**Speech by H.E. Jo Lomas, British High Commissioner to Namibia, on the occasion of the opening of Women’s Leadership Centre Conference on Preventing Harmful Cultural Practices in the Zambesi Region**

**Check upon delivery!**

**Katima Mulilo 13 February 2017**

**Ladies and gentlemen**

I am delighted to be here in Katima today to help launch this conference.

The UK is a global leader in the fight against sexual violence and other human rights violations against women and children. We have led the global campaign to prevent Sexual Violence in Conflict and most recently here in Namibia we have worked with UNICEF in our global ambition to help stop Online Child Sexual Exploitation.

Namibia is a great partner to work with. From her leadership of the Women, Peace and Security agenda at the United Nations, to her efforts to have equal representation in Parliament, Namibia is a great example of what can be achieved for women with a genuine focus on their empowerment and equality.

But there will always be challenges. I have to say I was shocked when I heard about some of the practices still used n this region today. Whether it is the mutilation of women’s bodies, so called “widow cleansing” or treating women as property. When the Women's Leadership Centre sat in my office and told me about these practices I was very keen that we, the UK, do something to help. That’s why we are sponsoring this conference.

I see this challenge as twofold. Firstly it about building a realisation and a consensus amongst senior members of the community that these practices are harmful mentally and physically. That these practices are directly responsible for the higher incident of HIV-AIDS in this region than in other parts of Namibia. It’s also about acknowledging that some traditions can and should change for the better without damaging those positive elements of this vibrant culture.

The second challenge is about empowering our women and girls. They need to understand their rights and above all to feel free and secure in saying NO. ENOUGH. Now this is far from being just a Namibian problem. It’s not a regional problem or an African problem. In the UK I frequently read stories of girls who have low ambition and often education, lack of confidence and a belief that putting up with harmful sexual practices will make them better or more loved.

These girls, wherever they are in the world, need mentors, teachers, families who will instil them with confidence who will teach them that their bodies are their own and that they get to make the decisions. I am the mother of a 7 year old daughter and I believe that the most important thing I can teach her is to love herself and her body. Let’s make sure all our girls believe that.

I’d like to congratulate the WLC on tackling this issue. Its often uncomfortable, sometimes embarrassing to their audience to talk about what goes on behind closed doors. But Liz, Liz and their team have been doggedly pursuing this issue for 8 years. It’s clear that these changes don’t happen overnight but the British High Commission stands ready to support your work in this important area. I hope this conference will help shift the dial further so that these practices are accepted as outdated and harmful and that women and girls in this region can take control of their lives.

Thank you and good luck.