STATEMENT BY THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT CONDEMNING CULTURAL ACTIVITIES THAT CONTRIBUTE TO PERPETUATE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN UGANDA

DATED 15TH JUNE 2022

On June 11th 2022 during the Elgon Cultural gala, a video footage and pictures of the event emerged which showed a cross section of a procession of young girls half-naked with their breasts painted white and their hips and upper thighs only covered with see-through banana leaves. The girls who were half naked were dancing along to the cultural music procession in the name of exhibiting culture. The organisers insist that this is not the first time such a breast parade in the name of culture and tourism is happening.

Women of Uganda are concerned about such processions because they contravene Article 33 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda on the rights of women which inter-alia states that *women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men.*

Article 33(6) specifically states *that laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status, are prohibited by this Constitution.*

Section 7 of the 2016 Children's Act states *that a person shall not expose a child to any customary or cultural practice that is harmful to his or her health, wellbeing, education or social-economic development.*

Article 2 of the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) states that, *state parties take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;*

Further, the objectification of women and girls has proven to be one of the ultimate causes of violence against women and girls. This action of parading bare-chested girls is disgraceful especially as the country grapples with a spike in the cases of defilement, child marriage and teen pregnancies.

This case is particularly worse because it takes advantage of the naivety of children towards whom as society all adults have a duty to protect. The cardinal rule of child

protection is that all actions must be done in the best interests of a child. Accordingly, making these girls dance naked amounts to Violence Against Children (VAC).

While we acknowledge the critical role that positive culture plays in shaping society, we also recognise and condemn Harmful Cultural Practices (HTP) such as this at the festival that requires the bodily exposure of children particularly adolescent and pre-adolescent girls. We live in a society that already objectifies and sexualises the nudity of females even children. We live in a society that uses nudity as a scapegoat for sexual violence and festivals such as this one serves to increase the risk and vulnerability that children, especially girls face. Such acts reinforce inferiority among women and girls, promotes a continuous cycle of patriarchy and has negative implications towards achievement of gender equality. Conclusions drawn from the pictures indicate that such practices have devastating physical and psychological effects on women and girls

This action by the organisers and the authorities that permitted the festivals to proceed with the specific parading of bare-chested girls is reprehensible/ disgraceful especially as the country grapples with a spike in defilement, child marriage and teen pregnancies. This cannot be tolerated; not after close to over 2 million girls suffering abuse and falling pregnant in the last two years in the wake of COVID-19. As a country, we can only ignore such incidents at our own risk.

Statistics from the recently released 2021 Annual Police Crime report state that a total of 16,545 persons were victims of sex related crimes out of whom 14,482 were female juveniles, 378 were male juveniles, 1,636 were adult females and 49 adult males. 14,570 cases of defilement were reported in 2021 with aggravated defilement increasing by 1.6 while simple defilement increased by 2.3%.

Additionally, a 2021 fact sheet by UNPA indicated that in 2020 there was a marked increase in teenage pregnancies within the districts at 67/136 (49.3%). Between January to September 2021, a total of 290,219 teenage pregnancies were recorded, translating to over 32,000 monthly recorded pregnancies. These are alarming figures and we cannot look on as a country when such acts that perpetuate Violence Against Women and Girls continue to happen like the Mbale festival procession.

Although government has put in place legislations and other measures to outlaw the harmful traditional/ cultural practices and customs which are against dignity of women and girls, however, these continue due to persistent primitive and dehumanising practices such as the Elgon Cultural Festival.

Cultural activities which objectify women and girls don't constitute to reduction of VAW/G and must be stopped. This statement is made bearing in mind the ongoing National Campaign on Ending Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy and Promoting Positive Parenting which was launched in 2021 by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and the Ministry of Education and Sports.

Therefore, we the Women of Uganda;

1. Call for vigilance by parents, guardians and all members of any community countrywide to always protect children.

2. Call upon all Ugandans to tap into our age old positive cultural practices that are reflected in the saying, 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Similarly, collective effort is needed to protect children.

3. Caution the public to desist from using culture as an excuse to indulge in crime and illegality.

4. We caution the organisers that having held similar past two events does not justify continued humiliation of the dignity of innocent young girls by having their breasts paraded.

5. We sound a strong warning towards abolishment of all customs/ practices done openly or secretly that continue to dehumanise and sexualise women and girls.

The Women of Uganda further demand:

1. Demand a public apology from the organisers for the total disregard they showed for the rights of children especially the girls, and the risk they have exposed the young girls to in the name of promoting culture or tourism.

2. Demand an explanation from the political and administrative leadership of Mbale City about how this festival was permitted to proceed despite media reports indicating that authorities were aware of the nature of the event but just heeded to it.
3. Demand a clear statement from the Bamasaba cultural institution, the Inzu ya Masaba on its position on child protection, girls' rights vis a vis this particular cultural practice and incident.
4. Demand that the government through the police institute an investigation to this and a report is availed to the public and specific warnings and sanctions to be issued to the organisers of the event.

For God and My Country.

UNITED WOMEN CAN!