



GIRLS NOT BRIDES

The Global Partnership
to End Child Marriage

**Testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee,
Subcommittee on
Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy,
Human Rights and Global Women's Issues
Hearing: Protecting Girls: Global Efforts to End Child Marriage**

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Chairman Rubio, Senator Boxer, and esteemed members of the committee,

Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony today. I am delighted that the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has decided to hold a hearing on the important issue of child marriage. As the Chairman alluded, I am Lakshmi Sundaram and I am the Executive Director of *Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage*. We are a global civil society partnership bringing together over 600 organisations from 80 countries dedicated to ending child marriage in our lifetime. Our members range from tiny community groups to large international NGOs, and include amazing organisations you have heard from before, such as the Kakenya Center for Excellence or World Vision. We are represented in the United States by our US National Partnership, *Girls Not Brides USA* – who is here today and has been a tireless leader working with Congress and the Executive Branch to develop and cement US leadership to end child marriage. The efforts of Senator Durbin and other champions merit recognition in that regard. And so before I begin my testimony I would like to commend to you the testimony that was submitted for the record by our US National Partnership, which contains a comprehensive view of US efforts on this issue to date and recommendations for future action, many of which I will highlight for you today.

But first, for those of you who are married, I want you to think back to your wedding day. Hopefully, it was a day of joy and love and promise. Hopefully, it was a day that opened up new horizons and opportunities.

For millions of girls around the world, their wedding day is the opposite. Rather than a joyous event, marriage is linked to dropping out of school and focusing on children and household chores; it represents a closing down of horizons.

How many girls are affected?

- Approximately 15 million girls are married every year before they reach 18 years.¹ That is, approximately 41,000 every day, or one girl every two seconds.

¹ UNICEF, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, 2014

- In the developing world, 1 in 3 girls is married by age 18, and 1 in 9 is married by age 15, some as young as eight or nine.² And, while we lack reliable data for developed countries, we know that the practice happens there too, including in the US.
- If there is no reduction in the practice, 1.2 billion women will have married as children by 2050 – that’s the equivalent of the entire population of India. These girls and women face distinct challenges and need assistance so they, their children and communities can thrive.
- Child marriage affects boys too, but the overwhelming majority of those who marry as children are girls, reflecting the roots of gender inequality that drive the practice. It is therefore fitting that this hearing is convened in the subcommittee tasked with global women’s issues.

Where does it happen?

- Child marriage is not linked to any specific region, tradition, or religion. It happens all over the world. You might be surprised to hear that, of the top ten countries with the highest absolute number of girls married before 15, four are in Africa, three in South Asia, one in East Asia/Pacific and two in Latin America.
- 45% of girls under age 18 are married in South Asia; 40% in sub-Saharan Africa; 29% in Latin America and the Caribbean; 18% in the Middle East and North Africa; and in Europe and North America too.³

What is the impact, and why does it happen?

When a girl becomes a bride, the consequences are lifelong and devastating – for the girl, for her family and, indeed, for her nation. My colleague Dr. Suzanne Petroni will walk you through some of those macro-level impacts in her testimony. Child marriage is a gross human rights violation that deprives girls of their rights to health, education, freedom from violence and the right to choose if, when and whom to marry.

Child marriage traps girls, their families and societies in a cycle of poverty, limits millions of girls from fulfilling their potential and leading happy, safe and productive lives. Child marriage spells disastrous effects for our shared goals of prosperity, maternal and child health, education and democracy. It means the end of school for girls, a lifetime of domestic servitude, increased risk of violence and sexually-transmitted infections like HIV, increased complications and even death in pregnancy and childbirth.

Child marriage is linked to maternal and child mortality and morbidity

- Countries with high rates of child marriage typically have high rates of maternal mortality. Investing in child marriage could dramatically improve the health outcomes of both mothers and babies.
- Child brides are under intense social pressure to prove their fertility, which makes them more likely to experience early and frequent pregnancies.⁴
- Early pregnancy endangers child brides’ health because many become pregnant before their bodies can safely carry or deliver children.
- Complications in pregnancy and childbirth are the second leading cause of death in girls aged 15-19 globally.⁵

² UNICEF, *Progress for Children: A report card on adolescents*, 2012

³ UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children, Table 9: Child Protection*, 2015

⁴ Levine, R., Lloyd, C., Greene, M., & Grown, C., *Girls Count: A Global Investment and Action Agenda*, Center for Global Development, 2008

⁵ WHO, *Adolescent Pregnancy Fact Sheet*, No.364, September 2014

- Child marriage is a major driver of adolescent births: 95% of the world's births to adolescents occur in developing countries and 90% of these births are to girls who are already married.⁶
- Furthermore 65% of all cases of obstetric fistula occur in girls under the age of 18 resulting in long term physical, emotional and psychological consequences for girls who go untreated.⁷
- Early childbearing also increases the risks to newborns. In low and middle income countries, babies born to mothers under 20 years of age have a 50% higher risk of being stillborn or of dying within the first few weeks of life than those born to older women.

Child marriage undermines a child's right to education

- Child marriage often denies children of school age their right to the education they need for their personal development, their preparation for adulthood, and their ability to contribute to their family and community. Married girls who would like to continue schooling may be both practically and legally excluded from doing so.⁸
- There is a complicated causal relationship between child marriage and education, as child marriage is both a driver and consequence of poor educational attainment.
- Girls tend to drop out of school during the preparatory time before marriage, or shortly afterwards when their marital and domestic demands increase. For example, almost 30% of young women who left secondary school before completion in Chad and Nigeria cited early marriage as the main reason.⁹
- Girls with higher levels of schooling are less likely to marry as children. With half of the world's population under the age of 25, educating youth is crucial to ensuring a sustainable and prosperous future.

Child marriage is linked to poverty and impacts national productivity

- Child marriage is most common in the world's poorest countries and is often concentrated among the poorest households. It is closely linked with low levels of economic development.
- Girls from poor families are nearly twice as likely to marry before 18 as girls from wealthier families, as marriage is often seen as a way to provide for a daughter's future.¹⁰ However, girls who marry young are more likely to be poor and remain poor.¹¹
- Girls who marry young do not receive the educational and economic opportunities that help lift them out of poverty and which are necessary to build a sustainable and prosperous future for their communities and countries.¹²

Child marriage is linked to violence and HIV infection

- Child brides have little say in whether, when or whom they will marry. In many cases their husbands are much older.
- Girls who marry before the age of 18 are more likely to experience violence within marriage than girls who marry later.¹³

⁶ UNFPA, *Motherhood in Childhood*, 2013

⁷ WHO, Fact Sheet, *Why is giving special attention to adolescents important in achieving the millennium development goals?* 2008 available at: http://www.wiredhealthresources.net/resources/NA/WHO-FS_PregnancyAdolescent.pdf

⁸ UNICEF, *Early Marriage: Child Spouses*, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001

⁹ Lloyd and Mensch, 'Marriage and childbirth as factors in school exit: an analysis of DHS data from sub-Saharan Africa', *Population Studies*, 62(1): 1-13, 2008

¹⁰ International Center for Research on Women, *How to End Child Marriage: Action Strategies for Prevention and Protection*, 2007

¹¹ International Center for Research on Women, *Child Marriage Factsheets: Child Marriage and Poverty*, 2007

¹² IPPF and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, *Ending child marriage: a guide for global policy action*, 2006; International Center for Research on Women, *Too Young to Wed: Education & Action towards Ending Child Marriage: Seeking Policy Solutions*, 2005

¹³ Kishor, S. & Johnson, K., *Profiling Domestic Violence – A Multi-Country Study*, ORC Macro, Calverton, Maryland, 2004

- Child marriage exposes girls to a high risk of violence often from their partners or their partners' families. The greater the age difference between girls and their husbands, the more likely they are to experience intimate partner violence.¹⁴
- Women exposed to intimate partner violence are one and a half times more likely to acquire HIV in regions with high HIV prevalence.

Child marriage increases during humanitarian crises and conflicts

- Growing evidence shows that in times of humanitarian crisis, child marriage rates increase, with a disproportionate impact on girls.¹⁵ Yet adolescent girls continue to be left behind in humanitarian response efforts.
- Seven out of the ten countries with the highest child marriage rates are considered fragile states. We cannot ignore child marriage in such contexts.¹⁶
- Child marriage rates have increased in some crisis situations. While gender inequality is a root cause of child marriage in both stable and fragile contexts, often in times of crisis, families see child marriage as a way to cope with economic hardship exacerbated by crisis and to protect girls from increased violence. But in reality, it results in a range of harmful consequences.
- For example, in Syrian refugee communities in Jordan, the proportion of registered marriages for girls under 18 years has rapidly increased. Between 2011 and 2014, the rates of registered child marriages almost tripled, from 12% to just under 32%.¹⁷ Protection of family honour and control of girls' sexuality were major drivers of child marriage in this context.¹⁸
- Child marriage is not being adequately addressed in situations of crisis. It is a cross-cutting issue which requires coordinated action across all sectors from the earliest stage of crises. More research is needed to understand how different types of crises affect child marriage, how programmes which tackle child marriage can be adapted for these settings, and how child marriage can be integrated into humanitarian response efforts. However, research must support interventions to address child marriage, and the need for more research should not be used as an excuse for inaction.

What you may not know is why. Why, in the year 2016, do 15 million girls marry as children each year? It is important to remember that the vast majority of parents want to do what is best for their children. They love their daughters. There are many drivers of child marriage that vary significantly from one context to another:

- **First and foremost, gender inequality:** child marriage happens to girls *because* they are girls. Girls are accorded little value in many societies. They are second-class citizens or perhaps commodities to be bought, sold or exchanged in marriage. It is because girls have less value than boys in society, and outsize value is placed on her virginity.
- **Poverty:** Where poverty is acute, parents may feel that giving a daughter in marriage will reduce family expenses by ensuring they have one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In communities where a dowry or 'bride price' is paid, it is often welcome income for poor families.

¹⁴ UNICEF, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children*, 2014

¹⁵ See *Girls Not Brides* [list of useful resources](#) on child marriage in humanitarian crises.

¹⁶ Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, South Sudan, Guinea and Bangladesh are listed as fragile states as defined by OECD. See definition in *States of Fragility 2015: meeting post-2015 ambitions*. Revised edition, 2015.

¹⁷ UNICEF, *A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan*, 2014.

¹⁸ Op.cit. CARE UK, *To Protect Her Honour: child marriage in emergencies, the fatal confusion between protecting girls and sexual violence*, 2015.

- **Security:** Many parents marry off their daughters young because they feel it is in her best interest, often to ensure her safety in areas where girls are at high risk of physical or sexual assault. However, they do not realise the significant violence she will encounter within marriage.

Why should we tackle child marriage?

Ensuring girls have the right to choose, if, when and whom to marry can create long term change for girls themselves, their families and their countries—and I'd argue it's one of the best returns on investment that you can hope for in your foreign assistance efforts.

What's more, child marriage is at the heart of many of the challenges we want to overcome as an international community. It is a barrier to achieving many development goals, including those on poverty eradication, nutrition, health, education, gender equality, economic growth and reduction of inequality.

Our efforts to reduce child and maternal mortality will be hindered as long as girls are giving birth as children. Our efforts to ensure every child can finish school undermined when in some communities more than 75% of girls have to leave to get married. Our efforts to end violence against women are held back as long as so many girls are trapped in marriages where they have no voice.

- Investing in delayed marriage and childbearing is recommended as a smart investment by the High Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development, which will have "high pay offs for improved wellbeing and quality of life, poverty eradication, economic growth and sustainable development, with multiplier and inter-generational effects that will yield benefits for decades to come."¹⁹
- The World Bank has highlighted that "delays in marriage are strongly associated with greater education, higher earnings and health-seeking behaviour".²⁰

And addressing child marriage can be an entry point. It's also a way to address the more aspirational goal of ensuring equality for girls and women. By tackling child marriage, we are necessarily addressing the way that girls and women are viewed in society.

We can break this cycle, because when a girl is able to avoid marriage as a child she is less likely to marry off her own daughters as children.

So, what will it take to end child marriage?

In 2014, over 150 experts, organisations and researchers came together to develop a global Theory of Change on child marriage, which identified four areas where we should focus our efforts to accelerate change:

- Empower girls, and make them aware of – and able to exercise – their rights and alternatives to marriage through programmes that invest in girls.

¹⁹ High Level Task Force for ICPD, *'Smart Investments for Financing the Post 2015 Development Agenda'*, January 2015, available at; <http://icpdtaskforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/FinancingBriefSmartInvestments2015.pdf>

²⁰ World Bank, *World Development Report, Gender Equality and Development*, 2012

- Work with traditional leaders, fathers, boys, communities to change the attitudes that devalue girls and hold them back. We have seen interesting programmes working with Christian priests, Muslim imams and Hindu clerics, as well as traditional leaders, where they are now champions for change.
- Provide services, like education, legal and health services, both through government and civil society.
- Enact and enforce effective laws and policies that put in place a minimum age of marriage at 18 and don't allow loopholes for traditional or customary laws, and make sure these laws are enforced.

Where are we today?

In the past few years, there has been unprecedented global action to end child marriage, notably:

- **New global and regional commitments:** Child marriage was included as a global development priority in target 5.3 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Resolutions at the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council have mobilised political support and strengthened the global normative framework. Other regional and intergovernmental bodies, including the African Union and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, have set out plans of action to end child marriage.
- **Strengthened legal and policy frameworks:** National strategies have been developed or are being developed in at least 14 countries. Many countries have also taken steps to strengthen their laws to address child marriage and put in place a minimum age of 18. I would encourage the US to follow suit. Currently, in every American state, children under the age of 18 can marry.
- **But we cannot legislate our way out of this practice. Urgent and sustained investment is needed to support new programmes:** the number of programmes addressing child marriage has grown dramatically, with increased action from international NGOs, community based organisations and many others. UNICEF and UNFPA have launched a new Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage in 12 countries. Yet this represents just a fraction of what is needed. The US has been a leader in many regards, although it is unclear how much money you have actually invested to end the practice and meet the needs of married girls.
- **Earlier this year Secretary of State John Kerry released the US Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls,** the first foreign policy in the world geared toward protecting the rights of, and providing pathways of opportunity for, adolescent girls. This strategy enshrines a commitment to girls' rights in US foreign policy and assistance, bringing much-needed attention – and I hope, resources – to the diverse and urgent needs of adolescent girls, including the right to choose if, when and whom to marry. The release of this strategy marked the culmination of years of intense work by those in government and civil society, including *Girls Not Brides USA*, to shape foreign policy and foreign assistance around the needs of girls. This is a great accomplishment.

But releasing a strategy and living the spirit of it are two different things. As much as we want to point to the strategy as an triumph in and of itself, the real, critical issue is how robustly it is institutionalized and implemented – and that is where Congress can help. I urge you to use your powers – of the purse, and of oversight – to ensure this important piece of foreign policy is not just words on paper, but truly directs the diplomatic and development might of the US to transform

girls' lives. I hope you will work with whoever comes into office next year to ensure that child brides and those at risk of marriage will not be left behind.

The US is poised to be a leader in the fight to end child marriage and has already done so much toward this end, but I urge you to escalate this work to improve the lives of adolescent girls globally. Through US foreign assistance, your leadership and influence both bilaterally and in multilateral arenas, and through the strength of Congressional action, I respectfully recommend the US take three initial measures to end child marriage:

1. Ensure US commitments to end child marriage are honoured by giving those efforts the full force of the US government, in terms of policies, programmes and, of course, funding;
2. Don't let child marriage get lost in larger efforts to promote girls' health and education. Mandate regular progress reporting so that Congress and civil society know exactly what is being done to end child marriage and meet the needs of married girls, how successful those efforts have been, and where more investment is needed; and,
3. Show your full support for this issue on the international stage by investing fully in achieving the target to end child marriage under the Sustainable Development Goals.

Conclusion

Chairman Rubio, Senator Boxer and members of the committee, I thought I would end with a more personal story. It is the story of Laxmi Sargara, an 18 year-old girl from Rajasthan, India. Laxmi was married when she was just one year old, to a boy named Rakesh who himself was only three. She knew nothing of this betrothal until the moment, 17 years later, when her parents announced that the time had come to leave home and live with her husband. Laxmi was upset because this was not the future she wanted.

Laxmi's story stands out for me, not only because she has the same name as me, but because she did something remarkable. In what is thought to be the first case of its kind in India, Laxmi turned to the courts and had her marriage annulled. Laxmi is a disruptive woman who was brave enough to stand up against a centuries-old tradition, determined to build a brighter future for herself.

If I had been born in a different context, Laxmi's fate may have been mine. Indeed, child marriage may have been the future facing my own rambunctious two year old daughter. In the work that I do, I am grateful every day that I was spared the experiences of girls like Laxmi. And I hope we can work together to ensure that we end this practice for girls everywhere.

Thank you.