

From: Carol Ode

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Subject: My written testimony for child marriage bill Thursday

Children need to grow up safe and strong, educated and ready for the future. They deserve to be free from marriage before they have grown up. Yet, there are loopholes in Vermont law that allow marriage before a child is 18.

In Vermont, 289 children were married between 2000 and 2021. Eighty percent of those children were girls who wed adult men. Defining 18 as the marriage age, without loopholes, will end child marriage.

Child marriage is easily forced. Today in Vermont, a minor may marry with parental consent, but that parental consent can be parental coercion. Only one parent is needed to give permission to enter a 16- or 17-year-old into marriage, and the parent does so merely by signing a form; input from the child is not required.

If the child runs away from home to avoid marriage, the child is considered a runaway and “a child in need of supervision” under Vermont law. Police may take the child into custody and release the child into their parents’ custody.

Domestic violence shelter staffers could be criminally prosecuted for sheltering or aiding the runaway child. At a designated shelter for runaway youth, the child is limited to a 21-day stay unless an officer seeks an emergency care order.

Designated shelters for youth are not confidential and the purpose of the shelter is mediation and reunification, which most often lands the child back home.

Once married, the child is emancipated, but the rights of emancipated youth are still subject to age limits under our state and federal constitutions and under state and federal law. Further, the rights of the emancipated minor come too late for protection from having had to endure the trauma of a forced marriage.

Child marriage, even at age 16 or 17, is a “human rights abuse,” according to the U.S. Department of State, because it destroys critical aspects of children’s lives, including their risk of experiencing increasing domestic violence, risk to their health, and risk to their educational and economic opportunities.

Child marriage is a known driver of domestic violence. A child's economic dependence contributes to the risk of domestic violence and makes it more difficult to leave the violent home.

Globally, child marriage is associated with higher rates of sexually transmitted infections and of early and unwanted pregnancies. Child brides are often unable to negotiate safe sex and access to medical care. Married teens in the U.S. are 40 percent more likely to give birth a second time within 24 months.

When child marriage is forced marriage, typically there is a loss of reproductive freedom; children can be forced to have unprotected sex and to bear and give birth to children without their consent.

A teen mother who wishes to co-parent can do so by signing a voluntary acknowledgement of parentage with the father under Vermont law, conferring to the father all parental rights and duties. Teen mothers who do not marry are less likely to suffer economic instability and deprivation than do teen mothers who marry and then divorce.

To delay marriage is not to deny it. Marriage is a serious life decision. Marriage is defined by Merriam-Webster as "the state of being united as spouses in a consensual and contractual relationship, recognized by law," and forced child marriage makes a mockery of the very definition of the term.

It is in our hands to give our children the opportunity to grow up before entering such a serious union. Let's end this human rights abuse.