November 22, 2017

The Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations Office at Geneva

High Commissioner Zeid:

Thank you for your letter dated September 22, 2017, outlining your questionnaire on United States actions taken to address the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). Please find the U.S. response attached.

Sincerely,

Jason R. Mack
U.S. Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Human Rights Council

The United States recognizes that societies and economies achieve far better results when they embrace, rather than marginalize, the role of women as agents of change. Yet, to best ensure that the girls of today have enabling environments to be tomorrow’s leaders, they must be empowered to achieve their full potential. Girlhood is a time when young women should be nurturing their skills, pursuing their passions, and building the foundations of their futures. However, far too many girls face unreasonable limitations that block their paths to achieving their goals and self-fulfillment. In many countries, girls are seen as a burden or commodity. These issues prevent girls from fully participating politically, socially, and economically in their communities.

The United States is committed to combatting all forms of violence against women and girls and harmful practices, including CEFM, both domestically and abroad. We are also committed to addressing the root causes of these practices, such as poverty and a lack of access to education, through various multinational initiatives. Around the world, the United States is working to help underrepresented populations, particularly girls, understand their human rights, increase their self-confidence, and empower themselves to become leaders in their communities. The United States has cosponsored resolutions on eliminating CEFM at both the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, and has made efforts to condemn this practice through strong statements in various multilateral fora. The U.S. Department of State continues to strengthen reporting on CEFM in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. Preventing early and forced marriage and other forms of violence against women and girls is a focus of the Department’s diplomatic efforts as well as the humanitarian assistance the U.S. provides through UN agencies and other international and non-governmental organizations. Through collaborative efforts with various government agencies regarding the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Department of State continues to implement the DREAMS Partnership in ten sub-Saharan African countries and DREAMS-like activities in five other countries. DREAMS is supporting adolescent girls and young women to become Determined,
Resilient, Empowered, AIDS-free, Mentored, and Safe using evidence-based interventions.

In 2016, the Department of State launched a $7 million program in Afghanistan aimed at addressing early and forced marriage, including a campaign highlighting the negative health, economic, and social consequences of this practice for girls, their families, and communities. The program has been working to change perceptions on the acceptability of early and forced marriage and to empower adolescent girls to make informed life choices through education, vocational and life skills training, and peer support networks.

The Department of State also supports organizations working to protect refugee children from harmful practices, and has incorporated the issue of preventing CEFM into programs aimed at providing education to refugee youth, health services to women and girls, and psycho-social support to traumatized refugees including children. These programs work to engage parents, caregivers, and community leaders in order to address the issues that both cause and perpetuate early and forced marriage. In particular, the Department will continue its work on combatting CEFM in countries impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis. Programmatic efforts in this region focus on mobilizing caregivers, religious leaders, and community stakeholders to increase their understanding of the benefits of delaying marriage. This initiative also focuses on supporting civil society organizations for community-led changes, protecting at-risk girls, and giving a voice to married girls.

Furthermore, the Department of State has continued its efforts to safely and effectively assist U.S. citizens who are victims of early and forced marriage overseas by enhancing its guidance related to early and forced marriage for consular officers at U.S. embassies and consulates. The Department’s Bureau of Consular Affairs also continues to work with other offices within the Department of State and other federal agencies to raise the issue of child, early, and forced marriage through public messaging, education, and provision of resources. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also continues its commitment to preventing and responding to CEFM. Over the last three fiscal years, USAID has invested over $10 million annually in addressing issues related
to the practice. For example, USAID is addressing the high prevalence of child, early, and forced marriage in Ethiopia through programs that address its root causes, including education, empowerment of women and girls, and health services. In one such program, USAID trained 875 members of the judiciary and law enforcement communities on CEFM issues. As a result, 748 early and forced marriages were annulled in the Amhara region, where this illegal activity is widely practiced. These approaches also focus on programs that provide health services to young girls and legal and psychosocial services to persons married as children. USAID is integrating child, early, and forced marriage-related approaches into sector specific programs and continues to train staff on ways to integrate prevention and response strategies into field-based programs and activities. To that end, USAID developed the “Child, Early, and Forced Marriage Resource Guide” highlighting case studies, guidance on working with key stakeholders, regional considerations, and developing robust monitoring and evaluation indicators.

The Department of Labor’s (DOL) Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB), Office of Child Labor, Forced Labor and Human Trafficking (OCFT) works to address the worst forms of CEFM-related issues like child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking worldwide through research, technical assistance, and policy engagement. As part of these efforts, DOL/ILAB supports programs and initiatives that reduce the prevalence of the worst forms of child labor among vulnerable girls around the world. Currently, ILAB is funding three projects in Ethiopia, Paraguay, and Zambia, totaling $21 million, as part of its adolescent girls’ initiative. These projects will aid over 10,000 girls ages 11-17, who are engaged in or at high risk of entering child labor, by teaching them life skills, increasing their access to education and vocational services, and improving their ability to secure decent work.

Through its constructive compact with the El Salvadorian government, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), a bilateral foreign aid agency created by the United States Congress, is working to improve quality education in secondary schools in El Salvador. As part of this initiative, MCC (through the El Salvadorian Ministry of Education) will conduct interventions aimed at reducing violence against women and girls in schools, through trainings for teachers and
directors, students, students’ parents and caretakers, as well as Ministry of Education staff. MCC will also implement a program aimed to empower adolescent girls and promote new concepts around masculinity among adolescent boys. Additionally, MCC will conduct a nation-wide study to assess the violence against women and girls in schools in El Salvador and use those findings to strengthen the Ministry of Education’s protocols and processes to respond to such cases. These programs, which address issues that are closely related to CEFM, will help the El Salvadorian government continue to strongly combat CEFM practices.

The Department of Homeland Security dedicates significant resources to combatting forced marriage issues, including child, early, and forced marriage issues, through U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Noting that victims of forced marriage of any age may be leveraged for their immigration status, USCIS collaborates with the Department of State to provide confidential assistance to victims of forced marriage in instances where the victim indicates that she or he was forced into, or is at risk of being forced into, petitioning for a spousal or fiancé petition.

USCIS also employs specific policies aimed to help victims of various types of abuse. The U nonimmigrant status (for all ages of victims of serious crimes including domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking) and the T nonimmigrant status (for all ages of victims of human trafficking) provide temporary immigration status and a path to permanent status for foreign nationals who, among other requirements, cooperate with law enforcement in the investigation and prosecution of these crimes. By encouraging victims of these crimes, which can occur in situations involving forced marriage, to report to law enforcement, these forms of relief strengthen law enforcement’s ability to enforce laws that protect victims from violence against women and girls. USCIS trains its officers in the adjudication of applications for T nonimmigrant status, petitions for U nonimmigrant status, and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) self-petitions. USCIS offers unique training to ensure officers understand the dynamics associated with domestic violence, crime victimization, and human trafficking, as well as the role of immigration relief in victim safety. USCIS has conducted extensive outreach efforts with the public, immigration attorneys, and federal,
state, and local law enforcement, providing increased awareness of and access to the VAWA, T, and U nonimmigrant status programs.

Finally, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) implements numerous programs to combat violence against women and girls, including human trafficking, as girls who are subjected to CEFM can also be vulnerable to trafficking. HHS has implemented these programs by identifying victims, assisting survivors, and preventing trafficking through health and human service systems. In fiscal year 2016, HHS issued 444 Certification Letters to adult victims of trafficking who have received T nonimmigrant status or continued presence from DHS and 334 Eligibility Letters to foreign national minor trafficking victims. These letters enable recipients to be eligible for services and benefits to the same extent as refugees. In fiscal year 2016, HHS assisted more than 1,760 individuals through victim assistance programs in more than 230 cities and 42 states. The National Human Trafficking Hotline identified 7,405 unique cases of potential trafficking and provided service referrals to 4,608 victims of trafficking in fiscal year 2016.