

What the Evidence Shows: Protecting Girls: Global Efforts to End Child Marriage

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to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,
Subcommittee on
Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security and Global Women's Issues

September 14, 2016

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer, and esteemed members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on the important issue of protecting girls around the world from the pernicious—yet not insurmountable—human rights abuse of child marriage.

Our colleagues from the State Department provided an excellent summary of U.S. efforts to empower girls around the world and to protect them from numerous rights abuses, including child marriage. My organization, the International Center for Research on Women - ICRW - has been building the evidence base regarding child marriage for the better part of two decades. During that time, we have worked to raise awareness of this important issue across the globe, and we have worked with so many in the U.S. government - including Ambassador Russell, Assistant Secretary Richard, Senator Collins, Senator Durbin and Senator Boxer - among others, to expand evidence-based policies and programs to prevent this harmful practice. So I testify before you today with no small amount of pride that our government has is now leading the world in prioritizing girls in its foreign policy and development assistance. For that I commend you and your colleagues like Senator Durbin, who have been tireless advocates for girls around the world.

You have also just received an excellent overview of the practice of child marriage from our good colleague Lakshmi Sundaram, who sits at the secretariat of the Girls Not Brides global partnership, of which ICRW co-chairs the U.S. National Partnership, Girls Not Brides USA. I could not agree more with her recommendations as to what should be next for U.S. leadership on this issue.

I'll focus my brief remarks today on some of the emerging evidence ICRW is generating that we hope will shed more light on not just the drivers and consequences of child marriage, but also on solutions that can unlock real and sustainable progress, so that we can end this practice within a generation. As harmful as this challenge is, it is not without solutions.

Understanding Structural Drivers and Root Causes

While there are some common underlying factors, the drivers of child marriage are different from region to region, country to country, and even girl to girl. Indeed, as we learn more about

the practice, we learn more about the diverse, and often complex, drivers of it, both across and within countries. And understanding these drivers is critical if we are to develop solutions to end the practice.

In nearly all contexts where child marriage is prevalent, social and community norms around sexuality and gender play a tremendous role. Where girls are valued only for their roles as wives and mothers; where viable economic opportunities are available only to men, but not women; where having sex outside of marriage – or even talking to men other than your brother or father – is forbidden; where girls, but not boys, are taken out of school to help with household chores because girls' education is seen as having no value; child marriage *will* continue. Gender inequality is, in itself, a significant driver of child marriage, no matter where it happens.

Much of the early evidence we had on child marriage came from India, Bangladesh and Ethiopia, where parents or community leaders were – and still are, in many cases – the main decision-makers around girls' marriage. Girls here are often taken out of school and married off *by* an adult, often *to* an adult, often an adult they may not even know. In contexts like these, targeting these decision-makers and shifting social norms regarding the value of the girl – solutions that you've heard already today – are of utmost importance.

But we now have more evidence from contexts where girls are forced to drop out of school, not because of marriage, but because the practical costs of attending school outweigh the bleak economic opportunities that girls and young women have in their communities. And once out of school, girls may be forced to marry, either because it is socially unacceptable to be an out-of-school, unmarried adolescent, or because marriage may be their only means of financial support.

We also know – from our recent research in Senegal, Uganda, Kenya and Zambia, and that of groups like Promundo in Latin America, and Tahirih Justice Center in the United States – that many girls are dropping out of school and becoming child brides because they become pregnant, something that is seen as incompatible with formal education in many contexts.

So, while it may add a great deal of complexity to the issue, it is vital that we understand the different circumstances that contribute to child marriage, so that we may implement the most appropriate solutions to it. That said, there are some broad solutions that can be implemented across contexts.

One of the most important pieces of research ICRW has produced on this issue is our *Solutions to End Child Marriage* paper. This was a systematic review, in which we reviewed more than 150 programs to determine what works best to end child marriage. We identified five commonly employed solutions, which are also reflected in the *U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* that you heard about earlier today. These are:

- I. First, empower girls with information, skills and support networks.** Having girls learn basic skills like literacy and numeracy, how to communicate and negotiate, to stay healthy, to solve problems, and to earn and manage money, can help girls become more knowledgeable and self-confident. Engaging with peers and mentors can also help alleviate the social and economic isolation many girls experience.

- II. **Second, educate and rally parents and community members.** As you've heard, these adults are often the ones responsible for deciding when and whom a girl marries. We have seen powerful examples of how educating these key stakeholders about how child marriage impacts a girl's health and future can spark significant change.
- III. **Third, enhance girls' access to quality formal education.** Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry before 18 as those with secondary or higher education. Providing incentives – such as uniforms or scholarships – or the necessary skills and support for girls to enroll and remain in school can help delay marriage. Programs aimed at improving the safety and girl-friendliness of schools, strengthening school curricula and making school lessons relevant to girls' lives also are effective. When girls are in school, they are also less likely to be seen as ready for marriage, and they can develop social networks and skills that allow them to advocate for themselves and their futures.
- IV. **Fourth, provide economic support and incentives to girls and their families.** Some parents may see a short term financial benefit from marrying their daughter early, by gaining a bride price, lowering the price of dowry or simply having one less mouth to feed. And some girls may find themselves without any financial support from their families, and thus turn to boyfriends and potential husbands. Providing a girl or her family with a loan or an opportunity to learn an income-generating skill, can provide economic relief for struggling families. And daughters who learn skills that enable them to earn an income in the future may be seen as adding more value to the family.
- V. **Lastly, encourage supportive laws and policies – and, importantly, their implementation.** Many countries with high rates of child marriage have legislation on the books to prohibit the practice. Advocating for the implementation of such laws, and raising awareness about them among government officials and community leaders and members, can help strengthen and/or better enforce existing initiatives around girls' rights. Where such legislation is not on the books, advocating for legal and policy reform is a critical first step. We know that while laws themselves can't solve the problem, they are a necessary part of the solution.

I should note that the most effective approaches are those that employ several of these strategies, often in combination with others. And we also know that siloed interventions do not always work. Recent research conducted by ICRW, and funded by USAID, for example, demonstrates this very point. In a rigorous evaluation, we found that a large-scale conditional cash transfer program that was intended to delay marriage in India did *not* work, largely because there was no corresponding effort to educate families, communities or girls on the value of girls as their own, independent beings, endowed with rights to choose if, when and whom to marry. The intervention was thus perceived by many as the government defraying the economic burden that having girls placed on poor families. In many cases, that money was even used for the girl's dowry as soon as she turned 18.

New research we recently conducted in Zambia and Kenya – the findings of which we are actually publishing today, and which reflect some of our other recent research in sub-Saharan Africa – indicates that the main drivers of marriage in these contexts are school dropout and early pregnancy. So here, interventions to delay marriage would need to target both of these drivers. In particular, providing adolescents with sexuality education – starting with basic information about fertility and pregnancy, as well as youth-friendly reproductive health services, can also be important solutions to curtailing both adolescent pregnancy and child marriage.

Recommendations

I would like to close with a word about the importance of U.S. leadership in ending child marriage.

While we all recognize the harms that child marriage does to girls, we should also understand that child marriage is also actively undermining American investments in broader goals of global health, education, democracy and governance, and so much more.

ICRW is currently engaged in a multi-year, global research project, in partnership with the World Bank, in which we are calculating the economic impacts of child marriage. While the research is ongoing, our initial findings show that, in addition to the harmful effects on girls' health, education, rights, and wellbeing that we've heard about today, the economic costs of child marriage, from the individual to the national levels are very significant. In Niger, which has the highest child marriage rates in the world, for example, eliminating child marriage today would translate into savings of \$25 billion by the year 2030 for the education sector alone. The cumulative savings to governments and societies will likely be in the *trillions* of dollars. There's much more to this study, and if you invite me back in about six months, I'll be able to tell you much more.

For now, however, we have sufficient evidence to confidently recommend the following:

1. It cannot be assumed that child marriage will be adequately addressed as part of the increasing and very worthy efforts to advance the broader health, education and welfare of adolescent girls. To ensure that child marriage prevention receives the dedicated attention it deserves, I recommend the Senate commission a report that details where, how, and how much the Administration is currently investing in ending child marriage. Once we have that information, let's double these efforts. Even then, I suspect the U.S. may still find itself well behind many other countries in addressing this issue. But it would be a good start.
2. Don't let married girls get lost in the shuffle. We critically need robust investments to delay the age of marriage. But at the same time, those 15 million girls who still marry each year are among the neediest and hardest to reach individuals in the world. Even as we work to more fully understand their needs, we know that they should be provided with educational opportunities and with critical health care services, including youth-friendly family planning, maternal health, HIV screening and treatment, and mental health care.
3. Continue to invest in research to better understand what will work to prevent child marriage in regions where we don't know as much—starting with the Western Hemisphere and the Middle East and North Africa, where child marriage rates are high, but attention to and funding to combat the challenge are low. Let us also implement and evaluate new interventions, so that we can develop scalable models that are most effective across different contexts.
4. Finally, continue and expand the growing emphasis on girls' rights and empowerment. As the research demonstrates, we cannot end this problem without ensuring that girls have viable

alternatives to marriage, know their rights and are equipped to negotiate them with the gatekeepers of their lives: parents, teachers, community and religious elders.

I know of no government in the world that has articulated as solid a commitment to girls in their foreign policy as the United States has this year. There is no stronger foundation on which to build truly transformative change.

As we move toward a new Administration, it will be incumbent upon Congress to ensure that we build on this foundation and continue to advance opportunities for adolescent girls around the globe. Thank you for your leadership in this regard.