

Dear Members of the Michigan House Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony regarding HB4293-4302

On this exact day 28 years ago a clerk in the state of Mississippi authorized a marriage license for a 15-year-old frightened girl and a 43-year-old man who was facing sexual assault charges in the state of California.

This child was told that if she didn't fight being hauled from state to state and looking for a judge to marry them then she would be able to finally attend high school and be a "normal teenager".

This young girl was taken from her home in California and driven across the United States to be married against her will. This child was reassured for several days on the drive from California, through Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, and into Mississippi that by going along with the marriage she would not have to face the torture and beating from her stepfather.

On May 11th, 1995, standing in a courthouse in Mississippi alone, with the marriage license that was granted with a permission slip from my mentally ill mother. A judge made it official and married me to this man without asking any questions. We arrived "home" with an eviction notice on the door of his trailer. The charges were dropped against him, and I began my sentence which lasted until I could escape several years later.

My education stopped in 8th grade, I had no control over my body, and I could not access a doctor.

I worked as much as I physically could in "under the radar" jobs and still went hungry and couldn't purchase things like shampoo and toothpaste on a regular basis.

By our second anniversary, I began contemplating if I had the will to keep fighting to survive or to end my life. Being a minor, I could not file for divorce or live on my own, ending my own life began to look like my only way out.

I couldn't drive and was completely isolated. He would encourage me to drink alcohol and to use drugs to "chill out". I knew that if I began using drugs, I would never make it out, and I refused the illegal substances I was given over and over again.

It took me decades to recover mentally, emotionally, and physically from this traumatic experience. I had to relearn how to be in a normal healthy relationship, to trust again, and not be terrified all the time.

If I had been married at 16 or 17 the circumstances and consequences would have been the same, only a shorter period.

For the last 20 years, I have made a home in Indiana. I have enjoyed 17 years of a wonderful marriage that I chose, completed my education earning a master's degree. I

currently work for an Indiana youth-serving organization and have worked in education and pediatric mental health for almost a decade.

I work to prevent and support youth victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in our Hoosier state.

Recently I assisted in a case very similar to mine in which a 14-year-old girl was lured to Michigan from Tennessee by a 40-year-old man. She met him online and told her he was 24 years old.

The man was planning to coerce the parents into giving their permission for the girl to marry him or never see their child again.

Thankfully we were able to intervene and rescue this child.

This is the reality of child marriage today. It is used to cover up abuse, trafficking children, and evil in general. The data grossly underrepresents child brides quietly suffering across our nation.

We are isolated but we are not invisible, we are hiding in plain sight all around you.

These marriages are not teenagers who become overwhelmed with emotions. These are dangerous loopholes that allow children to be abused and exploited without consequence.

My first marriage was not a marriage, child marriage and these sick excuses for abuse and violation make a mockery of the beauty that is marriage.

As a former child bride, pediatric mental health professional, and fellow Midwest neighbor.

I am asking to you please help us close this loophole so that not one single girl must live through the nightmare that I did.

Please pass this bill package out of committee and let us work toward ending this horrific situation everywhere.

In Solidarity,

Genevieve Meyer, MBA

Chair of The Anti-Trafficking Network of Northeast Indiana