

**Remarks by Helena Minchew, delivered to Congressional Staff for International Day of the Girl Child Briefing on Capitol Hill**

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**Sponsors: Congresswoman Betty McCollum, Girls Not Brides USA, International Center for Research on Women, Population Council**

Hello everyone and thank you so much for coming today. I'm Helena Minchew of the International Women's Health Coalition and a co-chair of Girls Not Brides USA, the leading advocacy coalition urging US action to end child marriage.

First of all, thank you to Congresswoman McCollum and Jenn Holcomb for hosting this event and for being stalwart champions in the fight against child marriage for years. Thank you also to our great panelists today from the [Population Council](#) and the [International Center for Research on Women](#). I've actually heard presentations on these pieces of research before but I learn something new every time. You know, people in this field have heard for years "we know this is a problem but we don't have evidence of what works to end it" and I'm just thrilled and grateful that people can't use that excuse anymore for not working to end child marriage!

So we've now heard why we're here, to celebrate International Day of the Girl Child and learn about new research on what works to end child marriage around the world. As is obvious by the presentations, the Population Council and the International Center for Research on Women are providing rigorously evaluated findings on programs that aim to end child marriage, a scourge which impacts 15 million girls per year.

But for a moment, I'd like us to back up and drill down - I want us to look through the crowd, beyond the 15 million and see the faces of the individual girls who are impacted by this practice. I want us to see how child marriage affects every aspect of a girl's life. And it doesn't just do this on the day of her wedding, but every day of her life and for the rest of her life. Once married, each girl faces even more difficulty in accessing education than she did before. She is often isolated within her husband's or her in-laws' home, without friends and the social networks she could turn to in times of difficulty. She's unlikely to be permitted to work outside the home, and if she is, it will probably be difficult for her to find work since she was removed from school early, meaning that she, and her family, are more likely to be trapped in poverty, generation after generation. She will probably be expected to get pregnant soon after marriage and before her body is ready, meaning that she will face a higher risk of experiencing dangerous, life-threatening complications in pregnancy than if she could have waited until she was ready, physically and psychologically. And because she likely hasn't had the opportunity to gain comprehensive sexuality education during which she could talk about gender equality and relationships, and because her youth, inexperience and the gender norms and discrimination that placed her in marriage as a child in the first place forbid it, she is likely unable to negotiate safe sex with her husband or access sexual and reproductive health services, leaving her at a higher risk of contracting HIV, as well as suffering domestic and sexual violence.

**This is the human rights violation of our time**, but as we know from today, it is not without solutions. These studies found that child marriage is preventable with the right interventions and that it can be done in ways that are cost effective. The Population Council's research shows that not only can we delay the marriages of girls, but that we can do so by huge margins. In fact, the studies presented here provide critical information to the entire international community on how to delay marriage, increase girls' educational attainment, help girls transition into empowered and productive adults, improve

health outcomes, and ensure better futures for all those individual girls, as well as their families, communities and countries.

And importantly, this research was funded by American dollars.

But it was also clear from these studies, and particularly what was presented by ICRW, that we need to go further than just delaying marriage until a girl is 18; and in order to do so, we need to invest specifically in programs that increase girls' status in their families and communities, ensuring that they are seen *and* heard as citizens and individuals, stress education by building their skills and knowledge, and are cost-conscious. Concentrating programs on delaying marriage through financial incentives works to delay marriage, but to truly ensure that girls and young women are marrying if and when they are ready, which is their human right, and want to and are able to choose their own destinies, we need to put our efforts behind **social change** that addresses the discriminatory gender norms that are so common in places where child marriage is prevalent.

And that's what I'd like to stress to you today - the investment that the US Government has made in these studies will only see a return if we do more than hold panels - we must ensure that we **fund programs** that put the studies' findings into practice. We must invest in the long-term interventions that will increase the value of girls in their communities and in their own eyes. This is not just good for the girls themselves, it's good for us as well - girls who are aren't married as children and can therefore pursue their education become educated adults who can lead healthier lives, raise healthier families, lift themselves out of poverty and contribute to their economies, which stabilizes nations. Rising tides lift all boats.

This will require specific funding for programs aimed at preventing child marriage, as well as mitigating the practice's negative impacts on the lives of already married women and girls. We need holistic programs that look at girls as whole people, not a combination of sectors, and I therefore applaud the Administration's recent pushes to do just that - through the State Department's current efforts to write a whole-of-government, whole-of-girl Adolescent Girl Strategy, which was mandated by the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013, and through the Let Girls Learn Initiative and its associated Challenge Fund which, last night, was announced to be \$25 million from the US Government and asks civil society, academia, and the private sector to be involved in creating and funding programs that work for adolescent girls.

By working with civil society organizations who understand these issues from research and practical lenses, and reaching across a myriad of US Government offices, from USAID to Peace Corps to PEPFAR, and engaging the full range of associated sectors, from development work in health and education and water and sanitation, to humanitarian aid to diplomatic outreach, and by coordinating these efforts, the US Government can be a global leader in achieving sustainable and large-scale change for girls and be a key part of ending child marriage within a generation.

But this requires more than rhetoric from me or the Administration - it requires investment. Later this week, Congresswoman McCollum will be circulating a letter to the Office of Management and Budget in support of continued and enhanced US engagement and investment on ending child marriage specifically, and the overall work of the US Government on empowering adolescent girls in all aspects of their lives. We encourage you to be on the lookout for that letter and for your bosses to enthusiastically add their names.

As I said, empowering adolescent girls, ending child marriage and supporting already married adolescents is long-term work that will require a long-term investment by the US Government. But we know what works. We have the data because the US Government has invested in getting it. Let us not let that investment go to waste.

Thank you.