



Report of the `STOP Early marriage campaign launch`

Cresta Crossroads Hotel- 28.11.2009

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1.0 Introduction

The National Youth Council of Malawi (NYCOM) with support from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), launched a `STOP Early marriages campaign`. The launch took place at Cresta Crossroads Hotel, Lilongwe on The launch of the campaign came following an observation that in Malawi early marriages are still rampant and they are predisposing girls to complicated pregnancies, maternal deaths and also HIV infection. Again following the Malawi National Assembly on its seating of 22nd June to 31st July 2009 that passed a bill proposing that the age for marriage be moved from 15 years to 16 years old with parental consent. This development did not help those children that are being forced into marriages by their relatives, parents and others.

The launch of this campaign was part of a series of activities that started with an aim of lobbying the state president not to assent to the bill that proposed marriage age be moved from 15 years to 16 years. Before the launch, NYCOM with support from UNFPA conducted district hearing campaigns that were aired live on Zodiac, developed a communiqué that was presented to all youths in Malawi during the 7th annual general assembly of NCYOM and also to the Minister of Youth Development and Sports (MoYDS), met parliamentary committees on health, legal affairs and also social services.

As such the `STOP Early marriages` was launched as a nationwide campaign that young people through their youth organizations will take to their districts and discuss with their fellow young people, parents, community leaders on what should be done not to marry girls off but rather give them the means to be reproductive citizens.

The launch of the campaign was honored by a youthful member of parliament, who was one of the few to stand up against the proposed bill to move the age from 15 to 16 years in parliament. His name is Honorable Alekeni Menyani.

2.0 Aim

The aim of the `STOP early marriages` campaign is to bring awareness to parents, young people especially girls and community leaders on the evils and dangers of marrying girls when they are still children.

3.0 Methodology

3.1.1 Youth participation

The launch was advertised on the radio inviting all youth leaders in Malawi from all traditional authorities, districts and regions to the launch. They were 464 youth leaders that came from all 28 districts in Malawi. These are youth leaders that heads respective youth organizations and networks and participated in the launch. We expect that the campaign will trickle down to children and youths in the deepest remote areas where these leaders are coming from and reach not less that 9.1 million young people aged less than 30 years and also parents and other guardians.

3.1.2 Dissemination of the coverage exercise report

During the launch of the campaign, NYCOM disseminated the Malawi Coverage Exercise preliminary report. The aim of the dissemination was to show the youth leaders how young people in Malawi are accessing services. The revelation that the rural youths are getting few resources than needed had a direct correlation with having large numbers of young girls getting married off when they are still children. It was noted by the youth leaders that the coverage exercise report would help them re-strategise on which areas to concentrate on that should help reduce incidences of early marriages.

3.1.3 Reading of the youth and children communiqué on early marriages

A youth and children communiqué was read to youth leaders during the launch so that each of them affirms their stand on what they want to be done on early

marriages. Since the development of the communiqué following the district hearing campaigns, the communiqué stood out very strongly as a stand that has been taken by youth leaders and children in Malawi on early marriages.

The communiqué received overwhelming response from all the leaders that gathered during the launch.

3.1.4 Production of `STOP early marriage` campaign logo and IEC materials

NYCOM developed a special logo (as seen on the cover page of the report), on `STOP Early marriages` that will be used on all official communications to do with early marriages and all campaigns that youth organizations and other partners would like to carry out. This logo was pretested and was accepted by young people to be the official logo for early marriage campaign.

IEC materials in form of posters were designed and printed. A total of 600 t-shirts carrying a big stop early marriage campaign logo was printed at the back of the t-shirts carrying a clear message of what young people in Malawi wants to done. A total of 2,000 posters were printed that were distributed to all youth leaders so that they could subsequently use them during their campaign in their respective communities once they go home. The posters carried a clear message saying that young people have said no to early marriages and wants to be get back to school.

These IEC materials made the launch of the event colorful but again carrying a strong message for action.

3.1.5 Production of paintings depicting evils of early marriages

NYCOM produced paintings from different artists that depicted different scenarios on consequences of early marriages to children. A total of 50 big paintings were produced. A day before the launch, the Vice President of the Republic of Malawi, the right honorable Joyce Banda, who is also the goodwill ambassador of CARMA (Campaign for the Acceleration of the Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Malawi), viewed the paintings. She was taken through the

entire paintings one by one and explained to on what each painting means. For instance, one painting depicted a young girl aged 15 years who had two children and contracted HIV as she was married to a man who had lost 3 wives already due to HIV. However since the parents wanted something that could bring them income, they opted to marry their daughter off to this man. The vice president was touched and it was not surprising when she reported that something needs to be done. Again the fact that most maternal deaths are taking place in the very young girls, a lot of paintings depicted the effects early marriages have on maternal complications such as vesicle vaginal fistulas (VVF), postpartum hemorrhage, caesarean section and eventually death.

Youth leaders present during the launch were also explained to as what each picture means. The paintings carried a very powerful message and clearly were able to relate to what exactly is happening in the communities of Malawi.

3.1.6 Testimony from a teen mother

There was one testimony from a teen mother who had her first pregnancy when she was aged 14 years. As she narrated her story, the picture of and consequences of early marriages were once more brought out and appreciated by the youth leaders. It was captivating as she narrated how she struggled with her pregnancy and how much she had nearly died due to loss of blood during delivery. She regrets the wasted years she would have been to school but however mentioned that her parents could not afford to send her to school at that time hence she finding herself in that situation.

Today she is an advocate in her community discussing with her fellow young girls, parents and other community leaders on the consequences of marrying girls off early.

4.0 Results

4.1.1 Parliament sends back marriage proposal to law commission

A very positive development that has happened has been that parliament has requested law commission to do further consultations on the issue and present to it a fresh proposal on which should be the right age of entry into marriage. Since young people in Malawi communicated through the communiqué that they were not consulted and that the right age should be at least not less than 18, this development has been seen in part due to the efforts made following a series of activities that NYCOM conducted.

The sending back of this bill to the law commission, came after NYCOM conducted the live district hearing (see report), met parliamentary committees on health, legal affairs and social services (see minutes of the meeting) and also launch of this campaign. This is a major deliverable for the whole exercise.

4.1.2 Scaling up of the campaign across Malawi

Following a very colorful launch of the campaign, NYCOM expects that it will continue to trickle down to every community in the country and that the messages will reach young girls, parents and community leader on the need to refrain from marrying girls off early. With participation of the youth leaders, the information and the messages will reach at least a not that 9.1 million young people.

5.0 Way forward

Following the series of activities NYCOM have had, there is need to continue with the campaign until we see substantial change of attitudes of young people, parents and other communities towards early marriages. We will need to support youth organizations technically and financially to conduct community level advocacy campaigns and also work hand in hand with our partners especially the Malawi Girl Guides (MAGGA), Ministry of Youth Development and Sports (MoYDS), parliamentary committees and others. UNFPA will be critical to all this process.

Now that the issue has been referred back to law commission, NYCOM will be linking up with the law commission on how best to ensure that children and young people are engaged on the whole process. This is now a great opportunity to change the marriage age as proposed by young people. UNFPA role in this will be very crucial especially technical and financial support to make this a reality.