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March 14, 2016

His Excellency Mamnoon Hussain  
President of Pakistan  
President's Secretariat  
Islamabad  
Pakistan

President Hussain:

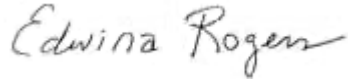
The Secular Policy Institute joins a wide array of international organizations listed below in condemning the sacrifice of young women at a pivotal stage in their development to satisfy particular religious sentiments. Through a series of human rights conventions, the international community has established an explicit global consensus: forced, child marriage is a cruel, inhumane practice that has disproportionately robbed young women of the chance at an education, puts them at a higher risk for death in child-birth and STI transmission, and must be abolished. On January 16, a member of Pakistan's National Assembly withdrew her bill after it received resistance from an official, religious advisory panel deeming the 2014 "Child Marriage Restraint Amendment" as "anti-Islamic" and "blasphemous."

Child marriage is not limited to, but disproportionately selects, girls under 18, often to be wed to men much older. As these are marriages in which the victim is too young to give informed and fully valid consent, they are also referred to as "forced" marriages. According to UNICEF and human rights organization, Girls Not Brides, 28 girls under the age of 18 are married every minute globally, and it is estimated that during this decade 140 million girls will be wed before 18, 50 million before the age of 15. In trying to secure a protective, stable future for their daughters, some parents will marry their daughters off to older, established men ("loving manipulation"). Others marry off their young daughters, seeking to reduce a financial burden upon themselves or to settle disputes. In many other instances this is done out of customary reasons to avoid social shaming. Regardless of the rationale, globally, child marriage is twice as likely for those living in rural poor communities. In Pakistan 48.9% of girls in the poorest communities are entered into forced marriages as opposed to 9.9% from the most affluent. While legally prohibited, child marriage is culturally sanctioned in Pakistan.

These forced marriages are deleterious at multiple levels, and the international community has called for a stop to them. A recent UN Resolution on human rights states that "child, early, and forced marriage is a harmful practice that violates, abuses, or impairs human rights and is linked to and perpetuates other harmful practice and human rights violations." Consistent with this position, the 2015 UN Human Rights Council included ending forced child marriage as part of their 2016-2030 Sustainability Goals.

Though child marriage has many causes, religious doctrine is a chief factor in the perpetuation of this practice. For this reason, it is especially in our interest as a Secular advocacy group to oppose such practices.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Edwina Rogers".

Edwina Rogers, CEO  
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