CONCEPT NOTE

SADC PARLIAMENTARY FORUM
59TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY SESSION
EZULWINI PALAZZO, EZULWINI, KINGDOM OF ESWATINI
20–27 NOVEMBER 2026

SYMPOSIUM ON THE THEME FOR THE 59TH PLENARY ASSEMBLY AND LAUNCH OF THE REGIONAL CHILD MARRIAGE MONITORING DASHBOARD

Theme: *"Harnessing Political Leadership, Progressive Culture and Data to Accelerate the Eradication of Child Marriage in the SADC Region"*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child marriage remains a serious violation of children's rights and a major impediment to gender equality and sustainable development in Southern Africa. It disrupts education, exposes girls to early pregnancy and associated health risks, limits economic opportunities, and perpetuates intergenerational poverty. Despite varying experiences across Member States, poverty, gender inequality, harmful social norms, inadequate legal protections, and weak enforcement continue to sustain the practice, underscoring the need for effective prevention, protection, and support for children already in marriage. In response, the SADC PF adopted the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage on 3 June 2016, during its 39th Plenary Assembly in Ezulwini, Eswatini. The Model Law established a common legislative benchmark to guide national reforms, promote legislative harmonisation, and strengthen regional parliamentary cooperation. A decade later, the imperative remains to translate these commitments into enforceable legislation, adequately resourced interventions, and effective institutional accountability.

It is therefore particularly fitting that, ten years after adopting the Model Law, the Forum returns to Eswatini for its 59th Plenary Assembly under the theme *"Harnessing Political Leadership, Progressive Culture and Data to Accelerate the Eradication of Child Marriage in the SADC Region."* The theme underscores three mutually reinforcing drivers of change: political leadership to advance legislative reforms, institutional action and resource allocation; progressive culture to mobilise traditional, religious and community leadership in transforming harmful practices; and data to inform interventions, monitor implementation and strengthen accountability. The Symposium will bring together parliamentarians, government representatives, traditional and religious leaders, civil society, the media and survivors to examine progress, share experiences and identify priorities for accelerated action. It will also launch the SADC PF Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard, an innovative digital accountability tool and practical instrument for tracking the implementation of the Model Law and for strengthening evidence-based parliamentary oversight and accountability.

2.0 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

2.1 Prevalence, Drivers and Consequences

Child marriage takes different forms and occurs at varying rates across the region. Its drivers include economic insecurity, gender discrimination, school exclusion, harmful customary practices, inadequate social protection and limited access to child-friendly services. Rural children, children with disabilities and those affected by crises may face compounded vulnerabilities. The consequences extend beyond the individual child to families, communities and national development. The Symposium will draw on current, validated and appropriately disaggregated evidence rather than treating regional averages as a substitute for national realities.

2.2 Regional and International Frameworks

The Model Law complements the Revised SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Maputo Protocol, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3. Together, these frameworks call for the elimination of harmful practices, the protection of children's rights, and effective national implementation. The Model Law provides legislative guidance; its impact depends on domestic legal and institutional action.

2.3 Ten Years of the Model Law (2016–2026): Progress and Persistent Gaps

Over the past decade, the Model Law has served as a reference point for legislative reviews, policy dialogue and advocacy across Member States. However, the extent of domestication and implementation remains uneven. Inconsistencies among statutory, customary and religious frameworks, limited enforcement capacity, inadequate financing, fragmented services and persistent social pressures continue to impede progress. A credible ten-year assessment must distinguish between the adoption of legislation, enforcement, service delivery and measurable changes in the prevalence of child marriage.

2.4 Reflections on Returning to Eswatini and the Upcoming November International Commemorations

The SADC PF's return to Eswatini, where it adopted the Model Law in 2016, lends particular historical and political significance to its tenth anniversary. A decade after establishing this landmark regional legislative framework, the Forum returns to assess progress, confront persistent implementation challenges, and launch a regional dashboard to strengthen monitoring and accountability. The 59th Plenary Assembly also coincides with significant international commemorations, reinforcing the urgency and relevance of its theme. World Children's Day on 20 November provides a broader child-rights context, while two United Nations observances coincide directly with the Assembly:

(i) **International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November):** Marking the commencement of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence (25 November–10 December), this observance reinforces the imperative to address child marriage as a violation of children's rights and a harmful practice rooted in gender inequality.

(ii) **International Day for the Elimination of Child, Early and Forced Marriage (27 November):** Established by the United Nations General Assembly in 2026, its inaugural observance coincides with the final day of the Plenary Assembly, presenting a historic opportunity to reaffirm regional parliamentary commitments to eradicating child marriage.

The convergence of historical milestones and international commemorations provides a compelling backdrop for the Symposium and Dashboard Launch. It offers an opportunity to move beyond reflecting on a decade of legislative commitments towards renewed political leadership, evidence-based accountability and concrete parliamentary action to accelerate the eradication of child marriage across the SADC region.

2.5 Translating Commitments into Measurable Results

Legal commitments are indispensable yet insufficient on their own. Political leadership must translate them into institutional decisions, budgets and oversight; progressive cultural and religious leadership must help transform harmful norms while affirming children's dignity; and reliable data must enable stakeholders to identify what is working and where corrective action is required. The Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard is intended to support this third function by consolidating available evidence on domestication and implementation, subject to validated indicators, data quality and clear institutional responsibilities. The Symposium and launch will therefore form connected stages of a single, accountability-focused undertaking.

3.0 ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN ACCELERATING THE ERADICATION OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Parliaments have a central responsibility to translate regional commitments into effective national legislation, policies and institutional action. In exercising their legislative, oversight, budgetary and representative mandates, Member Parliaments should prioritise the following:

3.1 Legislative Reform and Domestication

Member Parliaments should harmonise national legislation with the SADC Model Law, set and enforce a minimum age of 18 for marriage with no exceptions, eliminate inconsistencies across statutory, customary and religious laws, and strengthen legal protections and remedies for children at risk of or already in marriage. Legislative reforms should be constitutionally sound, child-centred and supported by effective implementation mechanisms.

3.2 Parliamentary Oversight and Accountability

Parliaments should exercise robust oversight through committees, parliamentary questions, inquiries and reporting mechanisms to ensure that responsible institutions fulfil their obligations, coordinate interventions and deliver effective prevention, protection and support services. Oversight should focus on measurable outcomes rather than merely on the existence of legislation, policies or programmes.

3.3 Budgetary Allocation and Financial Accountability

Parliaments should prioritise adequate and sustained financing for education, social protection, child protection, healthcare, justice and survivor support. They should also scrutinise budget execution and

programme effectiveness to ensure that resources address identified implementation gaps and reach vulnerable communities.

3.4 Representation, Advocacy and Community Engagement

Parliamentarians should champion the rights and interests of children, amplify survivors' perspectives and engage traditional and religious leaders, civil society, the media and communities in challenging harmful norms and practices. Such engagement should uphold children's dignity, privacy, safety and meaningful participation.

3.5 Data-Driven Parliamentary Action

Parliaments should institutionalise the use of reliable, disaggregated data, including evidence from the Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard, to identify legislative and implementation gaps, inform budgetary decisions, strengthen oversight and facilitate regional peer learning. They should promote consistent reporting standards, regular data updates and responsible data governance, while recognising that gaps in available evidence do not imply the absence of child marriage.

4.0 OPPORTUNITIES FOR REGIONAL PARLIAMENTARY COOPERATION

Regional parliamentary cooperation should be strengthened to accelerate the domestication and effective implementation of the SADC Model Law through legislative harmonisation, peer learning and coordinated oversight. Member Parliaments should exchange experiences and good practices in legislative reform, enforcement and accountability; collaborate to strengthen regional data collection, validation and monitoring through the Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard; and promote engagement with traditional and religious leaders to advance positive cultural transformation and eliminate harmful practices. These efforts should be complemented by stronger partnerships among parliaments, governments, civil society, regional institutions and cooperating partners to mobilise resources, share expertise and sustain coordinated action to eradicate child marriage in the SADC region.

5.0 OBJECTIVES AND EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF THE SYMPOSIUM

5.1 Overall Objective

To commemorate the tenth anniversary of adopting the SADC Model Law, assess progress and persistent implementation challenges, and galvanise political leadership, progressive cultural transformation, and data-driven accountability to accelerate the eradication of child marriage in the SADC region.

5.2 Specific Objectives

The specific objectives are as follows:

(i) Assess achievements and outstanding challenges in domesticating and implementing the Model Law since 2016;
(ii) Strengthen parliamentary and governmental leadership in legislative reform, financing, implementation and oversight;
(iii) Promote traditional, religious and community leadership in transforming harmful norms and supporting children's rights;
(iv) Bring survivor, civil society and media perspectives into the identification of practical prevention and response priorities;
(v) Launch and demonstrate the regional dashboard as a tool for evidence-based parliamentary oversight and accountability; and
(vi) Identify practical priorities for coordinated regional action and appropriate institutional follow-up.

5.3 Expected Outcomes

Expected outcomes include enhanced understanding of the first decade's achievements and gaps; renewed commitment to effective implementation; stronger engagement with community leaders, survivors and civil society; an official launch and practical orientation of the dashboard; and focused recommendations for consideration by the Plenary Assembly. The recommendations should inform the Forum's established resolution and reporting processes rather than presume commitments not yet formally adopted.

6.0 STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 Political Leadership: From Commitment to Implementation

A decade after the adoption of the Model Law, political leadership should be assessed against progress in legislative domestication, effective implementation and measurable outcomes. Particular attention should be given to addressing persistent political, institutional and financial barriers, strengthening parliamentary oversight, and ensuring that legislative commitments translate into enforceable protections, adequately resourced interventions and demonstrable results.

6.2 Progressive Culture: Transforming Norms and Practices

Eradicating child marriage requires transforming harmful social norms while harnessing positive cultural and religious values. Traditional and religious leaders should be mobilised as champions of change, working alongside civil society, the media, survivors and communities to advance locally led, rights-based interventions. Priority should be given to identifying, strengthening and replicating effective approaches that promote children's rights, dignity and protection.

6.3 Data: Strengthening Monitoring and Accountability

Reliable, disaggregated and regularly updated data should underpin legislative reform, policy implementation and parliamentary accountability. The Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard should strengthen systematic tracking of domestication and implementation, inform parliamentary oversight and budgetary decisions, and facilitate regional peer learning. Establish clear institutional responsibilities for data collection, validation, reporting and utilisation to translate evidence into targeted interventions and measurable outcomes.

6.4 The Next Decade of Action: From Commitments to Results

The next decade should mark a decisive shift from commitments to coordinated implementation and measurable impact. Governments, parliaments, traditional and religious leaders, civil society and cooperating partners should strengthen collective action through clear priorities, defined institutional responsibilities, sustainable financing and robust accountability mechanisms. The Symposium should identify practical recommendations to inform the Plenary Assembly's deliberations and guide sustained regional action to eradicate child marriage.

7.0 STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

7.1 Participation and Resource Persons

Participants will include Presiding Officers and Members of Parliament, parliamentary officials, relevant government ministries and data institutions, traditional and religious leaders, civil society organizations, media representatives, survivor advocates, youth representatives, technical experts, and cooperating partners. Resource persons will be selected for practical expertise and complementary perspectives, ensuring appropriate regional and gender balance.

7.2 Symposium Format and Thematic Contributions

The Symposium will retain the established format of opening remarks, concise resource-person contributions and interactive parliamentary deliberations. Government and parliamentarians will address political and legislative implementation; traditional and religious leaders will address cultural transformation; civil society and media representatives will examine community mobilisation and public accountability; and survivor advocates will identify gaps in prevention, protection and support. Contributions will be focused on specific actions and evidence needs.

7.3 Launch of the Regional Dashboard

A separate afternoon launch will follow the morning Symposium. It will include a reflection on the 2016 adoption, a presentation of the dashboard's purpose and scope, a demonstration of verified functions and indicators, an official unveiling, and an explanation of parliamentary applications. Where feasible, a practical oversight question arising from the morning discussion should be used to demonstrate available evidence and identify remaining gaps. Technical custodians should disclose sources, reporting periods, limitations, and updating arrangements; the launch must not imply functionality or coverage that has not been verified.

7.4 Methodology and Safeguarding

The Symposium will be participatory, evidence-informed and solution-oriented. A moderator will link contributions to the three pillars and reserve meaningful time for parliamentary discussion. Survivor participation will be voluntary and informed, with trauma-sensitive facilitation, privacy safeguards and appropriate support. Public presentations and dashboard demonstrations should avoid disclosing child-level identifying information.

7.5 Documentation and Follow-Up

The SADC PF Secretariat and the host Parliament will coordinate briefings for resource persons, the programme, rapporteur arrangements, launch logistics and communications. Rapporteurs should record the proposed action, the responsible institution, the evidence required and the suggested review mechanism for each priority. Recommendations will be transmitted through the Forum's established processes for Plenary consideration, with subsequent orientation and reporting on dashboard use, as resources and approvals permit.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Ten years after the SADC Model Law was adopted in Eswatini, the Forum returns to assess progress and renew regional resolve. The Assembly coincides with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November and the inaugural International Day for the Elimination of Child, Early and Forced Marriage on 27 November, following World Children's Day on 20 November. These milestones heighten the imperative to translate legislative commitments into effective protection, progressive community action and measurable results. The Symposium and Dashboard Launch will help frame practical recommendations for the Plenary Assembly's consideration.

End.