An Op-ed by the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Ghana, Ms Christine Evans-Klock, on the occasion of the International Day of the Girl Child, 11 October 2017

Each year since 2011, on the International Day of the Girl Child, we recognize girls’ rights and acknowledge their unique potential and the challenges they face to achieve it.

The United Nations calls on all of us - families, communities, Government, traditional and religious leaders, educators, civil society organizations, Development Partners, the private sector - to come together and commit to creating supportive environments in which girls can be equal to boys and can live lives free of discrimination, exploitation and violence.

Where are we in Ghana? What more can we do to create the right environment to ensure that no girl child is left behind as the world embarks on measures to attain the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030?

Many girls in Ghana today are vulnerable to sexual violence, child marriage, trafficking, burden of domestic work, and forced labour. Few have adequate access to sexual and reproductive health information and services and to education at the secondary and tertiary levels. They are susceptible to gender stereotypes, norms and pervasive gender inequality.

According to the 2014 Ghana Demographic Health Survey, 21% of girls in Ghana are married before they reach the age of 18, but rates are as high as 36% in the northern part of the country. The Government, through the leadership of the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection recently launched the “National Strategic Framework on Ending Child Marriage in Ghana (2017-2026)”. Its implementation can be a game changer, in building supportive family and community environments, ending complacency of discrimination of girls, empowering girls with knowledge and skills essential to their development, reducing adolescent pregnancy, expanding measures to keep girls in school, and providing welfare, justice and social services to girls and families in need. The Framework merits pro-active support by all cross-sectoral stakeholders and adequate human and financial resources to implement it and meet Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and its ambition to end child marriage by 2030. The recently affirmed commitment by H.E. President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, African Union Gender Champion, to put in place policies and programmes aimed at improving the development of the girl-child in Ghana, and step up efforts towards ending child marriage in the country and more broadly across the continent is a very welcome step in the right direction.

Violence against girls, in all its forms, is a grave human rights violation. Up to one-third of adolescent girls in Ghana report their first sexual experience as being forced. When an adolescent girl experiences violence, often perpetrated by those closest to her, she has limited choices and opportunities. Without redress, the effects of such violence may last throughout her lifetime, and extend to future generations. We therefore call on all institutions and policy makers to ensure justice for victims of violence, to bring perpetrators to book for justice to be served, and to expand access to psychosocial support for victims of sexual violence and exploitation.

Age appropriate comprehensive sexuality education should be made available to both in-school and out-of-school girls, including information and provision of contraceptives. This should be an integral part of the minimum healthcare package made available to adolescent girls under primary healthcare.

Further, according to Ghana Demographic Health Survey 2014, about one million, out of the two million girls aged 15-19, are anaemic which negatively affects their development, school and work performance, productivity, and sexual and reproductive health. To reduce the prevalence of anaemia in adolescent girls, the Ghana Health Service in partnership with the Ghana Education Service and with the support of the First Lady of Ghana and development partners, are launching a programme aimed to provide adolescent girls with weekly iron-folate supplementation and nutrition education which represents an important milestone in the institutional efforts to provide targeted support for adolescent girls.

Another growing concern is that girls are increasingly vulnerable to both internal and external trafficking and are being exploited as domestic and sex workers and as marginalized head porters (Kayayeis) in the urban market centres. While government’s ongoing efforts to curb this scourge are appreciated, there is still more to be done to firmly anchor these efforts in law. For instance, passing the Labour (Domestic Workers) Regulations Bill 2016 and ratifying International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers by the Government could improve prevention and strengthen legal redress and consequences.

Education, primary health care, confronting harmful aspects of social and cultural norms, and law enforcement are all needed to end violence against girls, reduce teenage pregnancies, ensure that their human rights are recognized and protected, and thus give all girls in Ghana a better chance of reaching their full potential.

Research has shown that denying the rights of women and girls is not only wrong in itself; it has a serious social and economic impact that holds everyone back. Gender equality has a transformative effect on social and economic development. For example, girls with secondary education are better able to care for themselves and for their children, with positive outcomes for maternal and child health; have more productive livelihoods; and participate more effectively in the democratic governance of communities and nations. Providing girls with comprehensive life skills education helps them develop their critical thinking, builds their self-esteem, equips them to communicate effectively, and builds their leadership skills to contribute to the development of their country.

As we implement the SDGs and meet their underlying principle to leave no one behind, it is particularly important to recognize and protect the human rights of all girls and to end discrimination that they face on account of gender.

The International Day of the Girl Child is an opportunity for all of us – women, men and youth – to collectively commit to actions that can make a difference for girls in Ghana. They deserve a healthy and secure environment in which they can thrive. As the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, said: “Empowering girls today makes for a safer, healthier, more prosperous and sustainable tomorrow.”

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