

November 15, 2021

The Honorable Gregory Meeks
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Michael McCaul
Ranking Member
House Foreign Affairs Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Dear Chairman Meeks and Ranking Member McCaul:

Around the world, the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout are having a regressive effect on gender equality. Simultaneously, the world is grappling with the worst humanitarian crisis in history with nearly 82.4 million people displaced and 235 million in need of humanitarian assistance. These crises and the impacts of increasing violence and displacement are disproportionately affecting women and girls, and undermining global efforts to meet humanitarian need, uphold human rights in the face of authoritarianism, and achieve sustainable development and peaceful resolution of conflict. There has never been a more important time to elevate the needs and the voices of women and girls.

We request that the House Foreign Affairs Committee markup three important pieces of bipartisan legislation before the end of the calendar year: the Keeping Girls in School Act ([H.R. 4134](#)), the Girls Leadership, Engagement, Agency and Development (Girls LEAD) Act ([H.R. 1661](#)), and the Safe from the Start Act ([H.R. 571](#)). These complementary bipartisan bills address critical U.S. foreign policy priorities related to girls' secondary education, girls' civic and political leadership, and gender-based violence in crises settings, respectively.

[Research shows](#) that higher levels of gender equality are strongly and positively correlated with a nation's relative state of peace, a healthier domestic security environment, and lower levels of aggression toward other states. No country can fully succeed in achieving development outcomes if half the population is afforded fewer opportunities and resources. Specific, targeted measures are needed to ensure that women and girls, including those living in areas affected by conflict or humanitarian crises, are not left behind in benefitting from lifesaving U.S. foreign assistance programs.

It is estimated that 11 million girls will not return to school due to the pandemic, and the effects of a girls' loss of education include greater likelihood that they will be married as children and greater likelihood of experiencing sexual violence and adolescent pregnancy. **The Keeping Girls in School Act** directs the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to address the barriers adolescent girls face in accessing a quality secondary education in countries where girls are disproportionately more likely to drop out of school than boys. International development projects authorized by this Act will respond to new barriers that have emerged over the last year, such as inequitable access to digital learning resources, in addition to pre-existing barriers that prevent girls from staying enrolled in school and completing their education.

Data shows that girls experience distinct vulnerabilities during times of instability and crisis, and the most effective way to address these vulnerabilities is by consulting with girls themselves. However, even before the pandemic, girls faced significant barriers that often prevented them from participating in decision-making processes in their communities. These barriers include child marriage, unequal access to education, disproportionate domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities, and discriminatory social norms. Addressing these barriers and increasing girls' civic and political knowledge and skills will create a pipeline of women leaders in both the public and private spheres. Evidence shows that a greater gender balance in politics promotes a greater gender balance in the workforce and larger gains in GDP growth, but it is estimated that it will now take 145.5 years to achieve global gender parity in politics. Investing in girls' leadership now is key to addressing this significant disparity; **the Girls LEAD Act** would fill gaps

in U.S. foreign assistance to accelerate progress. As we approach the Summit for Democracy in December, it is critical that we take steps to ensure that girls are supported to meaningfully participate in decision-making fora.

Humanitarian contexts are known to increase violence against women and girls. Indeed, the Global Humanitarian Overview of 2021 noted that 70 percent of women experience gender-based violence (GBV) in humanitarian contexts compared with 35 percent worldwide. Sexual violence, child marriage, domestic violence, and human trafficking make humanitarian crises even worse for women and girls, who already grapple with food insecurity, lack of shelter and sanitation, and disruptions in education and livelihoods while displaced. The ongoing crises in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere demonstrate just how acute the impacts of conflict are on women and girls, particularly the rise in GBV. **The Safe from the Start Act** seeks to strengthen current U.S. efforts to address gender-based violence at the onset of a humanitarian emergency and to fully address its impacts. In addition to establishing U.S. government policy to advance the skills of humanitarian actors, improve coordination in emergency response, and bolster support for survivors of gender-based violence in humanitarian emergency contexts, this comprehensive legislation seeks to elevate the voices of women and girls around the world by fostering empowerment opportunities that promote economic advancement, access to education, and leadership and involvement in humanitarian response efforts.

We are grateful for your support on previous bipartisan efforts to advance gender equality globally, such as Chairman Meek's co-sponsorship of the Girls Count Act and Ranking Member McCaul's leadership on the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act, and for your passage of the Keeping Girls in School Act in the 116th Congress. We urge you to build on this progress by advancing the Keeping Girls in School Act, the Girls LEAD Act, and the Safe from the Start Act to HFAC markup in 2021 and ensure the needs and perspectives of women and girls around the world are not overlooked in U.S. foreign policy. We look forward to continuing to work in partnership with you on these important issues.

Sincerely,

1. Advancing Girls' Education in Africa (AGE Africa)
2. Alliance for Peacebuilding
3. Amal Alliance
4. Amnesty International USA
5. Basic Education Coalition
6. California Women Lawyers
7. CARE
8. Center for Policy Analysis of Horn of Africa
9. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy
10. Child Labor Coalition
11. ChildFund International
12. Clearinghouse on Women's Issues
13. Concern Worldwide
14. Creative Associates International, Inc.
15. EdIntersect
16. Educate the Children-Nepal
17. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
18. Feminist Majority Foundation
19. First Focus on Children
20. Food for the Hungry
21. Fòs Feminista
22. Friends of UNFPA

23. Futures Without Violence
24. Girl Up, United Nations Foundation
25. Girls Learn International
26. Global Campaign for Education-US
27. Global Girl Media
28. Global Rights for Women
29. Global Woman P.E.A.C.E. Foundation
30. GreeneWorks
31. Helen Keller International
32. Heartland Alliance International
33. Independent of the disabled persons of Kenya
34. International Action Network for Gender Equity & Law (IANGEL)
35. International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN)
36. International Justice Mission
37. International Rescue Committee
38. International Youth Foundation
39. IREX
40. Islamic Relief USA
41. Jewish Women International
42. Justice for Migrant Women
43. Kakenya's Dream
44. Last Mile4D
45. Light for the World
46. National Child Labor Committee
47. National Consumers League
48. Nonviolent Peaceforce
49. PDRC International
50. Plan International USA
51. Population Media Center
52. Promundo-US
53. Refugees International
54. RTI International
55. Rukmini Foundation
56. Save the Children
57. School-to-School International (STS)
58. Seeds to Sew International
59. She's the First
60. Soroptimist International
61. The Episcopal Church
62. The Hunger Project
63. Together for Girls
64. Together Women Rise
65. UNICEF USA
66. Vital Voices Global Partnership
67. WaterAid America
68. Women Deliver
69. Women Graduates USA
70. Women's Action for New Directions
71. Women's Refugee Commission
72. World Education
73. World Learning
74. World Vision US