

## **The Causes, Consequences and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World**

**Testimony Submitted to U.S. House of Representatives Human Rights Commission**

**By Anju Malhotra, PhD  
Vice President of Research, Innovation and Impact  
International Center for Research on Women  
Washington, D.C.**

**July 15, 2010**

Chairman Wolf, Chairman McGovern and honorable members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, thank you for holding this hearing on such an important topic. Forced child marriage is a gross violation of human rights and a barrier to girls' health and social well-being.

I come to you today as the vice president of research, innovation and impact at the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). ICRW works to make women an integral part of alleviating global poverty. We do this by using evidence-based approaches to demonstrate that a focus on women is critical for lasting social and economic change.

ICRW differs from other think tanks in that we translate our research into concrete steps that program designers, donors and policy makers can use to create the conditions in which women can thrive. The practical solutions we develop strive to impact not just one life, but millions. And most importantly, our work helps women to change their own lives and their communities for the better.

My testimony will show how and why forced child marriage is a pervasive problem across the developing world, affecting the lives of millions of girls. It violates their human rights and it severely impedes global development efforts. Forced marriage undermines initiatives to raise girls' education, to reduce maternal mortality, and to increase employment and enterprise levels. I also will discuss how this problem is

surmountable. Existing solutions can go very far in making a difference. The International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act, introduced in both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 2009, begins to outline some of these solutions. With political will and resources authorized in this legislation, the United States can support on the ground efforts that many countries are undertaking to help bring down perceptibly forced child marriage rates over the next few years.

## **The Scope of the Problem**

Forced child marriage is a life-changing reality for many of the world's girls. Some as young as 8 or 9 are forced to trade their childhoods for a life that can be defined by isolation, violence and illness. It is a practice rooted more in tradition than religious custom, and one that spans the globe, from Asia to Africa to the Americas. The number of girls who are married as children is astounding.

According to UNICEF, in 2007 more than more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 worldwide had married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>1</sup> If current trends continue, an additional 100 million girls – or 25,000-30,000 girls *every day*-- will become child brides over the next decade.<sup>2</sup> While boys are subjected to early marriage, most child marriages involve girls. For instance, in Mali the ratio of girls ages 15-19 who were married as children compared to boys, is 72 to one, and in El Salvador it is six to one.<sup>3</sup>

An ICRW review shows that rates of child marriage are highest in parts of Africa, and in South Asia, where one-half to three-fourths of girls are married before age 18. Niger, Mali and Chad have the highest rates

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. 2009. "Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse."  
[http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_45451.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45451.html)

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, J., and S. Clark. 2004. The implications of early marriage for HIV/AIDS policy", brief based on background paper prepared for the WHO/UNFPA/Population Council Technical Consultation on Married Adolescents. Population Council: New York, NY. (see [http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts\\_child\\_marriage.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/presskit/factsheets/facts_child_marriage.htm))

<sup>3</sup> Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI). 1995. *Women, families and the future: Sexual relationships and marriage worldwide*. AGI: New York.

of forced child marriage in the world, ranging from 71 percent to 77 percent.<sup>4</sup> But because of the large populations of countries such as India and Bangladesh, the greatest number of child brides lives in South Asia, where 46 percent of all marriages take place before the girl is 18.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, there is sometimes large variation of rates of child marriage within countries. For instance, some Indian states, such as Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, have high rates of forced child marriage, while other states such as Kerala have lower rates. In Ethiopia, national rates hover close to 50 percent, but the state of Amhara has a rate of more than 80 percent.

For these reasons, investments aimed at eradicating child marriage should target both countries with high rates of child marriage as well as hotspots within countries with high rates.

#### **Four Main Causes of Child Marriage**

Child marriage continues to be a reality for many of the world's girls because of a variety of factors. These include poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, insecurity in the face of war and conflict, and the force of custom and tradition.

##### *Poverty*

For many poor families, marrying their daughter at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. In Asia and Africa, the importance of financial transactions at the time of marriage also tends to push families to marry their daughters early. For example, in many sub-Saharan cultures parents get a high bride price for a daughter who is married

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<sup>4</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2007. *New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/new-insights-preventing-child-marriage>

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF. 2009. "Child protection from violence, exploitation and abuse." [http://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_45451.html](http://www.unicef.org/media/media_45451.html)

near puberty. In Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal, parents feel that their burden of paying a dowry at their daughter's marriage will be lower if she is married at a young age.

Globally, forced child marriage is much more common in poorer countries and regions, and within those countries, it tends to be concentrated among the poorest households. For example, a girl from a poor household in Senegal is four times more likely to marry as a child than a girl from a rich household.<sup>6</sup> In impoverished situations, parents see few alternatives for their daughters, aside from early marriage.

#### *Limited education and economic options*

Little or no schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age. Conversely, attending school and having higher levels of education protect girls from the possibility of early marriage.

In many countries, educating girls often is less of a priority than educating boys. When a woman's most important role is considered to be that of a wife, mother and homemaker, schooling girls and preparing them for the jobs may be given short shrift. And even when poor families want to send their daughters to school, they often lack access to nearby, quality schools and the ability to pay school fees. It is usually safer and economically more rewarding to spend limited resources on educating sons than daughters. This boxes families into early marriage as the only viable option for girls.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Insecurity in the face of conflict*

When families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughters is the best way to protect them from danger. In war-affected areas in Afghanistan, Burundi, Northern Uganda or Somalia, for example, a girl may be married to a warlord or another authority figure who can ensure

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<sup>6</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2007. *New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/new-insights-preventing-child-marriage>

<sup>7</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2003. *Too Young to Wed: The Lives, rights, and health of young married girls*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/too-young-wed-0>

that she and her family remain safe. In the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere, girls have been abducted or recruited by armed groups and made into the 'bush wives' of combatants and commanders.<sup>8</sup>

### *Tradition and Religion*

In many societies, parents are under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible in an effort to prevent her from becoming sexually active before marriage; a woman who does so brings dishonor to her family and community. Because marriage often determines a woman's status in many societies, parents also worry that if they don't marry their daughters according to social expectations, they will not be able to marry them at all. Forced child marriage also is a route to cementing family, clan, and tribal connections or settling obligations. For example, in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, Afghanistan and in some parts of the Middle East, marrying young girls is a common practice to help the grooms' families offset debts or to settle inter-family disputes.<sup>9</sup>

At its core, forced child marriage is rooted in tradition. A 2007 ICRW study found that **no one religious affiliation was associated with the practice.**<sup>10</sup> Rather, a variety of religions were associated with a high prevalence of forced child marriage, in a diversity of countries throughout the world.

However, customs and traditions do change. In fact, forced child marriage has nearly disappeared in several countries where it used to be an entrenched cultural practice only a generation or two ago. These countries include China, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia. There is no reason why this harmful

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<sup>8</sup> UNICEF. 2005. *The State of the World's Children 2005*. UNICEF: New York, NY.

[http://www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/sowc05\\_chapters.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/sowc05_chapters.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> IRIN, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Pakistan: Tribal Custom Forces Girls into 'Compensation Marriages'", IRIN News, August 20, 2003; cited in "Virtual slavery: The Practice of 'compensation marriages'". UNFPA. [http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/fact\\_sheets/marriage.doc](http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/fact_sheets/marriage.doc)

<sup>10</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2007. *New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/new-insights-preventing-child-marriage>

traditional practice can't also become a thing of the past in the countries where it remains common today.

## **Immediate Consequences**

The consequences of child marriage are devastating and often determine a life's trajectory. Girls who marry young are at a higher risk of dying during childbirth, having their child die before its first birthday, contracting AIDS and becoming a victim of domestic violence.

### *Increased maternal and infant health risks*

Girls who marry and give birth before their bodies are fully developed are more at risk of death or terrible injury and illness in childbirth. In 2007, UNICEF reported that a girl under the age of 15 is five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than a woman in her 20s.<sup>11</sup> Risks extend to infants, too: if a mother is under age 18, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60 percent greater than that of a baby born to a mother older than 19.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to death, young girls face tremendous health risks in childbirth, including a serious condition known as obstetric fistula. Obstetric fistula results when a young mother's vagina, bladder and/or rectum tear during childbirth. It causes urine and feces to leak from her, and without surgery, the condition lasts the rest of the girl's life. Fistula patients are commonly poor women, ages 15 to 20, many of whom were child brides.

### *Greater exposure to HIV/AIDS*

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<sup>11</sup> UNICEF. 2007. *The State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children, the Double Dividend of Gender Equality*. UNICEF: New York, NY. <http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/docs/sowc07.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Child brides also are at far greater risk of contracting HIV than their counterparts who marry later. Often they are married to older, more sexually experienced men with whom it is difficult to negotiate safe sexual behaviors, especially when under pressure to bear children. A study conducted in Kenya and Zambia in 2004 finds that married girls aged 15-19 were 75 percent more likely to contract HIV than sexually active, unmarried girls of the same age.<sup>13</sup> Similar figures have been found in 29 countries across Africa and Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Greater exposure to domestic and sexual violence*

Girls who are married early are more likely to be abused sexually, physically and emotionally. An ICRW study in India shows that girls who married before age 18 reported experiencing physical violence twice as often, and sexual violence three times as often as girls who married at a later age.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Deprivation of childhood and a future*

More than anything else, early marriage deprives girls of their childhood. They are thrust into the full burden of domestic responsibility, motherhood and sexual relations rather than playing with friends, dreaming about a career or fretting about a school exam. .

In many countries, young married girls move away from their parents' home to live with their husband and his family, where they have no friends, no support, and little say in their own lives or in household matters. Research shows that young married girls often are isolated and powerless. They are unable to negotiate or obtain support for issues in their own interest. And they're frequently exposed to violence and threats of abandonment and divorce.

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<sup>13</sup> Clark, S. 2004. "Early Marriage and HIV Risks in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Studies in Family Planning*, vol. 35 (3): 149-160, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15511059>

<sup>14</sup> Clark, S., Bruce, J. and Dude, A. 2006. "Protecting Young Women from HIV/AIDS: The Case Against Child and Adolescent Marriage", *International Family Planning Perspectives* 32(2): 79-88. <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3207906.html>

<sup>15</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2005. *Development Initiative on Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA) project: Analysis of quantitative baseline survey data conducted in 2004*. ICRW: Washington, DC.

Outside the family, the doors to schooling are usually closed to young married girls in most countries. This means that they have little chance to prosper later in jobs or as entrepreneurs. Often dependent and with little knowledge and income to support or invest in their children, child brides also end up raising daughters who face the same challenges as their mothers.

### **U.S. Development Consequences of Child Marriage**

Not only does child marriage paralyze young girls' opportunities, but it also hinders U.S. development efforts.

The United States spends more than \$450 million each year on development programs that are consistently undermined by child marriage. Research shows that young married girls are least likely to benefit from educational and economic policies and programs. These include primary and secondary school enrollment and expanded opportunities for credit or participation in the paid workforce. As noted above, their isolation and powerlessness means that many of the basic resources and services available to other segments of the population – such as basic health care or skills training – also are beyond the reach of young married girls.

Consider this scenario: The United States is spending billions of dollars in Afghanistan to rebuild the infrastructure. When USAID builds a school for girls in a province with high rates of child marriage, how much more effective would the school be if it were combined with a program to reduce child marriage? Or consider another scenario, this time in Uttar Pradesh, India. If USAID is seeking to reduce maternal and infant mortality in this Indian state, taxpayer dollars would be dramatically more effective if the program also addressed raising the age of marriage for girls.

Finally, the practice of forced child marriage stands in direct conflict with the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), adopted by the Congress, which include promoting education, women's empowerment and reducing poverty, maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS rates. Research shows the clear negative correlation between a country's rate of forced child marriage and its Human Development Index (HDI) ranking: By and large countries that are not scoring well on their citizens' well-being also are the countries where forced child marriage is most common.<sup>16</sup> What's more, unless addressed directly, this trajectory is likely to continue into the future because forced child marriage perpetuates the cycle of poverty in the developing world. Girls from poverty are the most likely to become child brides, and child brides are more likely to live in poverty and raise children in poverty.

### **What Works to Prevent Child Marriage**

We know the problem is forced child marriage. We know the causes and consequences are terrible. But the good news is that we also know solutions. We know that before launching any new program, it's critical to first talk to girls. They are the starting point for any solution to ending forced child marriage. Girls understand acutely the obstacles that bar them from opportunities, and they have clear ideas about what needs to change in their lives in order to succeed. It's also important to support parents who support their daughters' decision to continue their studies and enjoy their childhood – delaying the choice to become a wife and mother. These parents who are bold enough to go against what tradition dictates can be stigmatized by and ostracized from their community.

The answers lie with the world's girls and within several already successful programs. Over the past 10

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<sup>16</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). 2003. *Too Young to Wed: The Lives, rights, and health of young married girls*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/too-young-wed-0>

years, efforts by ICRW and others in several countries—India, Nepal, Ethiopia—reduced the prevalence of child marriage within a two- to three-year period. In the Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand, ICRW's Development Initiative Supporting Healthy Adolescents (DISHA) program reduced the rate of child marriage from 60 percent to 40 percent. In Nepal, ICRW and Engenderhealth, an international health organization, cut the rate of child marriage in half, from 44 percent to 21 percent, in urban areas surrounding Kathmandu.

These programs focused on three key issues:

- 1) Providing girls with life skills such as numeracy, literacy, using a telephone or articulating their needs and interests to elders;
- 2) Raising awareness and commitment among parents, teachers, religious leaders and other influential adults to eradicate forced child marriage; and
- 3) Working with young people—including boys—to understand and build peer support on the idea of preventing forced child marriage.

Finally, any effort aimed at ending forced child marriage, must address how to strengthen girls' education programs to ensure that girls stay in school and learn enough for parents to consider it worthwhile postponing their marriage. Education is the single most important factor associated with girls marrying before the age of 18, according to a 2007 ICRW study.<sup>17</sup> Even one more year of school than the national average can increase a woman's earning potential by 10 percent to 20 percent.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>17</sup> International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 2007. *New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs*. ICRW: Washington, DC. <http://www.icrw.org/publications/new-insights-preventing-child-marriage>

<sup>18</sup> Women Deliver, <http://www.womendeliver.org/knowledge-center/facts-figures/girls-education/>.

The International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act is a critical step towards increasing U.S. support for the eradication of forced child marriage. The legislation would draw attention to child marriage as a human rights abuse by requiring the U.S. Department of State to include child marriage rates in its annual Country Report on Human Rights. The bill also calls for integrating child marriage prevention activities into existing USAID development programs. This would increase the effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance efforts by guaranteeing that girls and young women are able to take advantage of the education, health and economic development opportunities USAID delivers. I applaud the efforts currently underway at USAID and the State Department, and know this legislation will build upon current investments in this critical issue.

If passed, the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act will strengthen the capacity of local civil society organizations to conduct child marriage prevention activities. And it will encourage more research on child marriage to identify the most promising strategies.

The International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act has unprecedented bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress. Provisions of the legislation were included in the Foreign Relations Authorization Act that passed the House of Representatives in June 2009. I urge Congress to pass this legislation without delay. Action by Congress through this legislation can achieve many wins – it will improve the return on investment of our ongoing foreign assistance activities; it will protect the human rights of girls around the world; and it will represent a strong statement by the United States that the practice of forced child marriage is unacceptable.

Girls around the world have a right to experience childhood – to make friends, go to school, pursue their aspirations and live a healthy life free from violence. The practice of forced child marriage robs girls of these opportunities. But it does not need to be this way – we have successful solutions. In many communities, the desire to abandon child marriage exists, and local organizations are doing substantial

work. What is lacking is sustained and coordinated support from governments, the international community and donors. With increased leadership and support, we have the opportunity to significantly diminish the number of child marriages in the next few years.

Ending child marriage will yield a double dividend. Not only is it the right thing to do – it is the smart thing to do. This bill will help protect the human rights of adolescent girls – and it will and provide them opportunities to live fuller lives that could break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

ICRW stands ready to support your efforts. Thank you for your time and I look forward to answering your questions.