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Senate

The Senate met at 9:30 a.m. and was called to order by the President pro tempore (Mr. HATCH).

PRAYER

The Chaplain, Dr. Barry C. Black, offered the following prayer:

Let us pray.

God of all nations, strengthen us that we may meet the challenges of these times. Enable us to live so that we will bring honor to Your Name. Be merciful to our Nation, for You are our hope.

Today, empower our lawmakers with the music of Your wisdom that they may bring hope out of despair and joy out of sadness. Lord, teach them to celebrate even in the darkness, because You are the God of our salvation. We celebrate Your mighty acts and take solace from Your providential guidance.

We pray in Your sacred Name. Amen.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The President pro tempore led the Pledge of Allegiance, as follows:

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Democratic leader is recognized.

FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I come to the floor today not to talk about a political issue, in the real sense of the word—not Democrat versus Republican—but a very difficult sensitive issue. It is hard to talk about, but we as a nation can't keep ignoring this important topic.

It has been more than 20 years since I learned about something called fe-

male genital mutilation, known as FGM. Since then, I have spoken often against this awful procedure and the devastating effect it has on women and girls around the world.

A number of people warned me 20 years ago that this isn't a subject I should talk about. It was taboo. They thought it would be untoward for me to do so. But I told them I had to because no one else was talking about it. So I am going to continue doing everything I can to bring attention to this issue and fight to end this horrible, awful, brutal practice perpetrated against women and girls.

It was a 1994 cable news program that introduced me to this practice. One of my friends in Las Vegas said: You can't imagine this. This was a young woman who sent this to me. I didn't expect getting this from her or anyone else. But we were friends, and so I watched this. She said: You have to. And I did: A 10-year-old little girl in a party dress held down by two men, her legs spread apart, and she was brutally mutilated as her genitals were cut away. These images have continually haunted me over the years. I will never ever forget the picture that I saw.

There are different forms of female genital mutilation around the world. The most severe and atrocious is the one in which the girl's genitals are cut away. But then the little girls are literally sewn shut, leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual blood.

Though FGM is performed for different reasons around the world. One thing is very clear: Whatever rationality you try to give to this practice, it is a form of control and oppression of women and girls.

In addition to the psychological impact, this form of gender-based violence has serious medical risks, including death, of course. It is recognized by the United Nations as a human rights violation, as it should be.

But FGM is still happening. As we speak, 200 million women and girls

worldwide have undergone FGM—200 million women and girls who are alive today who have undergone that procedure that I watched on cable news, or something like it. More than two decades after I first saw that program, women and girls are still being hacked, mutilated. It is not done in a hospital, an operating room. It is done in very unsanitary conditions most of the time.

This practice remains prevalent in at least 30 countries. In some places, the rates of FGM are higher than 90 percent—90 percent. In many of these countries, girls are cut before the age of 5. In most places they are cut between the ages of 5 and 14. In many of these countries, girls—well, enough. Imagine that—girls who haven't even started school yet, of kindergarten age or younger, being subjected to this horror.

Because of these millions of girls, I have spent more than 20 years trying to do something about it. I have worked hard to pass legislation outlawing the practice in the United States and banning so-called vacation cutting, which goes on when young girls are shipped overseas. Because it is illegal here, due to the laws we passed, they take them overseas to be cut.

There was some bipartisan support, obviously, for this. It is not a partisan issue. We were able to have a few victories—certainly not enough, but some. Still, this brutal practice continues around the world, and it is clear there must be much more done—much more done.

That is why, at my request, the General Accountability Office began a study on the American Government's efforts to stop this practice. The GAO has now completed its report about our government's international efforts. It wasn't much of a report. It was kind of short. The report is shameful in terms of what we have not done.

The title of the report says it all: "Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting:

● This "bullet" symbol identifies statements or insertions which are not spoken by a Member of the Senate on the floor.



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S3003

U.S. Assistance to Combat This Harmful Practice Abroad is Limited.” And “limited” is an understatement.

I am publicly releasing this report today, which outlines the U.S. Government’s limited—limited—efforts. I am terribly disappointed. I am embarrassed that the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development are not fully engaged in dedicating resources to put an end to this.

According to the GAO report, USAID and the State Department each had just one active stand-alone project focused on stopping female genital mutilation. One of these projects is gone—already ended. Less than \$2 million has been spent on these projects combined.

The GAO also found that the United States has never contributed—never contributed—a penny to the world’s largest international effort against this horrible, awful practice. It is called the Joint Programme on FGM/C. It is embarrassing. We have not put one penny into this.

During the course of the GAO investigation, State and USAID both began to take action. They were embarrassed, I assume. If they weren’t, they should have been. But they haven’t done much. USAID, for example, decided to update the guidance it released 16 years ago, and Secretary Kerry recently announced that the United States will be contributing to the Joint Programme for the first time. Bravo.

I commend this commitment, but I understand these funds are not a dedicated funding source. They are just a one-time, very limited pledge. Maybe we will have to get another GAO report before we get something into that program. It shouldn’t take a GAO investigation for State and USAID to act. The United States should prioritize ending this practice, but it hasn’t.

This is shameful. It is a tragedy that our great government is not doing more. It is inexcusable that the United States, a nation with wealth and power, is standing by while such sickening violence against women and girls is occurring. As we speak, 200 million have undergone this in the world—200 million.

The State Department and USAID should end it or do everything they can to make female genital mutilation a priority and dedicate substantial resources to this issue. It is a cause. It should be, if it isn’t. The United States can and must do far more to eliminate this practice worldwide. We still have problems here in the United States.

This shameful GAO report, I hope, is a wake-up call. Something had to wake us up because we have done almost nothing as a country. The report should be a turning point in the fight against FGM, a moment when the most powerful nation in the world commences the stopping of this brutal form of abuse.

The United States should be a leader in this fight and not a bystander. We must put this brutal practice to an

end. America must lead the world in stopping these assaults of little girls and big girls and women. I hope the Senate will join me in these efforts.

Mr. President, I don’t see anyone on the floor. I ask the Chair to announce the business of the day.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES APPROPRIATIONS ACT, 2016

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will resume consideration of H.R. 2577, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2577) making appropriations for the Departments of Transportation, and Housing and Urban Development, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016, and for other purposes.

Pending:

Collins amendment No. 3896, in the nature of a substitute.

McConnell (for Lee) amendment No. 3897 (to amendment No. 3896), to prohibit the use of funds to carry out a rule and notice of the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

McConnell (for Nelson/Rubio) amendment No. 3898 (to amendment No. 3896), making supplemental appropriations for fiscal year 2016 to respond to Zika virus.

McConnell (for Cornyn) modified amendment No. 3899 (to amendment No. 3896), making emergency supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016.

McConnell (for Blunt) modified amendment No. 3900 (to amendment No. 3896), Zika response and preparedness.

Collins (for Blunt) amendment No. 3946 (to amendment No. 3900), to require the periodic submission of spending plan updates to the Committee on Appropriations.

McCain/Blumenthal amendment No. 4039 (to amendment No. 3896), to extend and expand eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs and to establish consistent criteria and standards relating to the use of amounts under the Medical Community Care account of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the time until 11:15 a.m. will be equally divided between the managers or their designees.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I appreciate seeing the Presiding Officer in the chair and having a “Corey” represented and presiding over the U.S. Senate.

I rise today to speak against an amendment now pending to this bill

that would block a rule that seeks to fulfill the promise of the Fair Housing Act. This issue is very deeply personal to me and one that really has defined my own personal history. I would like to start by telling a story.

In 1969, just 1 year after the passage of the Fair Housing Act, a couple here in Washington, DC, married with two boys, decided to move to New Jersey. In New Jersey, they encountered a lot of a practice called real estate steering, where Black couples were steered away from certain neighborhoods.

Realizing they were being steered away from White neighborhoods, they grew frustrated, and they sought the help of the fair housing council. They set up an elaborate sting operation where my parents would go look at a home—or this couple would go look at a home—and they would then be followed by a White couple. The couple was told the house was sold or it was not for sale. The White couple would then appear and find out if that was, indeed, true. Most often for this couple from Washington, DC, yes, they would find out the house was still for sale.

Eventually this couple found a house they loved in a small town called Harrington Park, NJ, but they were told that the house was not for sale. They were told the house had been pulled off the market or sold. They left. Then the White couple came behind them. Lo and behold, the house had not been sold or was not pulled off the market. The White couple pretended that they loved the house as the Black couple did and put a bid on the house. The bid was accepted.

On the day of the closing, instead of the White couple showing up, the African-American gentleman from the Black couple and a volunteer lawyer came to confront the real estate agent. The real estate agent was so upset that he stood up and punched the lawyer representing the Black couple and sicced his dog on the African-American man. Yet the law was on their side. The fair housing law of the United States of America, the law of the Federal Government, was on their side.

Eventually, that Black couple and their two kids moved into that home in Harrington Park, NJ. That was 1969. It was the year I was born, and that couple was my parents, Cary and Carolyn Booker. That is my origin story. Legislation that this body passed empowered my family to move into the home of their dreams in an all-White neighborhood with incredibly good schools that I went through from K-12. I am the beneficiary of work this body did to ensure that our American values are preserved, our values of inclusion and integration, to make sure fair housing is the law of the land. That work gave me my start in life. The activism of local activists, combined with the law of the land as passed by us, defined my path.

After decades of struggle in communities across the country, we have largely been successful in banning overt housing discrimination. We