H. 148 Bill to End Child Marriage

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Hello, I am Dr. Marcie Hambrick the Director of Research and Programs in the Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Department of Prevent Child Abuse Vermont

Thank you Chairman LaLonde and Committee Members for hearing testimony on this important matter.

I am here today to encourage you to take up H. 148 to end child marriage in the state of Vermont.

The first time I became aware of the issue of child marriage, I was working as a social worker supporting teens who were pregnant or parenting. I met a new client, a high school student who was 8 months pregnant. In my intake with her, she revealed that the baby was conceived through a non-consensual sexual encounter with a man who was 11 years older than her. As a mandated reporter of child abuse, I made the report to Child Protective Services only to find that they were already aware of the case and were not able to take any action, since the girl, after the pregnancy was discovered, had married her abuser. After hearing this, my concern for the safety of this child only increased! So, I phoned a criminal report to law enforcement, who were also already aware of the crime, but also would not take action to arrest the offender due to the marriage. Though this example is not from a case in Vermont, it is how I became acquainted with the elevated risks to children who marry and the difficulty that the state systems have in protecting minors who marry.

In Vermont, children who are under age 18 are marrying at an alarming rate. These marriages are often forced by parents or by an older suiter who has more power than the child.

Based on marriage-certificate data between 2000 and 2022 from the Vermont Department of Health, collected by the non-profit organization, Unchained At Last,

- 289 minors were married in Vermont
- About 80% were girls wed to adult men an average 4.96 years older
- Two of the children were age 15, even though marriage is not allowed before age 16
- Further, like the case that I was involved in in Georgia, the spouse of one of the 15-year-olds could otherwise have been charged with a sex crime, but the marriage license hindered enforcement of laws designed to protect children from sexual abuse. Within a marriage, that sexual abuse can happen repeatedly, and the authorities are unable or unwilling to act. In this regard, the child is a virtual sex slave.

Additionally, child marriage is associated with higher rates of dropping out of high school for both males and females. Girls who marry are 50% more likely to drop out of high school and are 4 times less likely to graduate college. This is explanatory of the higher likelihood of living in poverty (Dahl, 2020).

Single teen mothers are more likely to return to school compared to married teen mothers after the birth of a child (Dahl, 2020).

The legislature has wisely prohibited minors from entering into contracts under the age of 18. Given this, if a married minor needs to retain an attorney to process a divorce or to assist in cases of domestic violence, they could not. Additionally, minors cannot access domestic violence shelters in Vermont. This is dangerous, because marriages that include a minor in the United States are more likely to feature intimate partner violence according to a study by McFarlane and colleagues (2016).

The solution is simple. A clearly defined marriage age of 18, without loopholes, such as parental consent or a judge's signature or emancipation, would keep children safer, increase their life potential, and make the work of child protective services and law enforcement easier.

References

Johnson-Dahl, M. (2020). Sixteen Candles on My Wedding Cake: Implications of Banning Child Marriage in America. U. Ill. L. Rev., 1045.

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