**Commonwealth Secretariat Submission to the OHCHR for the 2015 Report on Child, Early and Forced Marriage**

**1. Commonwealth Secretariat**

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 53 independent and equal sovereign states. It is home to 2.2 billion citizens, of which over 60% are under the age of 30. The Commonwealth includes some of the world’s largest, smallest, richest and poorest countries, spanning five regions. Thirty-one of its members are small states, many of them island nations.

**2. Our work to date on Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) since 2014**

The commitment from Commonwealth Heads of Government to prevent and eliminate CEFM has become progressively stronger as from the 2011 to 2015 Heads of Government Meetings.

In 2013 the Secretariat convened the Commonwealth Roundtable on Early and Forced Marriage which saw the participation of senior officials from 11 Commonwealth countries (Australia, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda and United Kingdom), with expertise and experience of developing legislative, policy and practical solutions to CEFM. During the Roundtable *“Participants recognised the unique added value of National Human Rights Institutions in the promotion and protection of human rights in relation to CEFM.”*

In 2015 the Commonwealth convened NHRIs in Rwanda to strengthen their abilities to address child marriage in their jurisdictions and the adoption of the **Kigali Declaration** was the result. The Declaration represents a united stand on child marriage and sets out a framework for NHRIs to strengthen their efforts. It also frames the programmatic work of the Commonwealth Secretariat. Twenty have thus far signed up to the Declaration with efforts continuing towards ensuring all Commonwealth NHRIs do so.

Following the adoption of the Declaration the Commonwealth supported NHRIs in its popularisation and operationalisation efforts within the national and regional context. The Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions has adopted CEFM as a strategic priority for the Forum over the period 2016-2019.

We supported the mobilization of traditional chiefs, young men and young women survivors of CEFM in the rural district of Karonga in Malawi resulting in the establishment of a Chiefs Caucus to mobilise traditional leaders and structures to end child marriage in rural communities. A network of young men was also established which has taken forward advocacy in several rural districts in schools, universities, churches and communities.

The Commonwealth commenced a partnership with the University of Pretoria and the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights by convening Child Marriage Dialogues with civil society actors, NHRIs, traditional and religious leaders with the purpose of calibrating efforts at grassroots level. The first dialogue was convened in Nairobi for Kenya, Malawi and Uganda in 2015. The second dialogue will take place in May 2016 for South Africa and Mozambique.

At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta in November 2015, the Secretariat convened a special session on child marriage at the inaugural Women’s Forum and launched the Commonwealth Champions against Child Marriage a network of survivors who will be central to Commonwealth advocacy and programmatic efforts.

In furtherance of the Kigali Declaration, the Commonwealth is taking forward work in 5 areas of comparative advantage: support to NHRIs to popularise and operationalize the Kigali Declaration; mobilization of traditional leaders and their governance structures, specifically in rural areas; capacity development and support to parliaments at both national and regional levels, including through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Human Rights Groups, collaborations with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and Parliamentarians for Global Action; mobilization of men and boys; and leveraging regional partnerships with the African Union (AU) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Commonwealth action in 2016 will include: the second Child Marriage Dialogue to be hosted in Pretoria for South Africa and Mozambique; technical assistance and cooperation with the Government of Zambia; work with the AU to develop a joint training cohort and materials for traditional leaders; mobilization of Queen Mothers and traditional leaders in Ghana; further strengthening of the capacities of our regional networks of parliamentarians in Africa, Asia and the Pacific; a side event at the Commonwealth Women’s Ministers meeting in Samoa to raise awareness of the issue in the region; development of a joint work plan with the Commonwealth of Learning; and an event to take stock and mark one year on from the Kigali Declaration.