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From: Verveer, Melanne S <VerveerMS@state.gov>
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In case you want to discuss with them.

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The Washington Post

Early marriage robs children of their opportunities

By **Graça Machel** and **Desmond Tutu**, Published: July 31

“If adults know child marriage is wrong, why do they allow it to happen?” a teenage girl asked one of us during a visit this year to Bihar, a state in northeast India where, despite national law to the contrary, 69 percent of girls are married before age 18.

For far too long, “tradition” has been the default answer. Child marriage happens, we are told, because it has been arranged for generations, because that is “the way things are.” But traditions are man-made, and we believe that when people realize a tradition or practice is detrimental, they can and do change them.

Wherever we visit as members of The Elders, girls and boys step forward and ask for their rights and dignity to be respected. In Bihar, The Elders met youths from the Jagriti campaign who, under the slogan “My life, my decision,” have gathered more than 20,000 signatures from other teenagers, pledging not to marry early. In the rural Amhara region of Ethiopia, girls participating in the Berhane Hewan project told us they had formed clubs and were determined to support friends vulnerable to early marriage.

As adults we have to ask ourselves: Are we doing enough to fulfill our responsibility to these young people and respect their rights in law and in action? The answer, sadly, is no.

Child marriage happens because adults believe they have the right to impose marriage upon a child. This denies children, particularly girls, their dignity and the opportunity to make choices that are central to their lives, such as when and whom to marry or when to have children. Choices define us and allow us to realize our potential. Child marriage robs girls of this chance.

The effects of child marriage are devastating. Child brides tend to drop out of school, making them far more vulnerable to a life of poverty, ill health and abuse. Child brides are more susceptible to death or injury in childbirth than are women in their 20s. They are particularly vulnerable to domestic violence.

These marriages are inextricably linked with global concerns such as food security and maternal health, as The Post noted in a recent report on the rise in such marriages following the hunger crisis in Niger. Child marriage directly hinders the achievement of six of the eight Millennium Development Goals and undermines our collective efforts to reduce global poverty and build just and prosperous nations.

Action is urgently needed. At current rates, 100 million girls will marry as children in the next decade. Fortunately, momentum for change is building. With government support in Ethiopia, the Berhane Hewan project is being scaled up across the Amhara region, where 80 percent of girls marry before age 18 and many marry at 12. Communities in Senegal are collectively pledging to end child marriage. At the recent London Family Planning Summit, Vice President Khumbo Kachali of Malawi committed to addressing by year's end inconsistencies in his country's laws related to the minimum age of marriage.

Local and national efforts are essential. But they need to be supported by action at the international level. In this regard, we were heartened that the U.S. Senate passed, for the second time in two years, the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act, which describes child marriage as a human rights violation and recommends an integrated approach to end the practice. We encourage the House of Representatives to follow suit. With or without legislation, we urge the Obama administration to make eliminating child marriage a foreign policy goal.

We also urge the administration to work with donors, national governments and community-based organizations to increase technical support and funding for programs that provide adolescent girls with social, economic, health and human rights information and services. Such programs can empower girls, educate parents and mobilize communities to end early marriage.

Without tackling child marriage, the U.S. government cannot hope to achieve its development ambitions. Conversely, by giving this issue the attention it deserves, the administration has an opportunity to strengthen its development work in all areas.

Our group helped found Girls Not Brides, a global partnership of more than 160 nongovernmental organizations. We are continually inspired by the individual girls, activists and community-based organizations courageous enough to stand up against child marriage, despite the opposition that challenging a traditional practice can bring.

The young people of India, Ethiopia and beyond are ready for change but need support and inspiration. The U.S. government has an opportunity to provide both and to fulfill the full rights, citizenship and dignity of the world's most isolated, voiceless and vulnerable girls.

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