

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H631: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE
SUBMITTED TO VERMONT HOUSE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
JANUARY 28, 2022**

Chair Grad, Vice Chair Burditt, and Distinguished Committee Members:

AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of H631. AHA Foundation thanks Representatives Ode, Bluemle, Burke, and Coffey for their leadership on this bill, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

H631 eliminates exceptions to the marriage age, and reserves marriage, a serious legal contract, for those who have reached the age of majority. While the current minimum marriage age in Vermont is 18, the state allows a major exception: parents can enter their 16- and 17-year-old children into marriage, by simply signing a form without the child's input.

Currently, there is no mechanism in place to ensure that the required parental consent is not in fact parental coercion. Children who have not yet reached the age of majority can easily be forced or coerced into marriage or trapped in an abusive marriage. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into accepting an unwanted marriage. They face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, file a legal action such as a divorce, etc.

Furthermore, in Vermont, children are automatically emancipated upon marriage, regardless of their level of financial independence. This is dangerous for numerous reasons, including the fact that the minor may become financially dependent on their spouse, and it is possible for financial dependence to lead to teen homelessness, especially because 70-80 percent of marriages under the age of 18 end in divorce.

AHA Foundation has worked with potential victims of forced and child marriage from across the U.S. and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. In one case, Mena¹, a U.S.-born minor, reached out to AHA Foundation due to her fear of being forced into an unwanted marriage. In spite of the fact that she could not yet legally vote, and was only just learning how to drive, her parents were planning her wedding to an older man whom she had never met. Due to state laws, all the courts needed was her parents' permission for the marriage to move forward. While AHA Foundation was ultimately able to help Mena escape the situation, the reality is that it should not have been legally possible for Mena's parents to coerce her as a minor to marry. Those at risk must be protected by a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees their human rights.

¹ Name changed to protect survivor's identity



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Individual stories like Mena's are also supported by data collected by Unchained At Last. Between 2000 and 2019, 280 children as young as 15 were married in Vermont, with 80 percent of them being girls wed to adult men. Interestingly, two of those children were 15 years old, even though marriage under the age of 16 is not permitted in the state of Vermont. Furthermore, one of those children was married at an age, or spousal age difference, that met the definition of a sex crime; while the minor was not old enough to consent to sex, they were entered into marriage in direct contradiction to Vermont's statutory rape laws. As such, this marriage license was effectively granted as a "get out of jail free" cards to a would-be child rapist.

Furthermore, child marriage severely limits girls' opportunities to health, education, and economic freedom. It also increases the risk of domestic violence. Given these factors, one case of forced or child marriage is one too many. AHA Foundation urges you to vote "yes" to close the existing loophole that fails to protect Vermont's children.

About AHA Foundation

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit founded by women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions, beliefs, and backgrounds who are facing female genital mutilation, forced marriage, child marriage, or honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive.

Since 2010, the focus of the Foundation's programs includes: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S., 3) lobbying and outreach to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services. AHA Foundation has trained over 3,000 frontline service providers on responding to cases of female genital mutilation, honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America's first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.