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Royal Commonwealth Society forms youth network to prevent child marriage

Young gender specialists and advocates from 22 countries and every region of the Commonwealth have gathered in Malta to form the first youth-led, Commonwealth network to campaign on gender equality issues: the Commonwealth Youth Gender and Equality Network. A key subject for discussion and action is child marriage: a human rights violation, a consequence and a cause of gender inequality, and a major barrier to economic growth and development in many Commonwealth countries.

Opening the conference, the President of Malta, Her Excellency Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca welcomed the delegates and stressed the importance of their objectives in feeding into the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in November. President of the Royal Commonwealth Society, Rt. Hon Lord Howell of Guildford, said that there can be no prosperity without equality:

“Women’s equality is not just a matter of fairness, and not just an ethical and social concern. It is the high road to sustainable economic progress and development... millions of women and girls are still oppressed, abused, forced into marriages, degraded, barred from a full life.”

Child marriage not only affects maternal health, but it also means that many Commonwealth countries are missing out on opportunities for development by denying half of their workforce the opportunity to continue their education and make decisions about their futures. Despite clear political will to end child marriage, there is a long way to go: 43% of women age 20-14 in the Commonwealth were married as children.

The Royal Commonwealth Society and Plan UK today presented the interim findings of their report, *The Role of Education in Preventing Child Marriage in the Commonwealth*, to H.E the President of Malta. The full report will be launched at the June 2015 Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers (CEEM) to highlight the need for further action from Commonwealth Governments to end child marriage.

Both within the Commonwealth and internationally, pressure is mounting on governments to act to end child marriage. At the 2013 CHOGM in Colombo, Sri Lanka, Heads ‘mandated the Commonwealth Secretariat, within the scope of its strategic plan, to continue with this area of work, including the sharing of best practices, challenges, achievements, and to address implementation gaps to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage.’

It is hoped that this report, the work of the Network, and the on-going work of the RCS, will also feed into the Women’s and Youth Forums, to be held at the Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) meeting in Malta in November.

The Royal Commonwealth Society and Plan UK’s report reveals that:

- Around 375 million women alive today were married or entered into union before their 18th birthday - this is over 16 per cent of the Commonwealth’s population, and amounts to 52 per cent of women aged over 18 years old in the Commonwealth.

- At current rates, 43 per cent of women in the Commonwealth are married before they reach 18. This is indicative that prevalence is reducing. However, the number still amounts to over 44 million 20-24 year-olds who were married as children.
- Over 2 in every five girls in the Commonwealth will be married before age 18 at current rates.

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