

Jasmin Martin

From: Dawn Tyree <upondawnwriting@gmail.com>
Sent: Monday, March 28, 2022 7:04 AM
To: Sen. David Wilson
Subject: Child Marriage HB62

Dear Senator,

My name is Dawn Tyree, and I am writing to you because I would like to speak on the record regarding HB62 - "An Act relating to the Legislative Ethics Act; relating to solemnization of marriage and relating to the consent to marriage." I feel strongly that the Alaska Senate amend this bill to change the minimum age for marriage in Alaska to age 18, with no exceptions. Doing so would make Alaska the seventh state to end child marriage.

I am a survivor of child marriage. I was 13-years-old when I was forced to marry my 32-year-old abuser. He had been sexually abusing me for two years. When I became pregnant, my stepmother first tried to terminate my pregnancy - nearly killing me and my unborn son. When that failed, my family insisted that marriage was in our best interest, and the trusted adults in my life coerced me into marriage.

I had no rights over my body. Not one adult ever talked to me about birth control, and 13 months after my son was born, I gave birth to my second child. I was a mother of two at age 15. Research shows that married teens are 40% more likely than unmarried teens to have a second child within 24 months of marriage.

At 16-years-old and with two toddlers in tow, we escaped the marriage. Homeless and with no support, I tried to go to a shelter. The women's shelter turned us away because as minors, we presented the shelter with a liability. Family Services told me to go back to my parents because they were responsible for me. But my parents had disowned me for leaving the marriage. My husband had reported me as a runaway and law enforcement threatened to return me to my rapist. I couldn't even rent a hotel room. How was I to think about working or going to school? Who would help me with child care? We lived below the poverty line for over a decade, sometimes going without the essentials such as toilet paper or shampoo. We often lived without electricity. My greatest fear was that my children would be taken away because of the way we lived.

When a child petitions for a divorce, the decisions often favor the older parent. In my divorce decree, I was allowed to have physical custody of the children, but I was never awarded any child support. The court also allowed my ex-husband unsupervised visits with my children, ignoring my concerns of physical and emotional abuse. My only option for safety was to break the order and save us from his abuse. It was then that we fled to Kodiak, Alaska. Our refuge.

The ripple effect of child marriage has been devastating. My adult children struggle to survive and support their families. Mental illness, addiction, and poverty all repeat through more generations. We do a grave disservice by allowing minors to marry. Marriage is a decision that should be between *two consenting adults*. The standards of responsibility for marriage should reflect the same standards we have in place for things such as voting, entering contracts, or serving our country. You must be 21 years old to buy tobacco in America, yet a child can marry.

This issue is important because the trauma of child marriage didn't end after the divorce. This trauma is generational and unless we raise the minimum age for marriage to 18, we are creating a perpetual loop of abuse and trauma for generations to come. Research by organizations fighting to end child marriage has revealed that most child marriages are a cover-up for statutory rape and child sex abuse. Almost 80% of these marriages end in divorce.

In the context of human rights in other countries, the U.S. State Department has called marriage before 18 a “[human rights abuse](#)” that “produces devastating repercussions for a girl’s life, effectively ending her childhood.” Yet in the United States, child marriage is legal and sanctioned in 44 of the 50 states. Studies show that girls who do not marry when they become pregnant are more likely to focus on their futures, while girls that do marry face dropping out of school.

When the Health and Human Services Committee hears this bill, I would deeply appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee to testify to my experiences. I am available to come to Juneau to testify.

I am attaching a small sampling of links to articles and resources about child marriage. There are additional articles and information available, and I will bring a more complete list when I appear before your committee.

The mental and physical impact of child marriage:

<https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-devastating-consequences/>

A comprehensive research report by the Tahirih Justice Center:

<https://www.tahirih.org/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/child-marriage-policy/>

The United States Customs and Immigration Services approved nearly 9,000 underage petitions for foreign spouses between 2007 - 2017

<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Child%20Marriage%20staff%20report%201%209%202019%20EMBARGOED.pdf>

Respectfully,
Dawn Tyree

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DAWN TYREE is a writer, an activist, and a founding member of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage in the United States. Her story has been told in an A&E documentary and published in over twelve languages.

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2020/01/14/child-marriage-activism/>