

IGN Side Event:
Time to Uphold Women's and Girls' Human Rights in the Post-2015 Development Agenda: A Call from the Global South

24 July 2015

Introduction

Hosted by AIDS Accountability International, the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women (ARROW), and the Women from Women Human Rights (WWHR), this side event advanced the discussion of how to most effectively uphold women's and girls' human rights in the Post-2015 Agenda. This side event, held during the July Post-2015 IGN, opened a discussion containing a diverse set of viewpoints from the Global South with perspectives from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. This meeting looked to forward various women's rights issues, including the fight against sexual violence, the fight against forced & early marriage, and the fight against female genital mutilation. This event also called for specific inputs to the post-2015 outcome document. The event was attended by a wide array of stakeholders, including those from missions, civil society organizations, and the United Nations.

The panel included:

- **Bob Mwiinga Munyati**, AIDS Accountability International, South Africa
- **Sai Jyothirmai Racherla**, ARROW, Malaysia
- **Sehnaz Kiyamaz**, WWHR, Turkey

Panel moderated by: Susan Alzner, United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (UN-NGLS)

Susan Alzner, the moderator of the discussion, began by explaining the role of UN-NGLS in helping organize events such as this side-event. She then discussed the importance of effective communication of the SDGs to the general public. Before passing the floor to the three panelists, she expressed her concern over women's rights violations in the Global South.

Bob Mwiinga Munyati of AIDS Accountability International in South Africa began by giving some background statistics on child marriage. One third of girls in the developing world are married by the age of 18, and 1/9 girls are married before the age of 15. Moreover, 15/20 countries with the highest percentages of child marriage are in Africa.

Mr. Munyati then shifted focus on how child marriage impairs fundamental human rights, impacting both the physical and mental health of women. For example, Africa has some of the

highest illiteracy rates and school dropout rates of females, largely attributable to forced marriage and early pregnancies. However, when a woman is educated, her community and her offsprings are educated, too. Thus, one of Mr. Munyati's main proposals was to advance the empowerment of women through access to education in the Global South.

Mr. Munyati continued with an in-depth discussion of Malawi. In Malawi, one in two girls are married before 18. Besides the clear human rights violations caused by this early, forced marriage, development in Malawi is undercut. Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world by GDP, and Mr. Munyati firmly believes early marriage of women in Malawi forces the cycle of poverty to continue. Since 2004, however, the government in Malawi has taken steps to provide primary education, raise the legal marriage age, provide youth friendly health services to girls, and educate chiefs on the importance of school to young girls. Thus, Mr. Munyati applauded the national campaign taking fold in Malawi. National campaigns to end child marriage are also occurring in Ethiopia, Chad, and Burkina Faso. He emphasized the importance of legal action against abusers of the law, as laws have little value without successful enforcement.

Mr. Munyati applauded Target 5.3 that looks to, "Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation." Although optimistic, Mr. Munyati stressed the importance of enforcement of these policies for effective change. Blind hope is not an option.

Sai Jyothirmai Racherla of ARROW spoke next about early forced marriage, early pregnancy of women, violence against women, and genital mutilation in South Asia. According to Ms. Racheria, birth rates are up to 66.9 births per 1000 girls in South Asia. Moreover, adolescents between the age of 15-19 are twice as likely as women of ages 20-24 to die of pregnancy and childbirth complications, too.

Ms. Racheria gave specific country examples of human rights violations against women. For example, she described the high early marriage and early pregnancy rates in Afghanistan. She claimed these violations against women reinforce poverty, gender inequality, and patriarchal norms in the region. Echoing the arguments of Mr. Munyati, Ms. Racheria discussed in-depth how the advancement of women's rights can help end the cycle of poverty.

Next, Ms. Racheria discussed the implementation and enforcement of laws developed for preventing human rights violations against women. She stated that in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Thailand, and Bangladesh, the legal age of marriage for women is 16, 16, 17, and 18 years of age, respectively, even though the median age of marriage in these countries is typically lower. For example, although the legal age for women to marry in Bangladesh is 18 years of age, the

median age of marriage is only 15. Without community support of the norms established by law, enforcement is effectively undermined. As another example, she cited that although laws exist addressing sexual and physical violence in India, studies show 35% of women still experience physical violence and 10% have experienced sexual violence. Thus, stricter enforcement and implementation is required, otherwise the concept of gender equality will continue to be undermined. Indonesia, as a further example, has laws to eliminate domestic violence, yet violence against women still is prevalent because implementation and enforcement of these laws is weak. Thus, moving forward, Ms. Racheria proposed stronger methods of enforcement by Member States.

Ms. Racheria proposed that if the issue of gender equality is to be taken seriously in the outcome document, references to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action (ICPD) should be included. Moreover, the elimination of sexual violence, of forced and early marriage, of genital mutilation/cutting, and all forms of violence and practices against women should be called for in the outcome document. She concluded by emphasizing the need for realization of gender equality across all of the SDGs.

Sehnaz Kiymaz, from Women from Women Human Rights (WWHR) of Turkey, was the final panelist. Ms. Kiymaz began by explaining her preference for the term “early and forced marriage” as opposed to “child marriage,” as different cultural customs determine when a person transitions from being a child to being an adult. For example, as reported by Ms. Kiymaz, sometimes a “child” becomes an “adult” at 8 or 9 years old. Ms. Kiymaz followed by giving a brief statistical background of early marriages in Turkey. According to Ms. Kiymaz, approximately one in four women are married before 18, and this percentage rises in particular areas of Turkey. She acknowledged, however, the need for better databases and more comprehensive studies regarding early marriage to confirm these results. Echoing the arguments of Ms. Racheria, Ms. Kiymaz explained that implementation and enforcement of the law is weak, as, legally, women cannot marry before they are 18 in Turkey, yet, in reality, one in four women is married before this age. Ms. Kiymaz noted that 2.2 million women in 2007 were neither in school nor in work, mainly due to early marriage. Thus, she proposed stricter enforcement of the law and more education for both females and males on women’s rights issues in South Asia.

Ms. Kiymaz also echoed Ms. Racheria’s call for the ICPD and CEDAW to be noted in the outcome document. In the outcome document, she pushed for elimination of early and forced marriages, elimination of violence against women, and the addition of mechanisms to include feminist organizations in national level planning. She stressed the need for strong political will and commitment from Member States, too. Overall, she requested a holistic, cross-cutting approach to gender equality in the Post-2015 Agenda.

Following the presentations, a question was asked about human rights violations against older women. The response from the panelists noted that although child marriage was discussed for the majority of the event, the outcome document must address the entire lifecycle of women. According to Ms. Racheria, older women from marginalized communities in South Asia have higher chances of facing sexual, physical, and mental abuse. Thus, from childhood onwards, women must be protected from human rights violations. The next question addressed the issue of cultural and religious barriers being overcome in reaching equal rights for women. The panelists responded that comprehensive education from childhood onwards for both boys and girls is essential in the fight for gender equality. Additionally, the panelists addressed the need for religious leaders and policymakers to push forward these issues of gender equality. Regardless of faith or culture, violation of human rights for women cannot be accepted.

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