

## Kenyan Educationalist Rebukes US Congress For Rejecting Child Marriage Bill

Washington DC, January 6, 2010: A leading Kenyan advocate for girls' education has criticized the US Congress for rejecting a proposal to toughen US policy on early marriage, even though the practice increases the risk of illiteracy, complications at child-birth and HIV-AIDS.

The [International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2010](#) failed to attract the required majority when it was put to a vote in the US House of Representatives on December 16. The proposal had been unanimously accepted by the US Senate and was expected to become US law. Its rejection has raised fears that the new Congress will turn its back on the health of women and girls, which has been a signature issue of US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.



Photo by Luna Liu

[Kakenya Ntaiya](#) (left), a prominent Kenyan advocate for girl's rights, expressed dismay at the vote. "What kind of message does this send to the world?" she asked on her Facebook page. Ms Ntaiya testified on early marriage before the US Congress last year and was herself betrothed at the age of five.

UNICEF estimates that 60 million women between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18 and warns that the figure could rise to 100 million over the next decade. Most countries have set 18 as the minimum age for marriage, but this is widely ignored, particularly in Africa.

During her testimony to Congress last July, Ms Ntaiya argued that early marriage robs girls of their right to an education and treats them as the property of much older husbands: "Throughout my childhood, I was constantly reminded that my husband was waiting and that as soon as I underwent genital cutting - a traditional rite of passage to adulthood - I was going to be his wife."

Others have warned that early marriage exposes girls to serious complications during childbirth, to obstetric fistula and to uterine prolapse. Marrying a much older spouse who has had several sexual partners may also put them at risk from the HIV-AIDS virus.

Under the proposed law, the US State Department and Agency for International Development

(USAID) would have treated early marriage as a priority and reported on high levels in the Department's annual human rights reports. The reports have become an important tool of US foreign policy under the Obama Administration, and advocates would like to see them take a stronger position on reproductive rights.

A majority of Representatives (241 to 166) voted in support of the law, but this fell short of the two-thirds majority needed for passage. Most lawmakers from the Republican Party rejected the law after their leaders warned that it would cost an additional \$108 million over five years and also channel funds to organizations that support abortion.

Both claims were disputed by supporters of the Bill, who pointed out that it would have set new priorities for the US government but not cost any new money. In addition, the risk of abortion actually increases with early marriage because childbirth puts such strain on a girl's body. As a result, the vote has raised concerns that Republican lawmakers in the new Congress will routinely invoke abortion in opposing initiatives to improve reproductive and maternal health.

Meanwhile, Kakenya Ntaiya has turned her own experience into an inspiring program in Kenya. Her organization, Kakenya's Center of Excellence, runs a boarding school for 63 girls in her home village, and Ms Ntaiya is close to obtaining a PHD in the US. The Advocacy Project has sent three Peace Fellows to support the program and plans to strengthen the partnership in 2011.

- Read the [International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act](#), rejected by the US House of Representatives on December 16, 2010
- Read about [Kakenya Ntaiya's work](#)
- Hear an [interview with Kakenya Ntaiya on NPR Radio](#)
- Watch an [interview with Kakenya Ntaiya](#)
- Read the blogs of Peace Fellows who have volunteered at the Kakenya Center of Excellence: [Kate Cummings](#), [Luna Liu](#), and [Brooke Blanchard](#).