

STATEMENT OF ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE ANNE C. RICHARD  
SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE, TRANSNATIONAL  
CRIME, CIVILIAN SECURITY, DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND  
GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES

Thank you Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer and other members of the committee, for convening this important hearing on the plight of millions of girls around the world who are subjected to early and forced marriage, and thank you for inviting me to testify.

Ambassador Russell has outlined the scope of the problem. I want to focus my remarks on early and forced marriage among people who are refugees, internally displaced or stateless.

My bureau aids refugees and others uprooted by conflicts and crises, and we see, time and time again, how these emergencies exacerbate the threat of early and forced marriage - not only in warzones but also in places where families seek safety and take refuge.

### **Early and Forced Marriage Among Uprooted People**

Boko Haram and ISIL outrage the world by enslaving girls and forcing them into marriage. But these are not the only places where abuses are being perpetrated. Tragedies also unfold every day around the globe, as combatants in conflicts use attacks on women and girls to terrorize, subjugate, and scatter innocent civilians.

Families forced to flee may splinter. Some lose members through death or separation, including adult men who are traditional heads of the household. Families also lose their livelihoods, their dignity and their legal and social status. Instead of being able to work, they must rely on aid. Many find themselves living in poverty, in the close quarters of slums or tents, feeling adrift, uncertain about their fate and fearful for their future. Having escaped war, at this point they ought to be able to breathe a sigh of relief and resume normal life. But life in exile is not normal and, regrettably, is not always safe.

Ambassador Russell described the tangle of deeply rooted beliefs, traditions, and problems that can lead to early marriage. These include poverty, pervasive discrimination, the absence of opportunities and choices, and the misconception that early marriage will keep girls safe. Parents may feel they must do whatever it takes to safeguard their daughters' reputations and their family's honor.

Crises and conflicts can make these fears and dilemmas more urgent and make the lives of girls more precarious. Families may be afraid of what will happen to their young, unmarried daughters as they flee and find themselves in new, unfamiliar environments. Early and forced marriage becomes a so-called "negative coping strategy."

Syrian refugees in Jordan point to worries over safety and sexual harassment as reasons for arranging marriages for young daughters. Some parents also hope marrying a local man will help them stay in the host country legally.

Families marry off daughters because they are running out of money. In some cultures, families see their daughters as a burden, one that grows heavier when there are no opportunities for further education or work. That is especially true when the family is struggling to put food on the table.

And some families see early and forced marriage as preferable to other alternatives open to girls with no other source of income.

For all these reasons, more girls are forced into marriage. After two years in exile in Jordan, the rate of child marriages among Syrian girls there was twice the pre-war Syrian average. Before the war, about 13 percent of Syrian girls under 18 were married. But by 2013, the share of married girls among refugee families jumped to one in four. Nearly half of these girls married men at least a decade older than they are.

Even though parents may think they are shielding their daughters from abuse and sexual assault, early and forced marriage can have the opposite effect. Girls married young, especially those married to much older men, are more likely to suffer physical and emotional abuse and sexual violence than unmarried girls.

They are also far more likely to die in childbirth than older women, and to develop severe complications like obstetric fistula. I have seen how devastating this can be.

In Burkina Faso I visited a hospital supported by the United Nations Population Fund and spoke with women who had developed obstetric fistula because they gave birth before their bodies were ready. Some had suffered for decades, rejected by their families and ostracized by their communities, before learning that hospitals like this one can repair fistulas. They were there recovering from surgery.

The perils of early and forced marriage and child-bearing cross generations. Babies born of under-aged mothers suffer higher rates of infant mortality, prematurity, low birthweight and malnutrition.

Another risk is that these children will be born – and spend their entire lives – stateless, because underage marriages may not be legal, so children’s births cannot be registered. In 27 countries around the world, discriminatory laws prohibit women and girls from passing their citizenship to their children, and strip these children of legal rights and protections they will need in life, including the right to attend school, get medical care, work legally or own property. Stateless people are more vulnerable to trafficking, sexual and physical violence, exploitation, forced displacement, and other abuses-- such as early and forced marriage.

## **Remedies**

Let’s now discuss possible remedies. Strengthening laws against early and forced marriage could help. Most nations prohibit marriage below a certain age. But awareness of these laws is limited and enforcement is spotty – especially when laws clash with prevailing customs. Violations against displaced girls can be especially hard to address through legal means.

One solution is to make it easier to document marriages and births. Universal birth registration can reveal a girls’ age and help enforce laws against underage marriage, and it can prevent statelessness among children. At the most recent session in June, the United States cosponsored a UN Human Rights Council resolution “The Right to a Nationality: Women’s Equal Nationality Rights in Law and in Practice” with more than 100 cosponsors including all African states.<sup>1</sup> This resolution galvanized international support for granting equal nationality rights to

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<sup>1</sup> A/HRC/32/L.12

women and addressing the issue of statelessness. The United States is also supporting UNHCR's global campaign to end statelessness within the next decade.

We also need to change incentives, attitudes and the value placed on girls. Keeping girls in school is key. Girls with no education are up to six times more likely to marry as children than girls who have received secondary education. In sub-Saharan Africa, 66% of women with no education were married before age 18 compared to only 13% of those with secondary education.

The "U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls," launched by Secretary Kerry this past March, will strive to make education safe, free, and compulsory throughout the world, and keep girls enrolled in school, even if they are married and have children. It also aims to boost the numbers of adolescent girls who benefit from comprehensive health services and education.

Curbing gender-based violence in crises and conflicts can also discourage families from resorting to early and forced marriage. This is the focus of an initiative we launched in 2013 called Safe from the Start. Under it, we are channeling or have channeled approximately \$55 million to programs designed both to help survivors and to prevent attacks from happening in the first place.

We have provided new staff and training so that aid workers can identify risk factors and take countermeasures, make camps physically safer, provide medical treatment, legal counseling and psycho-social services, and help vulnerable women and girls earn money to support themselves. The initiative also supports education and awareness raising programs and wellness centers – safe spaces in refugee camps – for women and girls.

At Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, where early and forced marriage is a stubborn problem, girls get counseling and support. Outreach workers go door to door and organize community gatherings to raise awareness about the rights of women and girls.

In Nigeria and Uganda aid workers also distribute leaflets, put up billboards about the need to prevent forced marriages and let girls go to school. Aid workers say it is making a difference. Mothers and girls are coming forward to report that they,

their daughters, or friends are being pressured into early forced marriage and want help to stop it.

Preventing early and forced marriage and other forms of gender-based violence is a focus of our diplomacy as well as the humanitarian assistance we provide through UN agencies and other international and non-governmental organizations. We have worked hard to rally support for the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies, a unique initiative to mobilize and coordinate efforts to strengthen protection for women and girls caught up in emergencies. As the Call to Action lead in 2015, the United States created a roadmap that outlined concrete and meaningful steps all concerned governments and humanitarians can take over the next five years to do a better job of keeping women and girls safe and holding one another accountable.

When more girls have the chance to make their own, informed choices and reach their full potential, the world will be a better place, not just for them but for all of us.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.