

Testimony in Opposition to HB0083

Presented to Maryland House Judiciary Committee | 1/27/2022

Chair, Vice Chair, Distinguished Committee Members:

My name is Aliya Abbas. I am a child marriage survivor and advocate to #EndChildMarriage/ #EndForcedMarriage with a brightline of #18NoExceptions. As a child marriage survivor, I request you to vote "NO" on Bill HB0083 because this bill will simply will NOT end child marriage. Voting "Yes" would mean putting 17-year-olds in vulnerable, hopeless, & abusive situations. Parental consent is most often parental coercion. 17-year-olds are minors under Maryland law who DO NOT have legal rights to protect themselves from forced marriages nor obtain legal help. The U.S. State Department has called marriage below 18 a "human rights abuse," and a human rights abuse is never in the best interest of a child. Even a more robust judicial review process would be dangerous: It would put the child being forced to marry in the terrifying position of choosing between being honest with the court and facing the repercussions at home, or lying to the court and entering into a nightmare situation of a lifetime in real time. 17-year-olds are at the highest risk of being forced into marriage because they are close to graduating from high school, which is often when parents worry children will become too independent and choose to marry them off. I can attest to it being that 17-year-old child bride in such a situation 19 years ago. Child marriage destroys girls' health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing further violence & trauma.

Nearly 3,500 minors (children under age 18) were married in Maryland from 2000-2018 of which 63% were aged 17. The "safe-guards" that acknowledge the harms of child marriage in this bill (HB0083), not mitigate the following harms:

Emancipation upon marriage would grant some rights of adulthood too late for a teen who is facing a forced marriage. What would that look like? 17-year olds will be forced to endure the trauma of the forced marriage and would likely be pulled out of school. They would be raped before they could gain the rights they need to escape. Also, emancipation most likely ends parent's financial obligation to the minor. However, 70 to 80 percent of marriages before 18 ends in failure. This puts the 17-year-olds who were automatically emancipated upon marriage at risk of homelessness because they lack financial independence. So, what would we be really doing here other than putting the lives of these children at risk to all sorts of danger?

In regards to the judicial review process, even with an in-camera interview of the petitioner, the risk of forced child marriage would still be a reality for many children; instead, it puts a unimaginable burden on a terrified 17-year-old who is being forced to marry to choose between telling the truth and dealing with the consequences at home, or lying to the court and signing their away life to a nightmare which would never end. That is a position that no child should ever be in the first place!

I whole heartedly oppose this bill because it hits home. It's extremely personal. I am a product of child marriage and who better than a child bride to know the reality of this injustice. At 17 years old, in January of 2003, I was taken out of school in Maryland, my home state and was flown to a foreign country where I was forcefully married off to a complete stranger without my consent (**please note:** I could have been married in Maryland as well due to the loophole of "parental consent" as my guardians were aware of the laws; because of the marriage age by parental consent in Maryland, they were able to get me married without any worries even if the wedding took place abroad.). That one instance changed my life forever. I became a "wife" without my consent and was raped on my wedding night and then over and over again. I became a teenage mother without my consent (I love my children wholeheartedly, but I have sacrificed my whole life to make their lives the most comfortable and best possible in all areas and even though I chose to do that, I wouldn't recommend teenage motherhood (especially forced) onto anyone. It's extremely hard. Really hard for most consenting adults in fact. So think about the hardships a teenage mother would go through in child marriage situations. Children deserve to be children! They deserve to create a bright future for themselves first. Being a mother is one of the most fulfilling jobs I have, but again, it took every ounce of my being to get to where I am today and it still takes a toll. It's taking a toll on me right now as I write this testimony because as survivors, we live through the nightmare each time we write/speak about it. I do this hard work because lives of children matter. Lives of girls matter. No child should be a bride! It's a miracle that I am still here today and standing strong. No child should ever have to endure the unimaginable heavy load of challenges, abuse, & trauma that child marriage results in. The years I spent in the marriage if you can even call it that were the most painful years of my life where I endured mental, emotional, and physical torture. I was bullied, beaten, & raped. I would like to stop here and just say that I've never defined myself as a victim even though I have been brutally victimized. I am a survivor who had the courage to finally stand up for myself and most importantly stand up for the sake of my children despite any cost even when that cost was death as per my uncle when I wanted to free myself from the marriage. Even though I didn't know how to swim in an ocean of uncertainty, I took a huge risk towards our freedom and jumped. I taught myself how to swim within that uncertainty. I don't know where I got all that strength from, perhaps, God, but what I do know is that I don't wish this experience upon anyone! HB0083 will simply not end child marriage. It will in fact enable parental coercion and endanger 17-year-old children. Please vote NO.

Thank You,

Aliya Abbas