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**CARE Submitted Testimony
United States House of Representatives
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Targeting Girls in the Name of Tradition: Child Marriage”
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On behalf of CARE, I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, its Co-Chairs, Representatives Jim McGovern and Frank Wolf, and honorable Members of the Commission, for bringing attention to the harmful practice of child marriage. Child marriage is a human rights violation that condemns girls and women to a life of poverty. This all-too common violation not only endangers the health and well-being of girls themselves, it undermines the progress of entire communities and developing nations.

The U.S. government has a critical opportunity right now to take a bold step forward in preventing this harmful practice by passing the bipartisan International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009 (H.R. 2103). CARE comes before the Human Rights Commission today not only to share its experience in child marriage prevention programming, but also to express our strong support of this legislation and to urge you to pass it before the end of the 111th Congress.

CARE is an international poverty fighting organization with programming in over 70 countries globally. In its work, CARE places special emphasis on working closely with women and girls because our decades of experience have shown that such investments are key to pulling them, their families and entire communities out of poverty.

A growing body of research and analysis supports this concept that empowering women and girls creates a cycle of social progress and economic growth in communities, nations and regions. In particular, investments in girls' education have been shown to have a multiplier effect across a range of development indicators. An educated girl is more likely to delay marriage and child bearing and have fewer, healthier and better-educated children. She is more likely to participate in the labor force, engage in paid employment and earn more income for her family over her lifetime.¹

However, around the world, women and girls continue to form the majority of the poor and most marginalized in society. They represent approximately two-thirds of the world's illiterate

¹ Ruth Levine et al., *Girls Count: A Global Investment & Action Agenda* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2008).

people,² own less than one percent of the world's property and earn less than ten percent of the world's income.³ In many contexts, women and girls are subject to various forms of discrimination and abuse on a daily basis, fueled by gender norms that constrain their ability to exercise control over their own lives and bodies.

This situation is especially true for millions of girls in the developing world who are subject to systematic disadvantages. These include bearing the overwhelming burden of household tasks like collecting water and caring for other children, lacking opportunities and the support of their families to attend school and having limited access to information and health services. Studies have found that 15-19-year-old girls spend more time on labor market work and household work combined, than boys of the same age group in countries in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America.⁴

In many countries, girls' gender, age and social status expose them to social constraints and risks that make the transition between childhood and adulthood particularly hazardous. Child marriage is one of these hazards—one that can undeniably derail a girl's life by limiting her future educational and economic opportunities and pushing her into situations of early motherhood and social isolation that expose her to a variety of risks. Not only does early marriage put a girl at risk and rob her of her ability to succeed in life, it perpetuates a cycle of poverty, as she and her family will not benefit from the skills, knowledge, resources, social status and life choices she would gain through continued opportunities for schooling and labor force participation.

CARE's experience has shown, however, that girls can avoid early marriage and navigate a successful transition to adulthood if the right mix of policies and programs is in place. Child marriage can be prevented by ensuring economic and educational opportunities for girls and their families and by working with communities and local stakeholders to promote social norms, policies and practices that value girls' futures equally to boys'. Such strategies are laid forth in the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009, which is why we offer it our strong organizational support and call on Congress to enact it into law.

The Context: Causes and Consequences

As the years in which a girl stands at the cusp of adulthood, the period of puberty and adolescence is crucial in determining how the rest of her life will unfold. In many poor communities, the onset of puberty signals a girl's readiness to be married off, often to a much older man. One girl in seven in developing countries (excluding China) marries before the age of 15.⁵ Early marriage is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, where out 15 countries almost half of all girls are married before age 18.⁶

Child marriage is the result of a variety of inter-related issues and factors. In poor communities where livelihood options and opportunities are scarce, parents may choose to

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *"Education For All: Global Monitoring Report 2010"* (UNESCO, 2010).

³ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *"Gender equality: The Big Picture"* (<http://www.onbeingfemale.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/legalequityunicef.pdf>; Last accessed on July 12, 2010).

⁴ Ritchie, Lloyd, and Grant, *"Gender Differences in Time Use Among Adolescents in Developing Countries: Implications of Rising School Enrollment Rate"* Population Council Working Paper No. 193, 2004 (<http://www.popcouncil.org/pdfs/wp/193.pdf>; Last accessed on July 12, 2010).

⁵ Population Council, *"Transitions to Adulthood"* (<http://www.popcouncil.org/ta/mar.html>; Last accessed on July 12, 2010).

⁶ Jain, S. and K. Kurz, *"New Insights on Preventing Child Marriage: A Global Analysis of Factors and Programs"* (Washington, DC: International Center for Research on Women, 2007).

marry off their daughters at a young age as a way of relieving the household economic burden and in the hope of providing them with some form of social and economic security. This decision takes place within a context in which social norms and attitudes assign low value to women and girls and limit the roles and opportunities available to them outside of marriage and the domestic realm.

Further, in many cultures, certain traditional customs and expectations increase the social and economic incentive for parents to marry their daughters at an early age. In Ethiopia, for example, where certain regions experience some of the highest rates of child marriage in the world,⁷ CARE's research and programming indicates that the practice of "bride price"—in which a man must pay the bride's family in order to marry her—has contributed to a situation where communities attach economic value to young girls as wives, thereby increasing the likelihood their parents will marry them off at an early age.

In most instances, marriage spells the end of a girls' education, thereby undermining further possibilities for personal growth, social mobility and economic advancement. Further, early marriage is often followed early motherhood, exposing the girl to health risks associated with pregnancy and child bearing. Medical complications from pregnancy are the leading cause of death among girls 15-19. Compared with women over 20, girls aged 10-14 are five times more likely to die from child birth and girls 15-19 twice as likely.⁸ For those who survive pregnancy and delivery complications, long-term consequences may include obstetric fistula, reproductive tract infections and infertility.⁹ Simply put, young girls' bodies are not fully developed and therefore cannot carry a pregnancy or deliver children without doing tremendous damage to their undeveloped bodies.

Children of young mothers also face greater health risks. If a mother is under 18, her baby's chance of dying in the first year of life is 60% greater than that of a baby born to a mother older than 19.¹⁰ Children who survive are also more likely to suffer from under-nutrition, late physical and cognitive development, and chronic diseases in adulthood.¹¹

Child marriage also dramatically increases girls' vulnerability to unhealthy and abusive situations. At a young age, girls cannot effectively consent to marriage, and they have limited ability to exercise power and autonomy in relation to their husbands and his family once married.¹² This in turn limits their ability to exercise control over important aspects of their lives, including their reproductive health, making them vulnerable to health risks including HIV/AIDS. For example, research in Kenya and Zambia shows the prevalence of HIV infection among married adolescent females to be significantly higher than that of their unmarried counterparts.¹³ There are also studies indicating that women who married younger

⁷ A 2004 population Council survey found that about half of all girls in Ethiopia's Amhara region were married before age 15, with about 95% not knowing their husbands before marriage. See Erulkar, A. et. al., *"The Experience of Adolescence in Rural Amhara Region, Ethiopia"* (Accra Ghana: Population Council, 2004).

⁸ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *"Giving Girls Today and Tomorrow: Breaking the Cycle of Adolescent Pregnancy"* (UNFPA, 2009)

⁹ Temin and Levine, *"Start with a Girl: A New Agenda for Global Health"* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2009).

¹⁰ UNICEF, *"State of the World's Children 2007"* (UNICEF, 2006).

¹¹ Temin and Levine, *"Start with a Girl: A New Agenda for Global Health"* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2009).

¹² UNICEF, *"Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice"* (UNICEF, 2005).

¹³ Clark, Shelley, J. Bruce, and A. Dude, *"Protecting Young Women from HIV/AIDS: The Case Against Child and Adolescent Marriage," International Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 32, No. 2, June 2006.

are more likely to be beaten or threatened, and more likely to believe that a husband might sometimes be justified in beating his wife.¹⁴

There is conclusive evidence that girls' education plays a critical role in preventing child marriage. In a study of 42 countries, women between the ages of 20 and 24 who attended primary school were less likely to marry by 18 than women without a primary education.¹⁵ Schooling has protective and empowering effects on girls, including by helping them develop aspirations and giving them skills to negotiate who and when they will marry.

However, despite recent global progress in closing the gender gap in education, particularly at the primary level, girls are still lagging behind. Globally they represent 54% of the 72 million children out of primary school, with the gender disadvantage being more pronounced in much of South and West Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁶ The target of Millennium Development Goal 3 around achievement of gender parity in primary and secondary education by 2005 was not met and is still out of reach for many developing regions.¹⁷ Data shows that girls' school enrollment drastically drops in the upper primary grades and in secondary school, with only one in five girls enrolled in secondary school in Africa.¹⁸ Girls from certain socio-economic, ethnic and other marginalized groups face an additional layer of disadvantage, with roughly 70% of girls aged 6-11 not in primary schools belonging to marginalized groups – including ethnic, religious, linguistic or other minorities.¹⁹ Further, the poor quality of education in many countries has contributed to poor learning outcomes and high drop out rates among girls as a result.²⁰ When the quality of education or the perceived benefits are negligible, parents may be even more reluctant to let girls enter or continue with school.

Currently, efforts to accelerate access to basic education are hindered by a large gap in financing for education in low-income countries. In particular, efforts to reach the most marginalized children—those disadvantaged by poverty, gender, ethnicity, language and remoteness—require a major increase in education financing from governments and donors.²¹

Poverty and lack of opportunity are also key contributors to child marriage. Providing girls and their families with economic and livelihood options is an important part of strategies to delaying marriage.²² Also critical are efforts to promote community norms that discourage early marriage and the creation of an enabling policy environment for girls' rights.

CARE's Response

In recognition of the multiple vulnerabilities girls face, as well as their potential to be forces of change in their families and communities, CARE has long supported interventions aimed at addressing the needs and rights of girls, with a particular focus on marginalized and

¹⁴ UNICEF 2005, op cit.

¹⁵ UNICEF 2005, op cit.

¹⁶ UNESCO, "Education For all: Global Monitoring Report 2010" (UNESCO, 2010).

¹⁷ United Nations, "Millennium Development Goals Report 2010" (New York: United Nations, 2010).

¹⁸ UNESCO, "Education For all: Global Monitoring Report 2007" (UNESCO, 2007).

¹⁹ Lockheed, M and M. Lewis. "Inexcusable Absence: Why 60 Million Girls Are Out of School and What to Do about It" (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2006).

²⁰ UNESCO, "Education For all: Global Monitoring Report 2010" (UNESCO, 2010).

²¹ An estimated \$16 billion annually is required to close the financing gap for basic education globally. See UNESCO 2010 Report, op cit.

²² See for example, Jain. S and K. Kurz 2007, op cit.

vulnerable girls. This support includes programming aimed at increasing girls' access to quality education, health services, livelihood options and protection from violence and abuse.

In recent years, CARE has launched a strategic initiative aimed at increasing support for adolescent girls' education and leadership globally. The program, called Power Within, is focused on the 10-14 age cohort, because this is a critical age when targeted support can have a significant impact on girls' future trajectory. The program is built around a comprehensive approach that establishes education as a cornerstone of girls' rights, but also recognizes that simply providing girls access to school is not enough to unleash their full potential. Beyond educational access, increased attention must be given to supporting girls in acquiring and cultivating relevant skills and competencies, providing girls with supportive relationships and networks and addressing various risks, vulnerabilities and structures that undermine their welfare and limit the opportunities available to them.

Specifically the Power Within Program aims to:

- Increase the number of girls who complete primary school and obtain an equitable and quality education
- Build girls' leadership skills and increase the spaces and opportunities to exercise them
- Advocate for girls' rights by addressing harmful practices and creating champions for girls' advancement

More information on CARE's approach in support of girls' education and leadership can be found in a report entitled "Power Within: Empowering Girls to Learn & Lead". Mr. Chairman, we would like to submit this report for the official record.

CARE recognizes child marriage as a grave human rights violation, which undermines girls' well-being and acts as a barrier to reducing cyclical poverty. Our experience working in communities globally has shown us that addressing the multiple factors that contribute to child marriage requires holistic interventions and strategies across a range of areas including education, community mobilization, health, economic livelihoods and policy reform.

In Egypt, CARE's work with poor communities revealed that high rates of early marriage were linked to cultural norms, as well as to economic and social factors such as household poverty, non-availability of schools, and poor quality of education. With funding from USAID, CARE established the New Schools Program (NSP) aimed at increasing school access and enrollment of girls in poor rural areas of upper Egypt that were least served by public education. Among other activities, the project established alternative community-run schools to serve girls unable to join public school. These multi-grade schools incorporated a range of strategies designed to address barriers to girls' education, including flexible scheduling to allow girls to meet family responsibilities, "girls only" classes, and use of female facilitators/teachers from the local community. Over the eight-year life of the project, the NSP constructed 98 single-grade schools serving more than 36,000 girls and 189 multi-grade schools serving over 6,000 girls.

The NSP was specifically designed to influence parents in favor of educating girls. It included efforts to mobilize and engage parents and communities in school construction and governance, and ensured regular contact and follow up by teachers. A study of the project's impact after a number of years found evidence of girls' greater determination to complete

schooling and delay marriage.²³ In a number of cases, girls demonstrated increased capacity to engage family members on decisions around their own education, marriage or employment. There was also evidence of increased parental support for girls' education. This parental support was detailed in interviews with NSP beneficiary girls, which highlighted parents' change in attitude. One girl noted, *"My father changed. At the beginning he said we will only educate the boys, but when Ms. Halla came and told him she knows of a good school, he said okay. I did not have a birth certificate and they helped me get one."*²⁴

In Bangladesh, CARE is implementing a project known as the Adolescent's and Women's Reproductive and Sexual Health Initiative (ARSHI). The initiative aims to empower adolescents and women with information and skills to promote health, and mobilize community action to end discriminatory and harmful norms and practices, including child marriage. Using advocacy, community mobilization and behavior change communication strategies, the project engages adolescents, parents, religious leaders and local authorities to raise awareness of the harmful effects of practices such as child marriage and promotes community and policy action against them. Among other things, the project has helped to establish hundreds of community peer support groups for adolescent boys, girls and mothers, which promote dialogue and awareness on health issues, build essential life-skills and promote collective action to stop harmful social practices and promote good ones. Such strategies have proved effective in promoting action to discourage child marriage. In 2008, for example, a total of 42 early marriages were prevented through community group action.

Radha Rani was a 15-year-old girl in grade 11 living in a village in Derai, Bangladesh when her father decided that she should marry. But Radha was a member of an adolescent girls group facilitated by CARE's ARSHI project and she tried to dissuade her father from his decision using information she had learned in the group about the harmful effects of child marriage. She also received support from members of her adolescent group who visited her father and discussed the mental, physical and developmental effects of child marriage, urging him to reconsider. Ultimately these interventions were successful in convincing Radha's father to change his decision and stop the marriage. According to Radha, "...the girls' group has constructed a dream in me and I would like to continue my education once again."

Adolescent's and Women's Reproductive and Sexual Health Initiative (ARSHI) Interim Narrative Report, CARE Bangladesh December 2008.

Recommendations for U.S. action

The experience of organizations that have worked to reduce child marriage, provide increased opportunities for girls, and combat the deep poverty that causes and results from this harmful traditional practice, have shown that change is possible. However, it requires a holistic view of the situation and the patience and long-term focus to work with communities to create change from within.

²³ CARE International Egypt, *"The Impact on Women's Empowerment through the New Schools Program, Egypt 2000-2008"* (Unpublished Evaluation Report May 2008).

²⁴ CARE International Egypt, *"The Impact on Women's Empowerment through the New Schools Program, Egypt 2000-2008"* (Unpublished Evaluation Report May 2008).

In light of this experience, CARE would offer the following recommendations to the U.S. government, which has a moral and strategic interest in preventing the practice of child marriage:

1. Pass the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009 this Congress. This legislation outlines a bold agenda to prevent child marriage by integrating proven child marriage prevention strategies through U.S. foreign assistance programs, requiring the President to develop a multi-year strategy and mandating the Department of State to address child marriage in its annual Human Rights Report. It has significant bipartisan support in both chambers of Congress and should be signed into law. Members of Congress have many difficult choices to make each day; passing this legislation is not one of them.
2. Increase assistance to ensure girls' access to quality basic education. Keeping girls in school is perhaps the single best method of preventing early marriage, ensuring girls reach their potential, and assisting communities in breaking the cycle of poverty. However, a large financing gap for education in low-income countries is hindering access to basic education for many children, particularly marginalized girls. We commend the U.S. government for recent increases in funding for basic education globally and urge policy makers to sustain and increase this global commitment to basic education to ensure access for the most hard-to-reach children, including marginalized girls.
3. Support interventions to address underlying causes of poverty by empowering women and girls. Investing in the lives of women and girls is a high return strategy that is likely to help achieve multiple U.S. foreign assistance goals while unleashing untapped potential around the world. CARE's experience suggests that a comprehensive approach is key to empowering women and girls and helping to eliminate practices such as child marriage. This type of holistic approach requires that the U.S. government and other donors invest in programs that go beyond simply providing women and girls with skills, information and resources. It must include investments in long term efforts aimed at challenging underlying causes of poverty including the relations and power structures that force women and girls into a position of vulnerability. This requires, among other things, support for local advocacy, behavior change communication strategies and community mobilization to address social norms that fuel practices such as child marriage.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for calling this important hearing. CARE stands by ready to assist your efforts and strongly urges the members of the Human Rights Commission and the U.S. Congress to take action to make sure girls worldwide are not robbed of their futures. I look forward to answering your questions.