

The Kakenya Center for Excellence

International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act

Testimony Submitted to Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

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Chairman Wolf, Chairman McGovern and the honorable members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I am honored to stand before you to share with you the plights but also the hopes of young girls in my community of Southern Kenya.

These girls represent millions of other voices of young girls around the world who are crying out and their voices are not heard. Their dreams of a better life and a better future will likely not be realized because of not being able to get an Education. Education, as all of you know, is the key— the key to not only a better future for an individual, but also for a better nation at large. Education brings development to a home, a community, a nation and to the whole world. And most importantly it prevents early marriage. Education is the key to empowerment.

Statistics show that 60 million girls in developing world are married; some are as young as eight years old. Many girls are dropping out of school at an early age and most of them do not further their education beyond primary school. In order to state the reasons for this cause let me share my personal journey to the person I have become today.

I was born 32 years ago in a small Maasai village; a village with no running water, no electricity, no paved roads, no telephone, and no modern schools. The only distinct thing other people recognize us by is our deep belief in our traditions.

According to our cultural beliefs and traditions, girls are for marriage—a source of wealth to the family. In order to maximize and harvest this wealth as early as possible, girls are prepared for marriage as early as they are born, they are not sent to school and they are engaged to be married at an early age. Myself, I was engaged at age 5 and to be married as soon as I reached puberty. Throughout my childhood, I was constantly reminded that my husband was waiting and as soon as I underwent female genital cutting - a traditional rite of passage to adulthood, I was going to be his wife. All I was expected to know is how to care for a husband and the children.

As you may be guessing, yes, I did go to school – because of one woman I am currently indebted to—my mother. Due to the hard life she has endured, she held a different perspective. She believed that we should never grow up to be like her. What did she mean by us not being like her?

My father worked as a police man and lived well in the city. Only visited home once a year or sometimes stayed away for two years without coming home. He came home to supervise his wealth, which included the farm, produce, cows, goats and sheep. But who worked in the farm and took care of the animals—my mother. Because women are not supposed to own anything, then this by default was my father's property. Whenever he visited, he would treat my mother so badly including beating her in front of us, calling her names and then selling almost half of what we had worked so hard for. I despised this, and I swore to do the best I could so I could have a different life than my mother's. With the help of my mother I was able to continue with school.

When I was in six-grade Emma was my best friend, we played together, ate lunch together and we studied together. When school was closed for the holidays in December,

Emma and I hugged and parted ways to go home for the holiday. We looked forward to being together in class seven the coming year. However, something drastic had happened that December; Emma went through the cutting and got married. That was the end of her education and at 12 years of age Emma had a family to care for. A year later she had her first baby – a girl. To feed her children Emma had to work on the farm and sometimes she borrowed food from other people. Now Emma has eight children and her first born daughter is already married with two children. Last year, I met Emma in our local market – If it was not for her calling my name. I could not have recognized her. Emma was carrying a huge bag of Maize in her back and her health has deteriorated - at 30 she looked like a 50 year old woman. My conversation with her started with her saying, “I wish I had continued with school like you did”.

As for my case, I enjoyed going to school and competing with boys. Although I knew I had a husband and the probability of continuing past primary school was low, I kept on pushing and believing that I would overcome. The education system did not provide a level playing ground for girls and boys despite the challenges girls faced at home. At school teachers who came from the local community favored boys and paid less attention to girls. Despite all this, and also given the fact that I did not have time to do my homework at home because after school there was no lighting to use at night and before nightfall I had to help my mother carry water, collect firewood, take care of my little siblings, and prepare food for the rest of the family. Despite all of these challenges I was still able to remain competitive at school.

I fought hard, created alliances, negotiated deals and I finally worked through high school. Eventually I was able to convince the community to send me to a college in the United States; something that has never been done by any other girl in the village. As a

child my dream was to become a primary school teacher but as I fought and started overcoming obstacles my dreams and priorities changed.

Currently, I am pursuing my PhD in Education at the University of Pittsburgh and I no longer want to stop at teaching primary schools. I want to help girls in my community and around the world gain access to an education and help them become what they dream of becoming in their lives. I want to help girls who are in the situation I was in 20 years ago. I want to offer hope to those who do not yet see it.

Girls in my villages are only hoping someone can remember them and I want to say yes I remember you and you sure can be whatever you want to become in life. While I know there are millions of kids in the world who need an education I realize that a thousand mile journey begins with taking one step. I am not going to sit and wait for the help to come from somewhere else—it can only begin with us, little by little until every child has an opportunity, has a chance to realize what most of us in this room have – an education. I believe that it is possible and I know we can make a change. Starting with myself and by you listening here to my story today.

By passing the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act, the United States will take another step toward ensuring that all girls have the opportunities that an education provides and that early marriage does not thwart that opportunity for an education. This legislation will help to break the cycle of poverty, violence, and maternal and child mortality.

Last year we started the first girls' primary boarding school in my community. The school serves the most vulnerable underprivileged girls – girls who are at high risk of forced early marriage and those who will be forced into genital cutting. The school does not only focus

on academic excellence but also female empowerment, leadership and community development. We provide girls an opportunity that otherwise they would not have. We tell the girls it is okay to look up even when the society is telling them to look down. We provide them with food and a safe place to learn and believe that they can achieve their dreams. We tell them it is okay for girls to dream to become a doctor, a pilot, a teacher, or whatever they want in life. Yes, we tell our girls there are no limits to what you can achieve in life – because you are a girl you too can make a positive impact in your community.

We are working to provide this generation of girls with the knowledge and tools necessary to be productive and equal members of their household and community. By preventing early or forced marriages, another world of possibilities exist and the United States can play a vital role in these communities by ensuring that its health and development programs incorporate child marriage prevention activities in areas where child marriage is prevalent, such as in my village in Kenya.

Together, we can create a future that is different from what my mother, that of Emma and her daughter and millions of others, including me have faced - one that was predetermined for us merely because we were born females. My story that brought me here today is the exception, but for all of the other millions of girls who have had and continue to have their human rights violated by this practice, we must not delay in addressing this issue and providing them with opportunities to achieve their dreams.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today on this important topic and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.