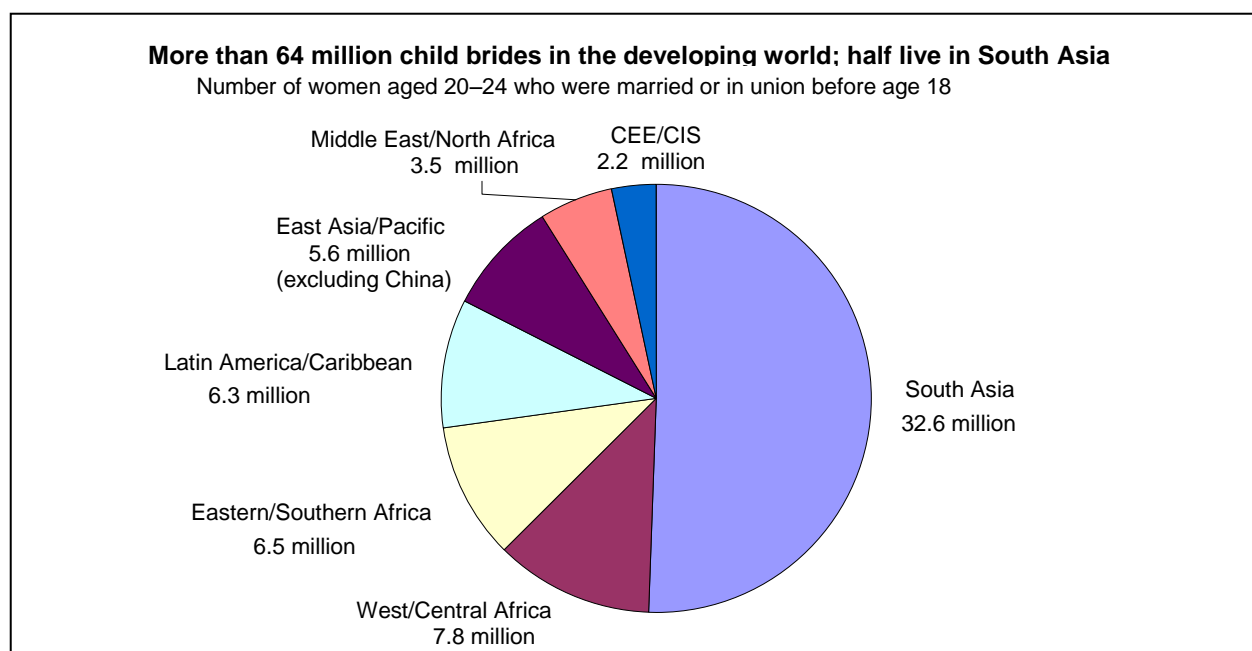


**Statement of Francesca Moneti  
UNICEF Senior Child Protection Specialist**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing  
Targeting Girls in the Name of Tradition: Child Marriage  
15 July 2010**

Chairman McGovern, Chairman Wolf, and honorable members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, many thanks for holding this hearing on this important topic and for framing it in terms of the broad topic of traditional practices that have very negative effects of girls. UNICEF agrees with Secretary Clinton, and with the supporters of H.R. 2103, that child marriage is a clear and unacceptable violation of human rights. It affects millions of girls and women.



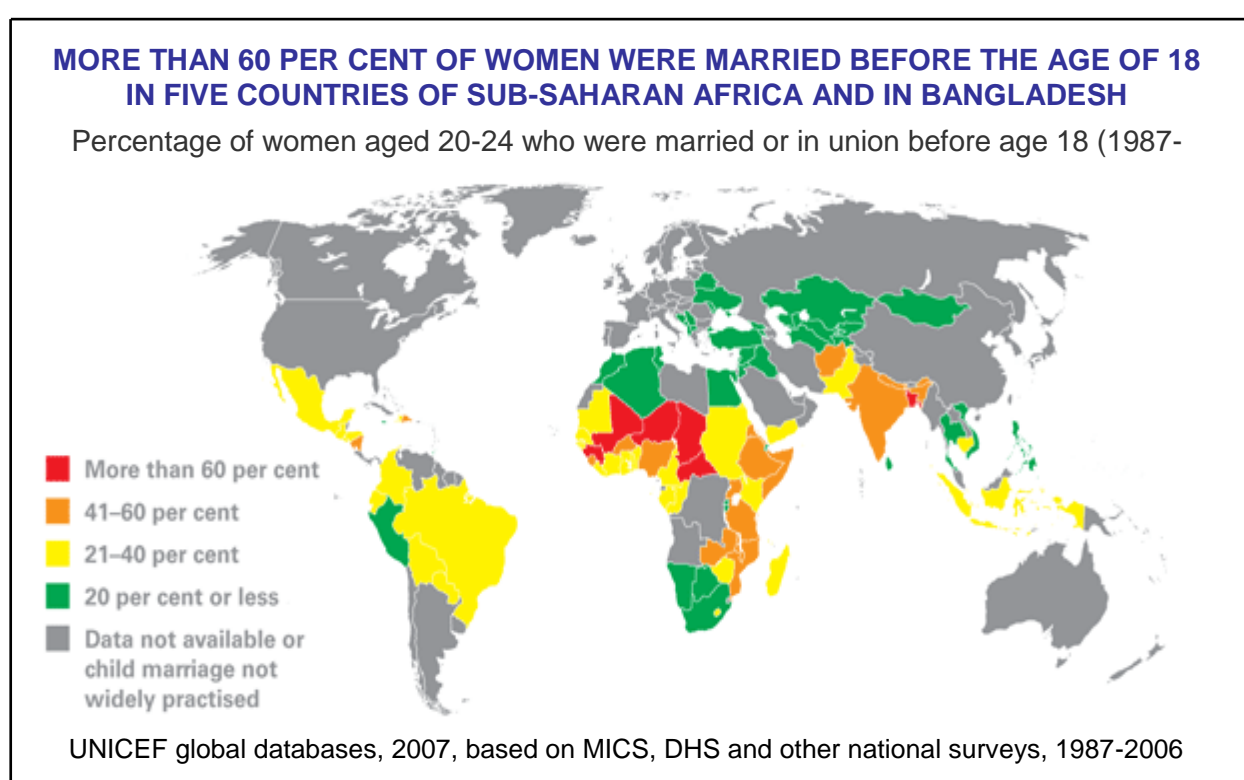
Over the past years UNICEF, together with a large number of development and academic partners has made major strides in understanding the social dynamics of harmful practices such as child marriage. We know why they persist and how they disappear. By bringing together state-of the-art social science and positive and negative programmatic experience, we now have a clear understanding of how harmful social practices can be abandoned, and why certain approaches are successful while others yield fewer results.

In societies where they are common, practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting are socially upheld behavioral rules. Families and individuals continue to perform them because they believe that their group/society expects them to

do so. They further expect that if they do not respect the social rule, they will suffer social consequences such as derision, marginalization and loss of status. The practices are held in place by a set of powerful social norms. At the root of these norms is the common factor of discrimination, especially gender discrimination.

UNICEF and its partners know that, with the appropriate support, social practices such as child marriage are being abandoned at a large scale by communities in different parts of the world. I would like to share with you UNICEF's perspective on what is needed for programs and policies to succeed and to share with you some concrete experiences. First, however, I would like to say a little more on the magnitude and scope of the practice of child marriage and its effects on girls.

**Scope and magnitude** – 46% of women aged 20-24 years in South Asia and 39 % in Sub-Saharan Africa were married as children. Overall, in the developing world, thirty-five per cent of women aged 20-24 years entered into marriage/union by the age of 18.



In developing countries, girls from the poorest quintile are much more likely to be married as children compared to girls from the richest quintile. An analysis of the data indicates that the girls from poorer families are three times as likely to marry as children than girls from richer families. It also shows that while the overall prevalence of child marriage is declining, progress has been uneven among socio-economic groups. In fact, we see that the progress is being made by the girls in richer families while virtually no progress is being made among the girls from poorer families.

**What child marriage means for girls** - Child marriage is part of a set of social norms that typically also includes early and continuous child bearing. Having children when the reproductive organs are not mature has severe health implications for the child mother as well as for her newborn. Indeed, maternal deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are an important component of mortality for girls aged 15–19 worldwide. They account for 70,000 deaths each year. Progress in decreasing maternal mortality – an important objective for all of us here – will be severely hampered by the persistence of child marriage.

Reducing infant and child mortality and development will also be difficult if child marriage persists. If a mother is under the age of 18, her infant's risk of dying in its first year of life is 60 per cent greater than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19. Even if the child survives, she or he is more likely to suffer from low birthweight, undernutrition, and late physical and cognitive development.

What may not be common knowledge is that even if the child mother and her infant survive the birth, the pregnancy affects the development of the mother for the rest of her life. Pregnancy stops the growth of the child mother. When an adolescent girl becomes pregnant her growth hormone stops working for her and works exclusively for the fetus. The result is stunting and the associated damage is often irreversible. Moreover, and crucially important, the negative effect is intergenerational. Stunting in children often occurs when babies are born underweight because the mother was poorly nourished or because she was herself stunted. Nutritionists analyzing the data are concluding that adolescent pregnancy is one of the main causes of child stunting which in turn undermines the child's physical development.

Other well-known realities are that girls who are married early typically also do not attend school and lack of education limits their development opportunities and helps to perpetuate the practice. In addition, adolescent wives are susceptible to violence, abuse, and exploitation and child marriage often results in isolation from family and friends, lack of freedom to interact with peers and participate in community activities, all of which have major psychological consequences.

**Analysis and current understanding** - Harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting are clear violations of human rights and some are *de facto* violent. However, they are not intended as acts of violence.

Child marriage is perpetuated by interconnected social and economic factors. Parents who marry their girl children generally do so because this is seen as a way to provide male guardianship for their daughters, protect them from sexual assault, avoid pregnancy outside marriage, extend their childbearing years, or ensure obedience to the husband's household. Crucially important is that where child marriage is prevalent it is typically a social norm. Families believe that they are expected to marry their girls early and the practice is held in place by social rewards and sanctions. Families that wish to increase the age of marriage of their girls face criticism and reprisal. It is very common to hear of girls and families being threatened, their houses stoned and girls

being taken by force to be married. As with other practices that are governed by social norms, the decision to increase the age of marriage of their girls is difficult to take by individual families.

Parents may also be in favor of child marriages out of economic necessity. The economic hardships that prevent girls from attending school favor the families' decision to marry them early to ensure their future and lighten the economic burden of the family. In many countries the situation is worsened by the dowry system where families have to pay a larger dowry to marry the older girl. In a similar way, in other countries where bride price is connected to child marriage, the price a family can obtain for giving a girl in marriage is higher if the girl is younger.

Imagine that we were all part of a community where child marriage is practiced. Our mothers were married as children as were our grandmothers and all of our ancestors. People around us – our neighbors, our friends, our religious authorities - expect that we will give our girl in marriage before she is 14. If we do not, we will be accused of being bad parents and of putting our girl in danger. We are acting in accordance to the positive value of wishing to protect our girls and to ensure them a proper future as well as to uphold the status of our entire family.

Does this mean that we are justified in violating the human rights of our girls when we marry them as children? Not at all. But it does explain why we would react very negatively to program interventions that simply condemn the practice and tell us that we are bad parents for engaging in the practice.

There is increasing evidence indicating that with proper support entire practicing communities do find viable alternatives to child marriage and other harmful social practices. It happens when programs make explicit and reinforce the positive values that drive the practice and when they also provide information from respected, credible sources and opportunities to reflect, discuss and act. Highlighting the positive values and facilitating the search for better ways engenders a positive process that is empowering in nature. When encouraged that they are good parents people are more likely to accept information that shows that child marriage is harmful to their daughters. When they have the opportunity to discuss the information, they are more likely to begin to form groups that agree that they should stop the practice. And when enough people are convinced – and convinced that others will also change their ways – they can reach the collective, joyful decision to abandon harmful practices.

This concurs with academic theory on social norms, which is based on experimental and empirical evidence. Abandonment requires a process of social change that results in new expectations on families. Within communities, large-scale abandonment requires people to unite and decide collectively to end the practice. It is sufficient that an initial group be ready to abandon the practice for a dynamic to be set in motion. It is in the interest of the members of this core group to convince others to abandon, thereby widening the support ending a particular practice and expanding the group that supports the new alternative. Eventually, a large enough portion of the social network will be

ready to abandon. However, large-scale abandonment may not take place if people are not assured that others will also stop the practice and that the stigma associated with not performing the particular practice will disappear. This assurance can be obtained through a moment or a process of actual public commitment whereby each individual can “see” other people’s decision to end the practice.

After the shift, there is no reason to return to the harmful practice. Families can achieve social status and simultaneously avoid harm to girls. Moreover, once the norm has changed, parents who do not marry their girl when she is still a child will be socially rewarded by being considered good parents. Effective abandonment of harmful practices therefore requires collective discussion, collective decision, and collective commitment. This is demonstrated by the large-scale abandonment taking place in Senegal and in parts of other countries of Africa and South Asia, including India and Bangladesh.

The process of social change is fundamentally similar among intersecting social networks within communities and among intersecting social networks at national level. The latter include networks of professionals, religious groups, women’s groups, youth groups or other interest groups. Discussion within and across social networks leading to commitment, and collective decision are essential to fuel the process of positive change.

**Programmatic approach promoted by UNICEF** – Consistent with the UNICEF Child Protection Strategy, UNICEF pursues a holistic approach that builds the capacity of child protection systems, including the alignment of legislation and policies with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international human rights instruments, and promotes social change along the lines discussed. Nationally, positive change is accelerated by promoting an enabling environment for change, including the enactment of appropriate legislation, development of policies, programs, and services, and involvement of the media, the government, and opinion leaders. UNICEF also works to ensure that girls, married or not, have access to the education and health care they need and deserve.

Let me give a couple of examples of how UNICEF is putting its principles into practice. In Niger, girls are sometimes promised for marriage as young as age nine, interrupting or abruptly ending their education. UNICEF works with both the national government and with traditional chiefs, who have a tremendous influence over people’s daily lives. The chiefs are key to the discussion of social issues in rural communities. One of UNICEF’s partners in southern Niger’s Tibiri region is Grand Chief Abdou Bala Marafa, one of the country’s most influential traditional leaders. To engage people in the process of abandonment of child marriage, Chief Marafa organized the Good Conduct Brigades, a group of specially trained men and women who travel from village to village imparting information to residents. UNICEF supports this project and has provided the brigades with motorcycles to ease their movement across the difficult, desert terrain.

It is extremely important to give girls the knowledge, confidence, and opportunity to speak out for themselves. In Bangladesh, a UNICEF supported project, *Kishori Abhijan*, aims to promote the rights of teenage girls, and engages in efforts to empower the girls themselves as well as their entire community to abandon practices such as child marriage and dowry. The project provides adolescent girls with leadership skills and life skills, as well as offers vocational training, and access to economic activities. It provides support for and strengthens networks of *Kishori Sanghas* (adolescent girls' groups). That support can make all the difference: in one case, a young girl named Mosamad, with help from her friends in the project, decided to break off her pending marriage. Her peer counselor and other members from the project appealed to the girl's parents to cancel the wedding. At first, the parents resisted – they believed if they waited, it would be difficult to arrange a marriage for her. But the girls convinced them that if their daughter studies and becomes educated, then she would find a better job for herself, so that her future and their future would both be better. Thanks to that intervention, Mosamad remains single, and in school.

In Senegal, working in close collaboration with the Government and the NGO Tostan, UNICEF supports a nationwide effort to empower communities to fulfill the human rights of their children. The Community Empowerment Program has led to mass abandonment of female genital cutting and child marriage by thousands of communities. Let me tell the story of one young girl, age 12, who was to be married to an older man. She is a very smart girl and did not want to marry. She wanted to continue school. Her village had not yet engaged in the Community Empowerment Program, but she knew that one of the nearby villages had taken a stand against child marriage. She went to see the Community Management Committee to ask for help. The Committee members discussed with the people of the man's village, they explained why they had abandoned child marriage and informed that according to the law girls cannot marry before the age of 16 in Senegal. Members of the man's village eventually agreed that she would not marry. The girl was thrilled. She stayed in school. She did not simply become the best in the village, not just the best in the district or in the region. She was the highest performing student in the entire country and was then able to attend the best high school in Senegal.

When provided with the appropriate resources and support, more and more communities are abandoning. As they do, they influence others to follow suit. UNICEF has worked with governments and NGOs to enable communities in contexts as difficult as Somalia to abandon harmful practices. But resource constraints impede rapid acceleration. More support is needed to accelerate the positive results. We know from experience that as abandonment proceeds it gains speed and scale. We have a responsibility for providing support to the process. If we do, child marriage and other harmful practices can disappear within a generation.

I wish to thank the Commission for the opportunity to share UNICEF's perspective on this harmful traditional practice.