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Good morning Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer, Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today on this critical issue of child, early and forced marriage. It is a pleasure to be here with you again after our last session in June on girls education globally, and it is an honor to be asked to speak on an issue that is central to our efforts to empower women globally.

**Scale and scope of the problem**

Child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) is a widespread, global phenomenon, with one in three girls worldwide married before the age of 18, one in nine married before the age of 15, and some girls married as young as eight or nine years old. Child, early and forced marriage disproportionately affects girls: approximately 156 million men currently alive were married before the age of 18, as compared to approximately 720 million women—a figure equivalent to 10 percent of the world's population, with an additional 15 million married each year. Girls are also more likely than boys to be married to significantly older spouses—especially in marriages involving girls under 15 and in polygynous marriages where an adolescent girl may be a second or third wife.

The persistence and prevalence of this practice is one of the key human rights, security, and development crises of our time because the systemic impact of child, early and forced marriage is dramatic and far reaching. Through the Sustainable Development Goals, over 190 governments share the view that ending harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation and cutting, is essential for advancing gender equality globally.

### **Consequences**

CEFM forces a girl into adulthood and motherhood before she is physically and mentally mature and before she completes her education, limiting her future options, depriving her of the chance to reach her full potential, and preventing her from contributing fully to her family and community.

#### ***Reduced Educational Attainment***

In almost every context where it occurs, CEFM has a strong negative correlation with educational attainment and political participation. In line with social norms portraying marriage and school attendance as incompatible, parents may pressure girls to discontinue their educations. At the same time, pregnancy and expected domestic responsibilities also present formidable challenges to pursuing an education. Schools may have policies that dictate that pregnant girls or young mothers be expelled, and even absent such policies, pregnant girls and mothers may face stigma and bullying by peers and teachers that cause them to drop out. Child brides not only face difficulty completing secondary school—they may also have trouble making the transition to secondary school, particularly if they enrolled in primary education late. In some areas, girls reach the median age of marriage in their society before they have even finished primary school.

## *Risks to Health and Wellness*

CEFM has devastating health consequences as married adolescents are more likely to experience psychological, physical and sexual violence and exposure to sexually transmitted illnesses. Approximately 16 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 years old give birth each year, comprising about 11 percent of births globally. Early pregnancy and childbirth have severe consequences for adolescent girls as compared to young women, including an increased risk of miscarriage and complications during labor, obstetric fistula, and death. Despite progress in overall rates around the world, maternal mortality remains a leading cause of death among girls aged 15-19, taking the lives of nearly 70,000 girls each year. Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than adult women.

Research in sub-Saharan Africa has shown that married girls have a 50 percent higher rate of HIV infection as compared to their unmarried, sexually active peers. Overall, sub-Saharan adolescent girls are two to six times more likely than adolescent boys to be HIV positive, because they are so often married to older, more sexually experienced men. Additionally, adolescent girls often lack access to healthcare or health information when they are married at an early age and become socially isolated within their husbands' households.

All of these risks—abuse, HIV, early and frequent pregnancy, poverty, and isolation—may be intensified when there is a large age difference between a girl and her husband, a situation that is most common in countries with high rates of early marriage. Since older men are more likely to have had a number of sexual partners and to be HIV-positive, marrying a significantly older husband

dramatically increases a girls' risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

### ***Reduced Economic Potential***

Early marriage locks a girl into traditional gender roles that limit development and access to a basic education, opportunity for employment in the formal economy, or other basic foundations for full citizenship. Child, early and forced marriage undermines economic productivity, perpetuate health risks for girls, and threaten sustainable growth and development. It hijacks a girl's agency to decide her future and hinder individual growth and development while systematically holding her children back as well. The children of young mothers have higher rates of infant mortality and malnutrition and are less likely to be educated than children born to mothers older than 18. This is a costly and tragic cycle.

### **Drivers of CEFM**

While child, early and forced marriages can take place for a myriad of different reasons in different settings, the core drivers are usually economic and social, and often perpetuate, gender inequality. The practices can be rooted in systems that hold women and girls in subordinate roles and accord them less value than men and boys. Under these conditions, parents see limited roles for girls and little incentive to invest in their education.

### ***Poverty***

Child, early and forced marriage is rooted in poverty, displacement, or societal pressures. It is both a driver of and symptom of poverty and limited economic

opportunities for women and girls. More than half of girls from the poorest families in the developing world are married as children. Lack of economic opportunity for women, ownership over assets, and economic mobility makes marriage the perceived safest choice for girls and their families. In communities where a dowry or ‘bride price’ is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families; in those where the bride’s family pays the groom a dowry, they often have to pay less money if the bride is young and uneducated.

In Jordan, I met Syrian refugee women who simply could not pay their rent or feed their families. One woman told me that her 15 year-old daughter was receiving marriage proposals. She was refusing, but the pressure to relieve some of the family’s burden was palpable. But the girls are not the only victims. Entire countries lose out on the productive potential of girls who are subjected to early and forced marriage, which weakens their economic output, cultural creativity, and political stability. Across that region, we have heard countless stories of girls married to ease pressure on strained family finances.

### ***State Fragility and Conflict***

State fragility, conflict, and humanitarian emergencies exacerbate drivers of CEFM by aggravating economic insecurity, eroding social safety networks, and limiting girls’ freedom of movement and access to educational and economic opportunities. In such contexts, families may perceive marriage as a means to increase a daughter’s safety, particularly from violent extremist groups and other combatants who often force girls into marriage; however, girls married under these circumstances are more vulnerable to violence from husbands and families and are unlikely to remain in school. Forced marriages are a pervasive feature of armed conflicts around the world, perpetrated by violent actors, including rebel or

insurgent groups. Abduction and forcible marriage is a common tactic among non-state actors, often leading to sexual slavery and prolonged forced labor.

It is important that we understand how conflict exacerbates forced marriages. Last year in Jordan, I met Huda, a Sunni Muslim woman from Mosul. As a widow, Huda felt she had increasingly fewer options to save her sons and daughter from Da'esh's clutches. She decided to flee her home, selling everything to fund the dangerous trip from Iraq to Amman, Jordan. Huda is one of the many Iraqi women who told me how Da'esh makes life unlivable for women and girls. The situation is especially grim for minorities. Reports indicate that Da'esh has abducted more than three thousand women and girls, including those from Iraq's religious community of Yezidis and other minority groups. Girls as young as 12 or 13 have been forced to marry violent extremists or sold to the highest bidder -- like cattle at an auction. These are young girls, mothers, and sisters facing imminent rape, trafficking, and forced marriage. Through emergency assistance programs, we have been able to help provide medical, psycho-social, and livelihood support for over 150 women and girls who survived Da'esh captivity. However, there are still thousands of girls that are held captive and will need assistance.

It is important that we speak about Huda, and her Iraqi sisters. We must not accept such stories as casualties of a war thousands of miles away and beyond our consciousness. In the situation I described, child, early and forced marriage is, plain and simple, an aspect of terror, a horrific violation of human rights with a lifetime of consequences. It is a tactic of terrorist groups like Da'esh and Boko Haram to control entire populations and to recruit new fighters. And it must be stopped. As Secretary of State John Kerry and others have said, preventing this kind of brutalization of women and girls in conflict zones preserves our common

humanity. It also protects the national security interests of the United States and our allies. We must come together to ensure we end it.

### **Addressing the Problem**

Women and girls around the world are leading the charge in their communities to take a stand to change the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage. Recently, I joined Secretary Kerry in Nigeria. We spent a morning with a group of adolescent girls benefiting from STEM programs and the efforts of organizations devoted to empowering adolescent girls and changing their families' perspectives about the value of girls' education. In Nigeria, I met Amina. She is one of those rare girls who completed 12 years of schooling. She told me that girls drop out of school "after a certain age to move to their husband's house." She told me that girls are generally married by the age of 13, and they usually immediately start having children. Amina's life has been different because her parents prioritized her education, rather than her marriage.

Fortunately, we are seeing effective efforts to confront and end this practice around the world in even the most remote villages where early and forced marriages are the norm. One such leader is Memory Banda, a young woman from Malawi. In Memory's community, it's not unusual for girls to get married and have children at very young ages. But Memory refused to get married. Instead, she organized literacy classes for other girls. She got involved in local advocacy. And she went to college. Her story is more than inspiring. It's also a reminder that girls around the world are not asking for our pity. They are asking for our partnership. And when we partner with them, we will be successful. Memory is proof of that: thanks to her efforts, and the work of other activists in Malawi, Malawi has adopted laws against early marriage.

That's not to say that our work in Malawi is done. While commendable, Malawi, like many other similarly-situated countries, has difficulty enforcing these laws. As of 2010, legal prohibitions against child, early and forced marriage were in effect in 158 countries, and 146 of those granted exemptions in the case of parental consent. In many countries, existing laws are weakly enforced, especially when they conflict with local customs. For this reason, I was impressed by the efforts of Malawi's "child marriage terminator" senior chief Theresa Kachindamoto. Chief Kachindamoto has banned CEFM and told the chiefs under her that they must also stop all sexual initiation rituals, like sexual cleansings, or she will dismiss them. During her tenure, she has annulled some 850 marriages. Her efforts are testament to the fact that ending CEFM requires a multi-faceted approach.

### **U.S. Government Efforts to Address CEFM**

The United States is taking a whole-of-government approach to addressing CEFM and has undertaken several key actions to combat this practice. The United States has co-sponsored resolutions on ending CEFM at the UN Human Rights Council and in the UN General Assembly's Third Committee. In 2012, the State Department began including reporting on the minimum age of marriage and the rate of marriage under the age of 18 in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and adopted new guidance and training for consular officers to assist U.S. citizens living abroad who are forced into marriages. That same year, USAID released Ending Child Marriage and Meeting the Needs of Married Children: The USAID Vision for Action, which set goals to mobilize communities to shift norms that perpetuate CEFM, address the unique needs of married children, and cultivate partnerships with host governments and the private sector.



The U.S. Government addresses child, early and forced marriage through three core interagency policies.

- **The U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security** (2011) commits the USG to strengthen efforts to prevent and protect women and children from harm, exploitation, discrimination, and abuse, including sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. By ensuring that women's perspectives and considerations of gender dynamics are woven into the DNA of how the United States approaches peace processes, conflict prevention, the protection of civilians, and humanitarian assistance, the National Action Plan affirms that matters of gender equality are fundamental to our national security interests. Importantly, the Plan recognizes that the protection and empowerment of girls is part of a comprehensive approach to preventing and responding to conflict.
- **The U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Response to Gender-based Violence Globally** (2012) identifies CEFM as a form of gender-based violence and emphasizes the need for increased programming to address the practice in countries where it is most prevalent. The strategy also calls on U.S. agencies to address root causes of violence as a means to raising the value of girls while developing best practices, programs, and policies.
- To address the range of challenges facing adolescent girls, Secretary Kerry launched the interagency **U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls** in March 2014. Bringing together the efforts of the Department of State, USAID, the Peace Corps and The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MMC), the goal of the strategy is to ensure adolescent girls are educated, healthy, socially and economically

empowered, and free from violence and discrimination. The United States is the first country in the world to develop a strategy focused on the protection and advancement of adolescent girls globally, and addressing child, early, and forced marriage will be a central focus of U.S. government efforts to implement this strategy. The Department of State has prioritized addressing child, early and forced marriage as one of the three key objectives specified in its implementation plan.

### ***Interagency Programs***

These policies are being implemented through a range of initiatives and programs. In particular, Let Girls Learn—a presidential initiative championed by the First Lady—is a central part of the United States’ implementation of the U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls. In July 2015, President Obama announced the Let Girls Learn Challenge Fund to design new, holistic programs that address the range of challenges preventing adolescent girls from attaining a quality education that empowers them to reach their full potential.

Malawi and Tanzania were selected in 2015 as the first two focus countries under the Let Girls Learn Challenge Fund. In these countries, USAID and the Department of State are working with an array of USG agencies, multilateral and bilateral partners, and civil society and the private sector to co-create, co-fund, pilot, and implement innovative programs through a multi-sectoral approach. Nepal and Laos were also just recently announced as additional countries for the USG to engage with as well.

### ***Department of State Programs***

While the U.S. Government has many programs that address child, early and forced marriage through economic empowerment, access to health, educational programs and legal reform, the Department of State also has programs aimed at understanding and responding to child, early and forced marriage.

- In March 2016, Secretary Kerry announced \$7 million in programming to empower adolescent girls in Afghanistan, where the Department of State will fund efforts to change perceptions about child, early and forced marriage at the district and community level through grants for girls to go to school and support for counseling, networks for girls, and training on life and vocational skills.
- Through the Global Women Peace and Security Initiative, the Gender Based Violence Initiative, and the “Voices Against Violence” global program, the Department provides emergency assistance to support survivors of extreme forms of GBV and harmful traditional practices. We have been able to provide funds for girls who were threatened with forced marriage, through small, short-term emergency assistance funding for expenses including medical expenses, psychosocial support or counseling, emergency shelter or other safe accommodation, relocation expenses, livelihood and dependent support, and legal assistance. The program is meant to provide assistance to those in urgent situations with little to no alternatives for support.

Through our Voices Against Violence program, we will engage with actors who have influence over the community’s attitudes and behavior, this includes judges from civil and religious courts, and grassroots organizations

on the ground to educate families. By working with local experts, advocates, and stakeholders, we will create meaningful, long-term changes.

- The Department is also supporting a three-year, \$5 million collaborative effort with USAID and UNICEF aimed at reducing the prevalence of school-related gender-based violence and establishing child and adolescent-friendly procedures to respond to incidents of GBV when they occur. Through training, mapping of services for GBV victims, advocacy and awareness raising activities, school actors are gaining knowledge of the impact of GBV, including on early marriage and its legal and social consequences. This project is developing a systematic reporting and referral mechanism to monitor and respond to incidents of school-related GBV.

### ***USAID Programs***

USAID invests in both research to expand our knowledge on effective interventions to prevent CEFM and programs to address the needs of married adolescents in regions where the practice is most prevalent. Guided by rigorous project evaluations and the latest research findings, USAID's interventions include promoting girls' education, supporting married children, strengthening the enactment and enforcement of laws and policies that delay marriage, and building community outreach efforts to shift attitudes that perpetuate the practice. In FY 2015, USAID doubled its investment to prevent CEFM and support married children, building on decades of engagement on these issues, including addressing the needs of more than 50 million girls and boys who are already married but have limited access to education, health services and economic opportunities.

- The USAID Vision for Action to Ending Child Marriage & Meeting the Needs of Married Children provided health care and access to education to married children and adolescents and educated students, teachers, parents, and community leaders, through programs including the Safe Schools program in Nepal, focusing on the importance of delaying marriage and the harmful effects of CEFM.
- USAID also conducted research to study the effectiveness of programs to delay child, early, and forced marriage in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Burkina Faso. Based on the findings of this research, the programs were later expanded to additional high-prevalence regions. Data on the impact of programs in Tanzania and Ethiopia data was shared through a global dissemination of results (available here: <http://www.popcouncil.org/research/building-an-evidence-base-to-delay-marriage-in-sub-saharan-africa>) in the fall of 2015.
- In Bangladesh, the Protecting Human Rights program supports the development and momentum on amendments from the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs (MOWCA). A divisional level workshop on child marriage was held and one immediate outcome was the announcement of an annual national day on prevention of child marriage, to be observed every 29th of September in Bangladesh.
- In addition, in September 2015 USAID released a resource guide on preventing and responding to CEFM. This resource guide provides information on how partners and USAID sectors, missions, and staff can integrate CEFM prevention and response into their programming.

USAID will continue to work in partnership with lawmakers, international organizations, the private sector, and change agents at the national, local, and community levels to address the practice of CEFM

### **Conclusion:**

While the statistics can seem grim, in every country I travel to, I meet innovative, resilient women, men and youth who are working hard to lead their countries toward gender equality and away from harmful practices like child, early and forced marriage. They know that with their hard work and community building, change will come in their countries. It is the tenacity of these individuals that keep us going, and I see it as key part of my job to raise up these leaders. As a matter of fact, just yesterday, we learned that Nadia Murad, Iraq's Nobel Peace Prize Nominee who is an outspoken survivor of Dae'esh, has just been named as a 2016 UN Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. Her appointment will take place on September 16<sup>th</sup>, the International Day of Peace, at UN Headquarters in NY. Nadia has bravely testified before the UN Security Council, U.S. Congress, UK Parliament, and other important international forums as a survivor of Da'esh violence and trafficking. She is just one example of the kind of grass-roots strength and will that inspires me to keep pressing forward every day.

On behalf of the State Department and the Office of Global Women's Issues, I'd like to thank the committee for their leadership in shedding light on this global economic, development, and human rights issue.