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5 Decades of the Marriage Bill:

How much longer will it take to Guarantee Safety and Security in Families?

As Uganda joins the rest of the world to celebrate International Women's Day, it is important we reflect on women's achievements and the enormous challenges they face. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing where 189 governments including Uganda adopted the UN Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a roadmap for gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Beijing Platform for Action focused on 12 critical areas of concern, and envisioned a world where each woman and girl can exercise her choices, such as participating in politics, getting an education, having an income, and living in societies free from violence and discrimination. However 20 years on, Uganda as a country is still far from achieving gender equality and women's empowerment.

Currently 25% of Ugandans live under abject poverty with women in a more disproportionate position. The UDHS 2011 indicates that 56% of women aged between 15 and 49 have suffered physical violence and 28% of women have suffered sexual violence. 6 in 10 ever-married women between the age 15 to 49 have experienced violence while 16% have experienced violence during pregnancy.

Although government has made some progress in advancing women's rights by adopting and being party to international legal instruments such as the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol, there is very limited commitment to allocate resources towards the implementation, enforcement and monitoring of the laws that are put in place. There is also lack of political will to enact a comprehensive family law that would ensure total empowerment of Ugandans.

The Marriage and Divorce Bill 2009 formerly the Domestic Relations Bill has a long history that dates back to 1957. It seeks to conform with the Constitution by reforming and consolidating existing laws relating to marriage, marital rights and duties.

The Bill in sum gives effect to the principle in Article 31(1) of the Constitution that 'men and women are entitled to equal rights in marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution'.

The Bill is a product of several consultations over the years that have resulted in compromise and consensus positions as well as innovative solutions to the issues being tackled. It was presented on the floor of Parliament in February 2013, debated and about 20 clauses were passed but the process was halted to allow for members of Parliament to further consult the public on some of the contentious clauses. Since then, the debate of the Bill was neither continued nor was a report of the findings of the consultations by members of Parliament presented on the floor to guide further proceedings.

We strongly believe that empowerment of a person

starts in the home. What affects them in the home has social, political and economic implications for our country as a whole. 'The personal is political'. Therefore as government prioritizes country-border security similarly safety and security in homes and families should be given due attention as a measure to averse possible civil uprisings and promote people centred development.

According to the Uganda Vision 2040, Uganda is poised to become a middle income country by 2032. However no country can make such progress while

over half of its population is excluded from key development initiatives. Comprising 51%, women are critical to government's goal of transforming Ugandan Society from a peasant to a modern and prosperous country.

As we celebrate the International Women's Day, we wish to recognize that delivering women's rights, reducing poverty and promoting national security are mutually reinforcing. We thus call upon the 9th Parliament to debate and enact the Marriage and Divorce Bill, 2009 before the end of its fourth session.

