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**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF H148: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE
SUBMITTED TO VERMONT SENATE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
MARCH 23, 2023**

Chair Sears, Vice Chair Baruth and Distinguished Committee Members:

AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of H148. AHA Foundation thanks Representatives Ode, Burke, Bluemle and Coffey for their leadership on this bill, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

While the current marriage age in Vermont is 18, a dangerous loophole in the law allows parents to enter their 16- and 17-year-old minor children into marriage, by simply signing a form without the child's input. H148 eliminates this harmful loophole.

There is no mechanism to ensure that the parental "consent" required to enter minors into marriage 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, or file a legal action. Vermont must cease to make it legally possible for parents to coerce their children to marry.

AHA Foundation has worked with those facing forced and child marriage from across the U.S., and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. The individual stories we have witnessed are supported by data collected by the nonprofit Unchained At Last. Between 2000 and 2022, 298 minors, two as young as 15, were married in Vermont, with 80 percent being girls wed to adult men.

Another danger in the law is that in Vermont, minors are automatically emancipated upon marriage, regardless of their level of financial independence. This is dangerous for numerous reasons, including that a minor may become financially dependent on their spouse. It is possible for this financial dependence to lead to teen homelessness, especially since 70-80 percent of marriages under the age of 18 end in divorce and once married, minors' parents are no longer financially obligated towards them.

Child marriage severely limits girls' opportunities for health, education, and economic freedom. It also increases the risk of domestic violence. Given these factors, one case of child marriage is one too many. Minors at risk must be protected by a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees their human rights. AHA Foundation urges you to vote **YES** on H148, to eliminate the dangerous loophole in the marriage law that harms Vermont's minors.



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About AHA Foundation

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit 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 honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive.

Since 2010, the Foundation's programs include: 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) outreach and education 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 3,400 frontline service providers on responding to cases of gender based violence, honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America's first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.