

Memo of support for HB2422: Eliminating Marriage Before Age 18
Presented to the Kansas House Federal and State Affairs Committee
March 26, 2021

Chair Barker, and distinguished committee members:

My name is Sara Tasneem, and I am a survivor of forced child marriage. I am a vocal national advocate to end forced child marriage in the United States because of the horrors that I had to endure as a child with absolutely no escape, legal or otherwise. I hope that no other child at any age must go through what I have. The dangerous loophole which allows a 15, 16 and 17-year-olds to marry in the state of Kansas can and must be removed to protect this group of minors who do not share the same rights as an adult.

As many victims of forced child marriage, my father and legal guardian was the one who forced me to marry. At the age of fifteen, during a summer visit to see my dad, I was forced into a marriage I did not want. My father introduced me to my husband-to-be one morning and I was told I would marry him that night. That man was thirteen years my senior, he 28 years old and I was fifteen. My mother did not even know that this was taking place. After a spiritual wedding ceremony that evening, I was handed over to my new husband and left in his care. He became my guardian, husband, and the father to my children. I lost my childhood, my freedom, and myself that night. I would never be the same person again. My perpetrator had full control over my life. I was not allowed to go back to school. Instead I was taken out of the country and impregnated almost immediately. At an age where all I had dreamed of was going to the Air Force and then law school, I was instead forced into a marriage and motherhood with a stranger almost twice my age.

Six months after our spiritual ceremony I was **legally** married at the age of 16 and pregnant in Reno, N.V. My pregnant belly should have alerted authorities to a rape instead of a rubber stamp on a marriage certificate. I was not advised of my rights, or even asked if I wanted the marriage. None of it felt like a real marriage to me. It began to feel more and more like a prison after our legal marriage. My personal experience highlights the very real dangers that minors face when being forced into a marriage. My perpetrators would have stopped at nothing to entrap me in a marriage so that they could escape any legal repercussions. If my mom had known I was being married, she would have alerted the authorities to a statutory rape.

Marriage before the age of eighteen makes children much more likely to be pulled out of school than their adult counterparts and three times more likely to suffer from abuse in their marriages. All of which was true for me. Marriage before the age or eighteen is a human rights abuse because of the many harms it causes to the minor.

It took me eight long years of surviving my abusive relationship and overcoming enormous obstacles to file for divorce. It then took three years to finalize my divorce. As a minor, I faced extreme and numerous barriers to being able to leave my abusive marriage. I am not the exception. It has taken me years to recognize and address the severe impacts child marriage has had on me, including PTSD from the prolonged abuse, recovering from the financial, sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. The educational impact of being taken out of school as a fifteen year led directly to extreme poverty later in my life. It has taken me years to recover. Even though I am in therapy, will likely suffer from PTSD and anxiety most of my life.

There are **so many** reasons why child marriage is harmful to minors. I cannot think of one good reason why KANSAS would want to continue these harms and expose minors to a human rights abuse.

Respectfully,

Sara Tasneem
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Survivor / Advocate