



March 21, 2023

**Written Testimony in Support of H148: Act to Ban Child Marriage
Presented to the Vermont Senate Judiciary Committee | March 23, 2023**

Chair Sears, Vice Chair Baruth, and distinguished committee members:

Protect Our Defenders is the pre-eminent national human rights organization dedicated to ending sexual violence, victim retaliation, misogyny, sexual prejudice, and racism in the military and combating a culture that has allowed it to persist. We honor, support, and give voice to survivors of military sexual violence. We seek reform to ensure all service members are provided a safe and respectful work environment free from misogyny and racism, and have access to a fair, impartially administered system of justice.

In order to fulfill our mission, we provide pro bono legal services to survivors of military sexual assault, advocate for military sexual assault reform, and publish and proliferate ground-breaking reports that expose the crises of sexual assault and racial discrimination in the military. Since our founding in 2011, we have assisted a number of child victims of military sexual assault and their families, who are left devastated following incidents that no child should ever have to endure. In FY 2020 alone, the DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) reported that there were 209 unique victims of child sexual abuse, 92.3% of which were female, and 7.7% were male.¹

When it came to our attention that some lawmakers have resisted ending child marriage so that an active duty servicemember might be able to marry a child for the child to be able to benefit from spousal death benefits, we were left deeply shaken. The military has a crisis on its hands in the form of sexual assault, which has been acknowledged by the Secretary of Defense², military leaders such as General Mark Milley³, and the Commander in Chief, President Joe Biden⁴.

¹ Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, Fiscal Year 2020, Appendix H: Child Sexual Abuse; https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/Appendix_H_Child_Sexual_Abuse_FY2020.pdf

² Lolita C. Baldor, "SECDEF backs change in military sex assault prosecution," Military Times, June 22, 2021; <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/06/22/secdef-backs-change-in-military-sex-assault-prosecution/>

³ Missy Ryan and Dan Lamothe, "'We haven't moved the needle' on sexual assault in the military, general says," The Washington Post, May 6, 2021; https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-sexual-assault/2021/05/06/a8f51a7c-ae98-11eb-8109-f8ba1ea2eeab_story.html

⁴ Andrew Solender, "Joe Biden Says He Would Take A Hard Line on Military Sexual Assault," Forbes, April 29, 2020; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/04/29/joe-biden-says-he-would-take-a-hard-line-on-military-sexual-assault/?sh=ec2ef7678629>

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Allowing for the perpetuation of child marriage under the guise that children stand to benefit is a fallacy. Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, servicemembers have the ability to designate a recipient for their death benefits, and that recipient is NOT limited only to spouses, thus enabling a servicemember to designate their benefits to whomever he or she desires.

We fear that continuing to proliferate the narrative that a servicemember should be allowed to marry children to ensure that child receives spousal benefits will enable those who wish to prey on children to do so under the guise of a legal union. This is very dangerous in any profession and in any setting, but especially within the U.S. military, which is already contending with a sexual assault crisis it cannot control.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Very Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adelaide', written in a cursive style.

Adelaide Kahn-Fowler
Director of Programs & Policy, Protect Our Defenders
