Overcoming Challenges, Empower Girls Event Report

CARE, in partnership with Girls Not Brides USA and the FGM Network, hosted the event “Overcoming Challenges, Empowering Girls” on October 10, 2017 at the Rayburn House Office Building, in commemoration of the International Day of the Girl. This event brought together over 150 policy-makers, advocates, researchers, and the media to discuss and debate the unique challenges and opportunities faced by adolescent girls globally, and U.S. leadership in addressing them. Hosted in cooperation with the House Foreign Affairs Committee, this signature community event was structured around a panel discussion moderated by CARE USA President and CEO Michelle Nunn, with speakers including Maryam Ahmed, a girl champion with Save the Children; Aubryn Sidle, Board Member and former Executive Director of AGE Africa; Yeva Avakyan, Head of Gender Inclusion, World Vision; and Quentin Wodon, Lead Economist, World Bank. This panel event was followed by a reception hosted by CARE USA and featured CARE’s Tipping Point PhotoVoice exhibit featuring photographs taken by girls and women in Nepal and Bangladesh who have been part of the Tipping Point project. The pictures and stories through the eyes of the girls and women themselves, offered stunning glimpses into moments of newfound freedom to move independently, support themselves financially, work together with men and boys, converse intimately with their families, become star athletes, and so much more.

The event successfully brought together Members of Congress, civil society leaders, and girl advocates to honor commitments made, articulate specific contributions, and call for further action for adolescent girls. Ed Royce, Betty McCollum, Debbie Dingell, Iliana Ros-Lehtinen, Eliot Engel, Ami Bera, Steve Chabot, and Lois Frankel, representing both major parties, attended and made remarks, affirming that girls’ rights and empowerment are central to development and stability; U.S. leadership on these issues are critical; and partnership, both across the aisle and with civil society, are needed.

A rich discussion followed the panel event, with particularly interesting insights into the impacts of child marriage, and approaches to overcome obstacles; the economic case for action against child marriage, and learnings for the U.S Government as a leader in the movement to end child marriage. Michelle
Nunn remarked that while America’s role as a leader has been called into question as a global leader in development and humanitarian assistance, it will take leadership, courage, and investment to make a difference and save lives. Maryam Ahmed, a 17 year-old girl advocate from Nigeria, discussed her experience advocating for girls’ education in her country. She called on the U.S. Government to invest in girls - especially poor girls, marginalized girls, and girls with disabilities, and include them in policy-making. Drawing from her experience in Malawi, Aubrey Sidle emphasized the role of culture and social norms, and the need to work with women elders. She also argued that the U.S. Government must prioritize local organizations in grant-making, as they are equipped with the expertise, access, and networks for sustainable change. Yeva Avakyan also stressed the need to work with communities, especially men and boys, alongside changing laws, as well as working with girls who are already married, and providing them with educational opportunities and health and social services. Quentin Wodon stated that child marriage affects the kind of work women do, and those who marry before 18, lose 9% of their earnings. He made the case for investing in education, and argued that if we ended child marriage today, we would see trillions of dollars of economic growth by 2030. All panelists agreed on the importance of making sexual and reproductive health and rights accessible, empowering girls with access to information, youth-friendly centers and promoting their agency.

Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Congressman Ed Royce, provided insightful remarks about the importance of engaging girls for a better future. He remarked “US leadership and more importantly require involving, and empowering, engaging young women and girls around the world and their mothers.” Congresswoman Betty McCollum, a longtime champion of adolescent girls’ rights, described child marriage as “culturally-sanctioned child exploitation” that results in coercion of the child and lasting physical and mental consequences. She stressed that girls are integral to our global community’s peace, security, and economic growth, and she reaffirmed her commitment to work on girl’s issues.

At the CARE hosted reception and Photovoice exhibition, several Members of Congress attended and offered remarks on Congress’ work and commitment to helping girls lift their voices and communities overcoming challenges to empowerment. The event concluded with remarks from Dr. Kakenya Ntaiya, Founder and President of the Kakenya Center for Excellence, who shared her experiences escaping child marriage and as a survivor of FGM/C, and advocate for girls’ education in Kenya.