

Judiciary Committee JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-6569

Title: AN ACT CONCERNING THE MINIMUM AGE TO BE ELIGIBLE TO MARRY.

Vote Date: 3/27/2023

Vote Action: Joint Favorable

PH Date: 2/27/2023

File No.:

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SPONSORS OF BILL:

Judiciary Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

Individuals who enter marriage under the age of eighteen encounter a higher rate of domestic violence, poverty probability, and emotional damage. This bill would require an individual to be no less than eighteen years old to be eligible to be married.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

None expressed.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Liza Andrews, Director of Public Policy & Communications, Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence: The testifier condemns the presence of parents who force children into marriage to cover-up rape or sexual abuse, or to conceal pregnancy outside of marriage. The testimony links the marriage of young girls marrying older men to a power imbalance which can persist even into adulthood, resulting in continued abusive relationships, and the long-term emotional ramifications this can have on the women. The testifier states that up to 80% of child marriages end in divorce, and that teenage mothers who divorce are twice as likely to live in poverty in the future than teenage mothers who do not marry. Finally, the testifier calls attention to the UN goal of ending childhood marriage by 2030.

Megan Baker, Lead AAPI Policy Analyst; Rosemary Lopez; Thomas Nuccio; Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity, & Opportunity: The testifiers oppose all marriage under the age of 18, with data supporting the idea that girls who marry before 18

are more likely to suffer from partner violence. The testimony also states that child marriage is driven by poverty, and how on a national level payment of dowry are a major driver of childhood marriage, supporting how this bill deters such exchanges. The testimony concludes by calling out groomers, the number of whom have been on the rise since the COVID-19 lockdowns. As an amendment to the bill, the testimony suggests that training be offered to first responders to help identify child exploitation.

Deshuna Barber, CEO, Service Women's Action Network (SWAN): The Network seeks closure of the military exception to the 18 requirements. Although the Network acknowledges that military marriage is often to provide widows of those who die overseas with the appropriate benefits, SWAN suggests instead that service members be able to designate to a chosen individual. SWAN also notes the link between childhood marriage and future spousal violence.

Juan Borrego: The testifier notes the seven states currently banning under 18 marriages, and the link between child marriage, spousal violence, and economic deprivation.

Mya Bowen: The testifier notes that childhood marriage links to the children being forced to drop out of education and suffer from mental health issues, fostering greater dependency on their spouses. This issue is compounded by their inability to enter contracts with lawyers or enter domestic violence shelters because of their age. The testifier expresses concern at the idea that children could be forced into marriage by their family to prevent a family friend from being deported, and they may lie to the judge out of fear of retaliation by their family.

Claudia Connor, Chair Norwalk Commission on the Status of Women: The testifier opposes the long-term impacts of childhood marriage, with notes to its impact as gender-based violence due to the significantly more common marriage of young girls than young boys. The testifier cites data which shows marriages before the age of 19 result in girls dropping out of high school at a 50% higher rate than those who are not married, and college at four times the rate, limiting their economic opportunities. Finally, the testifier notes the higher health risks associated with being a mother below the age of 20, with higher mortality rates for the mothers and the babies.

Beck Danger Cyr, MSW Candidate, UCONN School of Social Work: The testifier supports raising the age of marriage to 18 with no exceptions. The testifier takes note of the impact of childhood marriage on LGBTQ individuals, with cases of parents believing that a quick marriage would remove any LGBTQ feelings from their child. The testifier draws a parallel to conversion therapy, which the state of Connecticut banned in 2017, suggesting that childhood marriage causes similar harms. The testifier also notes the risk of child trafficking linked to childhood marriage, with emancipated children kicked out of the home by their parents at risk of being trafficked.

Johnny Dach: The testifier notes the number of children married since the General Assembly last considered child marriage. The testifier testifies to personal experience of helping to curb child marriage on an international level, and how often countries respond to American leadership by noting how child marriage is legal in the United States.

Brian Donahue, Founder, Not Just Us: The testifier notes the neighboring states which have banned child marriage, and how children who enter marriage are often coerced to lie to

the judge out of fear of reprisal, although often the judge allegedly does not even physically speak with the child. The testifier also notes the power dynamic of an underaged individual being married to someone of age, and how children cannot enter contracts (allowing them to divorce) and therefore are stuck married unless they gain the approval of the original parties which entered them into marriage.

Kathryn Dube, Executive Director, Connecticut Youth Services Association: The testifier notes the limited legal capacity children have, making it difficult to protect themselves once they are entered into marriage. The testifier also recognizes the economic, education, and health ramifications of childhood marriage.

Adelaide Khan-Fowler, Director of Programs, Protect Our Defenders: The testifier notes the issue of military childhood marriages, stating that the military is currently undergoing a sexual assault crisis which has been recognized by the Secretary of Defense, leaders of the military, and even the Commander in Chief Joe Biden. The testifier expresses their desire to dispel the myth that servicemembers can only designate their survivor benefits to a spouse, alleging that they may designate anyone who they wish to do so under the Survivor Benefit Plan.

Jasmine Garcia: The testifier notes the dangers present to young women and girls from childhood marriage, including lowered economic prosperity, education, and higher levels of physical and sexual violence.

Ariana Gonzalez, Policy Intern, Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund: The testifier references data which shows that between 2000 and 2020, 1246 minors were married in Connecticut, with an average age difference of 4.46 years. The testifier also notes the increased economic deprivation and instability, with 70-80% divorce rate occurring. Finally, the testifier notes that police can take runaway children back to the home of abusive parents, and domestic violence shelters do not accept children, limiting options for children whose parents wish for them to be married over the objections of the child.

Michele Hanash, Director of Policy, AHA Foundation: The testifier opposes the ability for children to be wed with approval from a judge and emancipation. The testifier notes that 95% of child marriages prior to 2017 were of ages 16 or 17, which would continue to be allowed under this bill. The testifier expresses concerns that marriage may be a result of coercion from the parents, and that minors may become financially dependent upon their spouse should they be emancipated upon marriage.

Jay Loretta, Managing Member, Justice of the Peace Association: The testifier calls attention to the three times higher rate of spousal beating when married at 16 or 17 compared to when married at 21. The testifier also notes the lower education attainment, psychiatric disorders, and financial disadvantages of marrying whilst being a child. Finally, the testifier draws attention to DCF, and how married children do not qualify for legal protection or access to domestic violence shelters.

Marianne Jensen: The testifier deplores child marriage as a historically sexist act. The testifier commends states which have passed full child marriage bans, unlike Texas or Virginia, who passed exceptions for freed minors to marry.

Cheryl Wilson, President & Executive Director; Wanczyk-Karp, Stephen; National Association of Social Workers: The testifier calls for Connecticut to not be the last New England state to ban child marriage, addresses the UN goal of eliminating child marriage by 2030, and noting the long-term psychological damage child marriage causes.

Representative Nicole Klarides-Ditria, Connecticut General Assembly: The testifier abhors the historical rate of child marriage from 2000 to 2020 and calls for Connecticut to hit the UN goal of eliminating child marriage by 2030.

Bridget Koestner, Policy Manager, CT Alliance to End Sexual Violence: The testifier calls for a no exception to age requirement for marriage. The testifier notes the difficulties which child brides face with accessing shelters, and complications with offering legal assistance. The testifier disagrees with the power dynamic created by older, often male, spouses having control over the child, which can follow into adulthood. The testifier is also concerned at the risk of parental grooming at a particularly young age to set up a marriage with family friends.

Paola Milbank: The testifier supports moving Connecticut law in line with its neighboring states which have banned child marriage with no exceptions. The testifier notes the issues which child brides suffer, including mental health, physical health, financial troubles, and sexual abuse. The testifier notes the cyclical nature of child marriages, with children of child marriages likely to also be wed in their childhood.

Natalie Miller: The testifier believes that child marriage is often forced marriage, with harm to the children. The testifier notes the lack of childhood legal rights, which can result in them being trapped in the marriage, and the high divorce rate shows that the marriages are not happy ones. With lower educational rates, and the financial implications of this, the testimony opposes any exceptions for childhood marriage.

Michael Nyenhuis, President, UNICEF USA: The testifier notes the millions of international child marriages and the 300,000 child marriages in the USA from 2001-2018. The testifier deplors the impact marriage has on the child, with many being removed from their parents and friends, with heavily restricted freedoms. These restrictions are lasting, with educational impacts keeping spouses in control of financial powers. The testifier also expresses concern with the risks associated with teenage pregnancy, with risks to the mother and the baby. The testimony details the higher rate of domestic violence, poverty probability, and emotional damage.

Prince Osaji: The testifier supports neighboring states which have banned all marriage under the age of 18. The testifier calls out the harm child marriage does to the economic, emotional, educational, and physical state of individuals who marry, with high divorce rates present.

Becca Powell, Director of Advocacy, Unchained at Last: The testifier protests the current loopholes in the law, noting that emancipated minors are still minors, with only some of the rights of adulthood. The testifier notes that even emancipated minors are unable to enter abuse shelters, retain an attorney, or bring legal action. The testifier points to the US State Department labeling child marriage as a "human rights issue", and the high divorce rate shows that pregnant teenagers were better off not marrying in the first place.

Asija Qyteza, LiveGirl: The testifier protests the disruption childhood marriage can have on the child's education, prospects for opportunities, and health. With attention to poverty rates for girls who marry an issue, the organization seeks to end all child marriage.

Fraidy Reiss, Founder, Unchained at Last: The testifier disapproves of the allowance of 29 minors to be wed after the passage of the 2017 marriage bill. The testifier notes that if the parents are malicious, nothing is in force to stop them from petitioning for a marriage above the wishes of the child.

Max Robins, Executive Director, Students Against Child Marriage: The testifier opposes child marriages, which are not in their view a love story, but instead instances of coercion by parents, which result in abuse by the spouses in a system which is heavily favorable to the adult in the relationship. The testifier also notes that the child can be excluded from emancipation proceedings, allowing for parents to emancipate their own child for the purpose of marrying them off to a third party. The testifier raises the issue that marriage automatically emancipates minors, which can force financial dependency upon their spouse, potentially trapping them in an abusive relationship. The testifier calls attention to domestic violence shelters barring minors, lawyers being unwilling to take on children because of voidable retainer agreements, and the inability to launch suits. Finally, the testifier notes the health and social complications of child marriage, with higher levels of teen pregnancies, economic dependency, and domestic violence.

Emma Rutan: The testifier believes that a minimum of 18 years should be the international standard to help protect children's safety. The testifier discusses how girls who marry before 18 have issues with physical health, including a higher rate of unviable pregnancies, higher risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, a greater risk of developing a health condition such as heart disease or cancer. The testifier also addresses emotional and economic damage, with a higher poverty rate, lower high school and college graduation rate, and higher rate of psychiatric disorders. Finally, the testimony notes the gender inequalities, with six times as many girls being married underage as boys.

Unchained at Last, Bipartisan Group: The group expresses desire for no new loopholes to be created to replace the current loopholes. The group notes that marriage before 18 is a difficult legal situation for the minor and can be overwhelming to even mature 17-year-olds. The group also addresses marriage for pregnancy, stating that teens who marry whilst pregnant suffer economic damages greater than those who remained single. On the issue of religion, the group dismisses the argument on the grounds that no known religion requires such a practice, with every major religion coming out against the practice; the Supreme Court has ruled that practices which are incidentally forbidden by religious practices may be enforced as long as the laws do not target the religion itself.

Luther Weeks, Chair, Secular Connecticut: The testifier supports the bill, noting the legal issues minors face with marriage.

Brittany Williams, State Policy Council, American Atheists: The testifier opposes children being coerced into marriage, especially on religious grounds. The testifier notes the high level of child marriages since 2000, with high divorce rates a prevalent issue pointing towards a need to ban the marriages. The testifier expresses concern for the parental loophole as it is the testifiers belief that almost all coercive marriage of children is led by the parents.

Jasmine Wolf: The testifier opposes child marriage, which has cruel husbands forcing girls to become pregnant despite the health risks associated with youth pregnancy.

Laurie Boske: The testifier expresses their opposition to child marriage and requests all loopholes are closed.

The following individuals also expressed their support for the bill:

- **Brittany Hall**
- **Deb Kelleher**
- **John Levin**
- **Alexa Richards**
- **Griffin Richie**
- **Maia Roothaan**
- **Noam Schonfeld**
- **Yurii Stasiuk**
- **Adam Walker**

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

Frank Vitale: The testifier expresses their opposition to the bill.

Reported by: James McNealey

Date: March 31, 2023