KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Commemoration of Ten Years of the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage and Launch of the Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard

22nd November 2026

Ezulwini Palazzo, Ezulwini, Kingdom of Eswatini

The Deputy Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Eswatini,

Honourable Speakers of Parliament and Heads of Delegation,

Honourable Members of Parliament,

The President of the SADC Parliamentary Forum,

Dr Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda of UN Women, joining us virtually,

The Secretary General of the SADC Parliamentary Forum, Ms B. Sekgoma, and her fellow Clerks and Secretaries Generals,

Representatives of Governments, the United Nations, civil society, development partners and the media,

Traditional and faith leaders, youth representatives and survivor advocates,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is both an honour and a privilege to welcome you, once again, to Ezulwini for this commemoration of ten years of the SADC Model Law on Eradicating Child Marriage and Protecting Children Already in Marriage, and for the launch of the Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard. I thank the SADC Parliamentary Forum and all partners whose persistence has brought us to this important moment.

Allow me to state, with emphasis, that it is not perchance that this commemoration is being held in Eswatini. Ten years ago, in June 2016, the 39th Plenary Assembly adopted the Model Law here in Ezulwini which begets this commemoration, a special significance. It was here that the region took a united legislative stance against child marriage, and it is here that we must now reflect honestly on the progress made, the gaps that remain and the action required for the next decade. We have returned to the place where that standard was adopted because history demands more than remembrance; it demands accountability. We are therefore enjoined to ask candidly, with honesty and courage, what the Model Law has achieved, where implementation has faltered, which gaps continue to expose children to harm, and what the next decade must require of every Parliament, Government and every institution entrusted with the protection of children.

As we reflect on the decade behind us, it is equally critical that we remain fully alive to the scale of the challenge ahead. UNICEF estimates that 640 million girls and women alive today were married in childhood. One in every five young women aged 20 to 24 was married before reaching the age of 18. At the current rate of progress, the world will require another 300 years to eliminate child marriage, while progress would need to accelerate nearly twenty-fold to achieve the 2030 target.

You may also be aware that Africa carries a particularly heavy burden. UNICEF estimates that 130 million girls and women on the continent were married in childhood. In Eastern and Southern Africa alone, more than 50 million girls and women are child brides, and nearly one third of young women in the region were married before the age of 18. Dear colleagues, we might be tempted to view these figures as distant abstractions. Yet upon closer scrutiny, they represent interrupted education, early pregnancy, exposure to violence, restricted economic opportunity and the loss of choices that every child should be allowed to make for herself.

I must also reflect candidly on my own country, Eswatini, lest I be accused of failing to practise the very candour I have urged upon this gathering. Estimates from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey indicate that Eswatini is home to more than 41 000 child brides and that approximately one in every twenty young women was married during childhood. The UNICEF profile records a prevalence of about 5% among women aged 20 to 24 who were married before reaching the age of 18.

These national figures must also be understood in the context of the wider economic and public-interest consequences of child marriage. The World Bank has documented its association with earlier childbearing, interrupted education, lower lifetime earnings, greater exposure to poverty, and heightened risks to health and safety. Its global synthesis further makes clear that the consequences do not end with the girl herself; they extend to her children, her household, her community and the wider society, limiting social and economic potential across generations. When a child is married, the burden is borne first by the child, but it is ultimately carried by the public health system, the education system, the justice system and the national economy. That is why ending child marriage is not only a matter of protecting individual rights but also an essential investment in the development and future prosperity of our countries.

Deputy Prime Minister, Honourable Members,

It is precisely for these reasons that the Model Law emanated as a regional response to this reality. It recognised that child marriage cannot be addressed by one ministry, one law or one institution acting alone. It requires a coherent standard, clear legal duties, prevention, protection, access to justice, services for children already in marriage, public awareness, monitoring and adequate financing. As some of you may recall, the Model Law is anchored in African human-rights commitments. Particularly, Article 21(2) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states, unequivocally that 'Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be eighteen years and make registration of all marriages in an official registry compulsory.'

Equally, the Maputo Protocol is explicit in its proviso of Article 6 that 'no marriage shall take place without the free and full consent of both parties' and that 'the minimum age of marriage for women shall be 18 years.' To that end, it follows that consent cannot be meaningful where a child lacks the age, information, freedom or power to make an informed decision. On the contrary, it becomes a truism that a

legal framework that permits exceptions or allows different standards to apply to girls and boys weakens the protection that the law is meant to provide.

The SADC Model Law translates these principles into a legislative standard. It provides, in direct and unequivocal language that, 'From the commencement of the law, a person under the minimum age of marriage has no capacity to consent to a marriage or contract a marriage and any marriage purportedly entered into or solemnised is a prohibited marriage and void.' Therefore, the task before us is to ensure that this standard is not confined to the pages of a model law. It must be reflected in national legislation, customary and religious interfaces, registration systems, court practice, enforcement, services and budgets.

The principle is also captured in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which provides that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.' Most of you may agree with me that the words are familiar, and in most instances, that familiarity makes them ordinary. Yet, when a child is compelled into marriage, her equality, dignity, freedom and future are placed at risk. In that regard, the protection of children already in marriage must therefore be treated as a central part of the response, not as an afterthought to prevention.

Deputy Prime Minister, Honourable Members,

Ten years after its adoption, we must acknowledge that regional progress is real, but it remains uneven, incomplete and insufficiently enforced. Data from 2024 revealed that only six of the 16 SADC Member States had established 18 as the minimum age of marriage for both girls and boys, without exceptions. Five countries had set the minimum age at 18 but retained exceptions that may permit marriage below that age, while others continued to apply lower or unequal age thresholds and allowed judicial or parental consent to circumvent the protective standard. This fragmented legal landscape creates uncertainty, weakens enforcement and leaves children's protection dependent on where they live, which law is applied, or whose consent is accepted. A child's right to protection cannot be stronger in one jurisdiction and weaker in another. The findings therefore call for urgent legal harmonisation, the removal of exceptions, stronger enforcement and sustained parliamentary oversight. They should not be interpreted as a basis for complacency, but as a clear mandate to move from regional commitment to uniform, measurable and enforceable protection for every child across the SADC region.

Yet I remain encouraged that Parliament is uniquely positioned to consign child marriage to the annals of history, where it squarely belongs. Thus, our first responsibility is to make the law clear, coherent and enforceable. A child must not be protected under one statute and exposed under another. Statutory, customary and religious frameworks must therefore be harmonised with regional and continental human-rights standards, so that no legal ambiguity can be used to justify the marriage of a child.

Additionally, the minimum age of 18 must be understood for what it is, as a safeguard for children, not an attack on culture, faith or family. It remains inherently true that protecting children from child marriage does not diminish our traditions but affirms the values of care, responsibility and human dignity that sustain our communities. After all, culture is strongest when it protects the dignity, safety and development of its children. It therefore behoves us as Parliamentarians to ensure that no tradition, practice or interpretation is invoked to legitimise an arrangement that denies a child her childhood, her education, her freedom and her future.

The second responsibility is to finance the law. A right without a budget is a promise deferred and a promised deferred is a promise, essentially, denied. The implementation of the Model Law requires resources for birth and marriage registration, social protection, education retention and re-entry, health and psychosocial support, legal aid, child protection officers, safe accommodation, referral systems, community engagement and enforcement. We must therefore be painstakingly incisive in our scrutiny of the budget focusing not only what is allocated, but what reaches the child and what result it produces.

The third responsibility is oversight. We should ask whether laws are being enforced, whether cases are being referred safely, whether children can access annulment and protection, whether girls are returning to school, whether services are available in rural and marginalised communities, and whether the responsible institutions can demonstrate progress. The oversight mandate of Parliament Oversight graduate beyond counting activities to examining whether children are safer and whether their choices and opportunities have expanded.

Fourth, and finally, Parliament must embrace its responsibility to listen. Effective legislation cannot be designed from a distance or imposed without understanding the realities it seeks to address. Girls, young women, survivors, families, traditional and faith leaders, teachers, health workers, police officers, magistrates, social workers and civil society organisations each hold knowledge that must inform both the substance of our laws and the manner in which those laws are implemented. Their experiences reveal where protection systems succeed, where they fail and where children continue to fall through the gaps. Listening, however, must go beyond consultation for its own sake. It must lead to laws, policies, budgets and services that respond to what communities are telling us. Parliament must create safe and meaningful avenues for children and survivors to participate without fear of retaliation, exposure or re-traumatisation. We must listen with humility, protect confidentiality and ensure that those who share their experiences are not merely heard, but are able to see their testimony reflected in measurable action.

This is why the launch of the Regional Child Marriage Monitoring Dashboard matters. The Dashboard is not a substitute for political will, legislation or services. It is, in the strictest sense, an instrument to make implementation more visible and more accountable. It should help us identify where laws have changed, where gaps remain, who is responsible, what resources are available, which indicators are moving and where Parliament must ask harder questions.

We should also be precise about what the Dashboard can and cannot do. It cannot replace national statistical systems. It cannot conceal gaps in reporting. It cannot convert incomplete evidence into false certainty. Its credibility will depend on clear definitions, validated indicators, transparent sources, regular updates, responsible custodianship and a willingness to show limitations.

As Speaker of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Eswatini, I am conscious of the significance of receiving this commemoration in the place where the Model Law was adopted. Eswatini has a special responsibility to honour that history through practical leadership. That leadership must include continued attention to the legal framework, stronger implementation of child-protection measures, sustained support for education and services, and meaningful parliamentary use of evidence.

Going forward, the next decade must be a decade of measurable protection. We should be able to return to this conversation and say that more girls remained in school, that more children were protected before marriage, that children already in marriage could access safety and justice, that harmful legal exceptions were removed, that budgets were executed, and that institutions were held accountable. These are the measures by which the Model Law will ultimately be judged.

As I conclude, I recall the words of His Majesty King Mswati III who rightly observed that ***'Any country that develops must have an educated and empowered youth.'*** That vision cannot be realised while children are removed from school, denied the freedom to shape their own futures or compelled into marriage before they are ready. Ten years after the adoption of the Model Law, our responsibility is to ensure that its promise is translated into clear laws, adequate resources, effective services, reliable data and firm parliamentary oversight. In doing so, we will honour the parliamentarians who adopted it, the partners who supported its development and, above all, the children whose rights are the reason for our work. With these few remarks, I wish you all fruitful deliberations.

I thank you.

Kealoboga

Ngiyabonga,

Muito Obrigado,

Merci Beaucoup

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