SPEECH BY MAI ELIZABETH TSVANGIRAI AT THE

COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL

DAY OF THE GIRL CHILD,

CHITUNGWIZA,

11 OCTOBER 2012

The Director the Girl Child Network, Ms Edinah Masanga,

The Principal Director in the Office of the Prime Minister,

Girl Child Network Board of Trustees,

Directors of Non-Governmental Organisations,

The UN family,

The civil society officials here present,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This feels more like home coming. Chitungwiza is my home. It gives me great pleasure to stand before you on this inaugural observance of the International Day of the Girl Child. I stand before you today as your mother and sister and I am glad that the United Nations has set aside this day to recognize girls’ rights and the unique challenges they face around the world. Today, girls’ voices will be amplified.

The theme for this year is "Ending Child Marriage," chosen because child marriage is a phenomenon that violates millions of girls' rights, disrupts their education, jeopardizes their health, and denies them their childhood, limiting their opportunities and impacting all aspects of a girl's life. Child marriage increases girls’ risk to be victims of violence and abuse, and therefore constitutes an obstacle to the achievement of nearly every Millennium Development Goal (MDG).

I am glad to note that at the GCN you are at the forefront in the fight against child marriages and that during the current year, you have successfully assisted 1522 cases of sexual abuse with the assistance of the Victim Friendly Unit. Statistics recorded by GCN in 2011 show that more than 100 girls were trapped in forced marriages and many more were used to avenge spirits while hundreds more were raped. Societies must change their attitudes towards the girl child if we are to successfully fight this scourge.4

Preventing child marriages will protect girls’ rights and help reduce their risk of abuse, early pregnancy, HIV infection, and maternal death and disability. When girls are able to stay in school and avoid being married early, they can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their families and participate in the progress of their nations.I call on the Government to take urgent action to:

1.end the harmful practice of child marriage

2.Enact and enforce appropriate legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18 and raise public awareness about child marriage as a violation of girls’ human rights.5

3.Improve access to good quality primary and secondary education, ensuring that gender gaps in schooling are eliminated.

4. Address the root causes underlying child marriage, including gender discrimination, low value of girls, poverty, or religious and cultural justifications.

The role of women and girls in our society has changed significantly with many more opportunities for them. We have since seen the rise of women in government, industry, sports, and the media. From South Africa to Malawi, from Liberia to Brazil and Germany, we have seen the ability of women to achieve greatness, which society never expected.

My Sisters and Daughters, it is my strong belief that among you are future leaders our country. As I share with you today, I see future presidents, prime ministers, business leaders, church and opinion leaders from among you.

Let us join hands today and speak with one voice against any forms of girl child abuse.

On this note I wish you fruitful commemorations.

I thank you.