practise and how to find solutions. One Asian country in the Commonwealth expressed a view that ending child marriage should not just be seen through the prism of *human rights*. Leaders will not necessarily follow the human rights argument. Instead it must be seen as the government's responsibility to act to help its citizens. Specifically there must be political will. And on this point it was conveyed that their country at present has the highest possible will. To that end, the levels of child marriage were reducing, but they want it to be a priority issue as there should not be any cases. It was also noted that legal frameworks on child marriages are often avoided by families and this is a challenge which must be overcome. This member suggested the Commonwealth could adopt a target to end child marriage by 2030, building on the UN commitment in the Sustainable Development Goals.

These views were echoed by an African country in the Commonwealth. A legal structure is not enough as from their perspective child marriage remains a cultural problem. This is often the case in villages not cities in Africa. The school system is crucial in changing behaviour and so is having local chiefs speak up and take this message to those in their care. It was also mentioned that children can be betrothed when they are born, not just at 15 years of age. This makes the problem about consent. The solution is education.

A fellow African nation expressed the view that political will is the key factor which is present in their country and they are witnessing a change in attitudes. This momentum must be harnessed in order to show that giving away a child at 15 is wrong. There must be a social stigma attached. Another key solution is the provision of state education. This relieves pressures on parents to find the money to educate their daughters in secondary school thereby allowing the funds to be used elsewhere.

Other civil society attendees voiced the concern that FGM is often the precursor to child marriages, where girls are taught that it is a normal practise to be married and have children young. This creates psychological, not just physical damage, to mother and child. Issues around dowries and bride price are still entrenched views which highlight the financial incentive to continue the practise of child marriages.

Another intervention focused on health and well-being and not just the legal and educational aspects of combating child marriage. The point made was that many parents would not give away their children if they knew of these consequences and they should be explained to them. Once again the importance of the provision of state schooling was raised.

This is also not just a prevention concern as there are many girls who are already married. Helpfully, the 2015 Commonwealth Communique reflects this. One Kenyan example was raised which allows child brides to return to the education system to finish their learning. It was agreed that this sort of policy should be shared.

Working with traditional leaders at the grassroots was a regular theme as implementation of solutions cannot just come from the top down. This can be supported by personal engagement from Presidents and Prime Ministers in rural communities. Zambia's President in particular was commended for doing so.

The final point raised was the difficult one of contraception whereby child pregnancy often leads to marriage. It was expressed that this will become a more prevalent issue if greater sexual health provision is not considered as part of the policy mix. This can take many forms and should be sensitive to religious beliefs.

The roundtable discussion was neatly summarised by the Deputy Canadian High Commissioner who said that avoiding forced marriage equals *wealth and health* and makes sense for the family unit.

Next steps

The Commonwealth is taking a lead on ending child marriage but the challenge of elimination still remains. Events like the Girls' Summit in Zambia demonstrate that countries in Africa are working together effectively to put policies in place. Holistic measures must be implemented across the Commonwealth towards the prevention of child marriage, without forgetting the girls already married, at government and local levels.

High Commissioners who wish to learn more about ending child marriage in order to report back to their capital can contact Tanya Barron, CEO, of Plan UK or Heather Hamilton, Executive Director, Girls Not Brides.

Download the [Royal Commonwealth Society's report](#).