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Statement on the Amendment of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Marriage) Bill 2016

The Institute for Gender and Development Studies (IGDS), at the University of the West Indies, St Augustine, calls upon the Members of the House of Representative to secure the rights of minors and implement public policy that expands the life choices of all children.

As the Miscellaneous Provisions (Marriage) Bill 2016 moves to be debated again in the House of Representatives on Monday 6 March 2017, the Institute of Gender and Development Studies, The UWI, St. Augustine Campus calls on Members of Parliament to prioritize the life and livelihood options of girls, and protection of minors, in their contributions and in their support of the bill’s passage.

The IGDS advocates for legal and social policy which is grounded in sound understanding of adolescent sexuality. Regardless of the politics of the moment, there are some inalienable facts on which all sides of this debate must agree. These facts include:

• The current laws of Trinidad & Tobago allow for the marriage of minors, with no minimum age set.

• Global commitments compel us as a nation to defend the rights of all our citizenry. Both the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Committee and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Committee have called upon State Parties to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 for girls and boys.

• Girls are disproportionately affected by the current laws regarding marriage. This legal inequality must be changed.

The debate on this Bill is an historic opportunity for law makers in Trinidad and Tobago to put into Hansard the commitment of all parties entrusted with the responsibility to uphold the rights of minors, particularly that of minor girls. This moment must be one in which the nation rallies around the priority to protect our girls to grow, develop, and achieve their fullest potential.

The Institute for Gender and Development Studies, consistent with our mission to advance social justice and promote gender-responsive human development in the wider society, remains committed to the ideals of eliminating all forms of harmful gender norms and obstacles to gender equality, by ending discrimination against women and the girl child. Global facts are that marriage of minors interrupts education, constrains personal development and agency, and legally sanctions the exposure of children to sexual harm and exploitation. This needs further research in Trinidad and Tobago to understand the effects of marriage on those married as teenagers, particularly girls.

While noting the complexity of perspectives on this issue, the IGDS therefore encourages responsible deliberation and action from sitting MPs for whom the protection of girls from marriage while minors should be our current priority.