

CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

# Survivor Story Compilation



Tahirih Justice Center  
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TAHIRIH  
JUSTICE  
CENTER®

**Tahirih Justice Center**

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# OVERVIEW

In 2016, the Tahirih Justice Center began what is now a national movement to end child marriage in the United States. We began by changing the laws of Virginia – where Tahirih is headquartered – which were shockingly lax, allowing children to be forced into marriages.

Tahirih found data showing thousands of girls had been married in the state, sometimes to much older men. To support its advocacy, Tahirih talked to child marriage survivors, then provided lawmakers with anonymized stories of the harmful, life-long impact of child marriage.

Since the victory in Virginia, survivors of child marriage in other states have boldly come forward seeking to change the laws in their own backyards. They know what is at stake, and their voices are powerful.

In state after state, survivors are moving legislators in personal meetings and public testimony. They are educating the public and building momentum. They are collaborating with statewide advocacy coalitions, and starting organizations of their own. Their stories often help to turn the tide when a reform bill stalls. Each survivor who shares her experiences inspires others to stand beside her, and the movement grows stronger.

Survivors' advocacy has not come without sacrifice. Each must manage the possibility of re-traumatization when she tells her story, and navigate repercussions from her family, community, and former spouse. Some share their stories anonymously, under a pseudonym, or with identifying details changed. Survivors may juggle advocacy with ongoing daily responsibilities such as jobs, families, children, and education.

In an effort to support this work, Tahirih offers this compilation of survivor stories from across the country to demonstrate the impact of child marriage on girls and women in the U.S. While the family backgrounds, time periods, and other details may vary, these stories share many common threads, including the often devastating harms associated with child marriage and the numerous ways in which our systems fail to protect children.<sup>1</sup>

## At a Glance: How Do State Laws on Minimum Marriage Age Compare?

As enacted by December 2019

- **2 states** (Delaware and New Jersey) set a minimum marriage age of 18—no exceptions
- **6 more states** (Virginia, Texas, Kentucky, New York, Ohio, and Georgia) also limit marriage to legal adults by providing exceptions only for emancipated minors
- **13 states** do not set **any** age floor by statute
- **Only 17 states** require all minors to get judicial approval before they can marry
- **6 states** expressly permit pregnancy to lower the minimum marriage age

*For more information on where states stand, including a compilation of state laws and exceptions and a 50-state report with comparative analysis and “scorecards” in the appendices, please visit [tahirih.org/childmarriage](http://tahirih.org/childmarriage).*

## Building Momentum for Legislative Reform

States with new minimum age of marriage laws as of December 2019 (alphabetical, by effective year)\*

**2016:** Virginia

**2017:** Connecticut, New York, Texas

**2018:** Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, and Tennessee

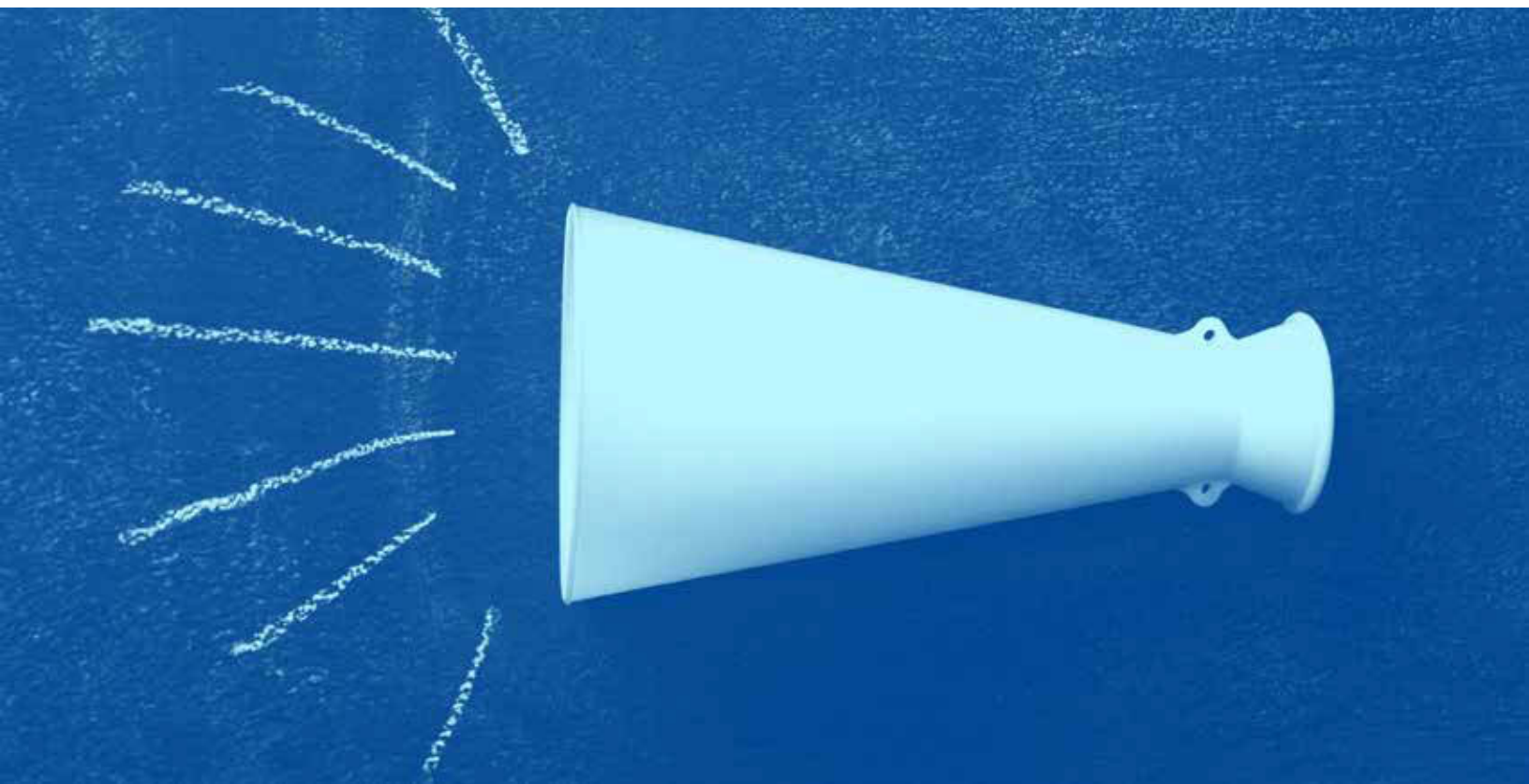
**2019:** Arkansas, California, Colorado, Georgia, Louisiana, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Utah; several other bills pending

*\*For the text of all marriage-age laws and exceptions, and for an executive summary of the national legislative landscape, please see Tahirih's 50-state statutory compilation, along with other resources available at [tahirih.org/childmarriage](http://tahirih.org/childmarriage).*

Each entry in this report has been included with the knowledge and permission of the survivor.<sup>2</sup> The Survivor Voices section includes survivors' poetry, emails, reflections, legislative testimony, and more. The Survivor Stories section includes stories compiled by Tahirih from existing media coverage and interviews with survivors. For those survivors with ongoing safety concerns, identifying details are omitted. For every survivor who is able to speak out, countless others cannot do so. This report honors their courage as well.

In August 2017, Tahirih released its first in-depth report on child marriage— a comprehensive analysis of state laws on marriage age that leave children more vulnerable to the harms of early and forced marriage.<sup>3</sup> *Falling through the Cracks: How Laws Allow Child Marriage to Happen in Today's America*, provides lawmakers and advocates with the information needed to pass laws that more effectively protect children.

With this report we hope to inspire funders, lawmakers, advocates, reporters, researchers, and other survivors to join the movement. Ending child marriage in the United States is possible, and it is within our reach.



# SURVIVOR VOICES

As the movement to end child marriage in the United States grows, survivors continue to raise their voices, telling their stories and calling for reform. The *Survivor Voices* section is comprised of pieces written by survivors, without editing by the authors of this report. Each is an example of ways in which survivors have advocated for change, sharing their stories through poetry, reflections, memoirs, or direct testimony before a legislature.

I don't know you, and you don't know me  
But we share one thing in common  
We were married before we even reached adulthood  
I know you feel afraid, abused, failed, judged or even ashamed  
I don't know where you are, nor where you are from  
All I know is that while the same sky covers us  
I will fight for your human rights

Enough is enough to children marriages  
Because you deserve to go to school and learn  
I can imagine how much you like to play  
I know you want to attend your prom one day  
I certainly know, you aren't ready to be a wife, nor a mother  
As you are still a child yourself

You are not alone, it is happening all around the world  
You are right to feel it is wrong, I truly understand  
It is stealing your innocence, your dreams  
Don't worry, there are brave people fighting for you  
So that your children won't have to go through what you went through

I plead to law makers, pass a bill to stop children marriages  
Today not tomorrow as these kids are feeling sorrow  
One day in their adulthood they may choose to wed  
But not now while they are minors, since they'd rather run and play

Delma Rojas was forced into marriage when she was just 14. She has raised awareness through the media and shared her story with legislators, helping secure significant reforms in both her home state and others. Delma dedicates this poem to all survivors of child marriage, and to the campaign to end child marriage in the United States.

Hello, my name is Dr. Judy Wiegand. I am a doctor of physical therapy, and I work in pediatrics with children 0-21 years old. I wanted to start out by telling you a story.

There was a little girl who was 13 years old, and found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was sexually assaulted by a male person who was old enough to give consent. Later, it was discovered that she was pregnant, and the accepted norm in the community was to have the girl marry the perpetrator. There were no laws, and there was no government intervention, and there was no one to step in and help her. So this little girl was awaiting her fate in the circuit clerk's office, and was taken from a low income status to a poverty status in the stroke of a pen. No one called the police to report statutory rape, no one called CPS, and no one said "this is not allowed."

This [girl] had married someone who used recreational drugs, he did not work, and he was physically and mentally abusive. And the government allowed [him] to pull her hair, beat her and abuse her. The police wouldn't help because they said this was just a domestic dispute, and even if they did come, there was nothing to say what would happen when they left. Neighbors wouldn't help, because she was a married woman and they did not want to get between a husband and a wife.

So later, when she was fourteen, then her baby was born, a healthy girl. And now she was a mother. She tried to go back to school, but she wasn't old enough to get a driver's license and babies were not allowed on the school bus. So she had to drop out of school. She wasn't old enough to get a job [due to] child labor laws [that] limited the hours she could work. But again, she could not drive so she could not get to work.

At fifteen years old, when the abuser turned his abuse to the child, she drew a weapon with the intent to use it. She grabbed the baby and ran for her life. Leaving all her belongings, she had her baby with her and ran to all doors clutching her child asking for help, and no one would let her in because they did not want to come between a husband and wife. A wife that was 15 years old. The only person that would help her was somebody who was not afraid to take on the abuser. And that person was the so-called local bootlegger. He wasn't afraid of the perpetrator, he was not afraid of the police. So she was allowed to come into his home and be able to place a phone call so that she could get help. [If] that sounds like a very scary movie, you would be right.

So the laws that were put in place to take care of children, suddenly disappeared under the pretense of "she is a married woman." CPS, statutory rape, no child left behind, summer lunch programs, it was all gone. And leaving her no other choice but being dependent on this man. When she left, she also had to then apply for state assistance. That was food stamps, medical card, Medicaid, whatever was available.

It is the responsibility of the government to protect children, not just some of them but all of them. And what happened to that little girl? Well, she is sitting here asking you to support this bill.

When Dr. Judy Wiegand saw in the news that a bill to end child marriage was stalling in her state legislature, she knew she had to come forward to tell her story, providing much-needed reinforcements to fellow survivor Donna Pollard. As a pediatric physical therapist, Judy often asks her young patients to "be brave" during their difficult treatments; she knew that she could ask no less of herself. Her testimony was instrumental in securing passage of the 2018 law that limited marriage to legal adults in Kentucky, and she has continued to press for reforms nationwide.



Writing this is incredibly difficult for me, more difficult than you can probably imagine. When I was 14, my parents took in a boy from our church who was about to enter the foster care system. Over the next two years he sexually, verbally, and physically abused me relentlessly.

During this time, my family moved [away, and he no longer lived with us]...I should have been safe, however, I developed post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and began making bad choices. As a result, my family, who was very conservative and Christian, felt that I should get married to my abuser, as my behavior was better in their eyes when he was around. I am now a counselor and over my many years of training and personal therapy journey, I have realized that the PTSD symptoms and acting out should have been clear signs to my parents and school counselor that something else was going on. Unfortunately, all of these signs were missed.

My family moved back...when I was 17 and my abuser...immediately asked my parents if we could marry (we weren't even dating), and they consented. I did not want to marry him but felt pressured into doing so in part through conversations with my parents but largely due to our conservative religious beliefs that made me feel that I was damaged and unlovable due to the abuse that I had already endured.

My parents told me they would pay for me to go to college if I married him, and I desperately wanted to go to college, so that was another factor. Shortly after getting engaged, my abuser sexually assaulted me in the hotel room where my family was staying. My four younger siblings were present in the room, so I had to stay silent to protect them from knowing what was going on – a tactic that had been frequently used by my abuser. From this interaction, I became pregnant, which moved our wedding date up.

When walking down the aisle, my thought was “just four years.” I was focused on going to college so I could escape with my baby. After the wedding, my parents let me know that they would not be paying for my college, as I needed to focus on raising my son and being a wife and mother.

I now have a graduate degree in Counseling and I work continuously as a school counselor to be there for the children that no one listens to and to try to pick up on the signs that are overlooked.

Activism such as this comes at a great personal cost...It further damages my relationship with my parents (as I'm bringing shame to our family and faith) and it puts me in danger of the wrath of my abuser/ex-husband. The risk becomes higher that my children will realize the truth of my life, and view their lives differently.



Please know that I will be crying, shaking, and experiencing PTSD symptoms as a result of writing this. I recently spoke to *The New York Times* about child marriage and spent two months in a PTSD nightmare. I know that if my family or abuser finds out about my activism, my life will be much harder.

Please know that I'm doing this because children under the age of 18 should not be allowed to marry. There is no benefit in an early marriage...my life has been a struggle and constant battle because of it.

I experienced extreme violence during my marriage and [my escape] hinged on my determination to graduate from college. Many girls are unable to escape through education...Children cannot easily access the legal and other resources they need to protect themselves...In my case, the parents of my friends tried to find a way to prevent my marriage and rescue me. As I was a minor, they were told doing so would put them at risk of arrest...Those of us who are writing you as former child brides are doing so at great personal cost. Please see and value our sacrifice. Please take time to imagine what our lives, what my life has been.

While Lyndsy Duet continues to suffer from trauma and to fear for her safety, she has remained resolute in her advocacy efforts. She wrote directly to the governor of Texas in support of a 2017 law that limited marriage to legal adults, and her story and personal testimony have helped to inspire reforms across the country.

## Skyler

**Skyler's reflections, presented repeatedly as testimony and in meetings with Maryland legislators**

My name is Skyler and I was a victim of child marriage in Maryland. I speak to you today to bring light to this issue, which is very dear to me. Most of you may believe child marriage only happens in third world countries, but I am here to tell you that it happens in the USA, right here in your own back yard.

It happens to that young girl that thinks it is what she needs to do for her family. That she cannot go against what her parents tell her she must do because she has been raised to listen to her parents, to trust them and with faith in hand, do what they say.

That little girl was me, and my perfect soccer mom did not look like an abuser. No one saw her for what she was, and no one helped me. Because the basement of the courthouse in Elkton, Maryland was not the first time I was victimized.

My mother abused me for years, and I reached out for help more than once, but Child Protective Services failed me and the police failed me. They left me in the custody of my mother who, when I was just 13 years old, began dressing me up and taking me out cruising for men. By the time I was 15 I had been raped 150 times, all at the hands of men my mother brought into my life. Time and time again, the system failed to protect me and I fell through the cracks. It felt like there was no one who cared about me.

This went on until the age of 16, when my mother decided she wanted me out of the house and got an offer from a man twice my age to marry me. This was good news for my mother as she had begun to get jealous of the interest her new husband had taken in me. My stepfather's name was "Montasar." I called him monster!

And so, I thought to myself "if I say yes then at least it will be my husband, not my step-dad, and maybe

he won't hit me. Maybe it will be different." I first met the man who was to be my husband on January 29, 2009.

One week later, on February 6, 2009, I was driven from Delaware down to the courthouse in Elkton, Maryland. Down the steps in the basement my mother and stepfather stood behind me, and my soon-to-be husband, a man TWICE MY AGE, as we met with two clerks in charge of issuing marriage licenses.

In that small [courthouse] basement, my whole life was stolen. One of the ladies there actually said to me as I stood there crying, "cheer up, this will be the happiest day of your life, wipe them tears."

My whole life I've wondered why no one at the court asked any questions. Why did no one say no? And then I think to myself, what if someone had asked me what I wanted? The courts had already been so easy to ignore my pleas for help. If I'm honest, I think even if I had been asked in that moment, I would have lied and said yes, because I was too afraid of what would await me back home if I refused, and I knew there was nowhere for me to go for help as a child.

And so I was married, and as a 16-year-old child married to a man twice my age, it was like he owned me. He abused and raped me and eventually I gave birth to two children whom he would ultimately kidnap. In fact, when I was trying to get a divorce, he actually took me to HIS attorney, who advised me to sign away my rights to my children. To this day, I am fighting for custody and every day I am wracked with fear about how close my daughter is to puberty.

Often, I think of what my life would have been like as a normal 16 year old. Kids my age were worried about their college applications and the party next Friday. I was taken to live miles from my friends. I was married for over 4 years and I wasn't allowed to leave the house, I wasn't allowed TV or radio. It was like living in a jail cell.

Nowadays, people I know have their friends on speed dial. I have 2 lawyers and 3 therapists on speed dial.

My life as a child bride could have been prevented and today I ask for your help in stopping the cycle. Please open your eyes to the backwards thinking of a child bride. If this had been the law 12 years ago, I would be 12 years further ahead in my life – instead I'm still trying to repair the damage and catch up.

Please pass this law. Save others that could end up like me.



Skyler has been advocating to end child marriage in Maryland for several years. She has met with legislators, spoken with media, and testified in support of reforms to the law that allowed her to be brought across state lines and forced into marriage at age 16. Beyond Maryland, Skyler's story has also helped to inspire strong legislation to prevent forced child marriage in several other states.

There is a lot to say. I was 15 years old when I heard my parents talking about a wedding they wanted us all to attend in Pakistan. At the time I was hardly allowed to leave the house, so this was huge for me. We ended up booking flights that would have us visiting Pakistan for a month because I was a sophomore in high school and I could not stay longer. Little did I know that one month was going to turn into a year. It turns out, my father's side of the family wanted me to marry my cousin. When I refused, my father decided to leave me in Pakistan.

I was told that the only way to go home to America was to get engaged to my cousin, so I did. Being sixteen, I had to do as my dad said. When I got home he told me I had to sponsor my cousin. Long story short I sponsored him, and once he arrived to the U.S. I continued to tell my dad I was not okay with the situation but he would not listen to me. One day, shortly after my cousin arrived, my father woke me out of bed and forced me to go to the courthouse. I went to court that day wearing a sweater and yoga pants. If you saw my attire and my face you would have known that I did not want to get married. Inside the courthouse I was called up to a window and the lady asked me if this was my first marriage and I said it was. She then asked me for ID and when she noticed I was under 18 she looked at my parents for permission and my dad said "yes, yes." I remember being asked to raise my hand, which my cousin

also did as he stood next to me. I was clearly sad and I kept wondering "why doesn't this woman at the window ask me if I am okay, why don't they have a different procedure where you pull me to the side somewhere with more privacy? And why do they have sixteen year olds getting married in the first place?"

Afterwards I was asked if I was to be married religiously or non-religiously, and I said non-religiously because I did not want to get my Nikah done.

As soon as she issued the marriage license we turned to walk out the door, but before we could, a lady offered to perform a marriage ceremony right

there in the courthouse and give the certificate that day. I wanted to kill myself at that point. My father, however, took her up on the offer, and we were taken into a meeting room, and I had to repeat after her, and so did my cousin. Finally she said the words "I announce you husband and wife... you may kiss the bride." My heart dropped; I didn't kiss that filthy man - I left and walked out. The woman who married us got her money from my father, and I knew she didn't care about me.

Maria spent the next year of her life suffering abuse not only from her parents, but also from her husband, and only felt empowered to reach out for help to leave the marriage after she turned 18. She shared her story with Tahirih to be used in legislative advocacy, and it has already had a significant impact, having been instrumental in moving one state's legislators to limit marriage to legal adults.



My work on the issues of child abuse and child marriage was born out of the realization that what had happened during my developing years was in fact sexual abuse and trafficking. Some of you may be familiar with parts of my journey from what has become international coverage of the efforts to end child marriage in the United States, including my home state of Kentucky. But what you may not know is what motivated me to come forward and vocalize my truth after over a decade of living in silence, engulfed in shame.

You see, my marriage at 16 years of age to a man nearly 15 years my senior who had been in a position of authority over me was a catalyst to my unraveling into sexual exploitation during my early life. My perpetrator knew exactly what he was doing when he targeted me to become his victim... As a child, I had been abused in multiple ways and my father passed away when I was just 13. I had no coping skills to deal with the trauma that I had suffered growing up, nor the loss of my father to lung cancer, and I broke. I began acting out in self-destructive ways and this resulted in me being admitted to a behavioral health facility when I was 14 years old.

That is where I met this man. He worked at the behavioral health facility as a mental health technician, which is basically a counselor. He was 29 years old. Again, I was just 14.

He began grooming me and making me feel ways I had never been able to feel before... I felt beautiful with him, like I really mattered to someone finally. He would write me the most beautiful love letters, making me feel that our love for each other ran so much deeper than a surface attraction, but more like a spiritual union of two souls that knew no confines within age. At least, this is what he said. And I was desperate to internalize it as truth.

Shortly after we married, he made no secret of his expectations for my wifely duties, which were incredibly exploitive. If I did not comply, he would become violent or stage a suicide attempt. In my vulnerable state as I was still a child, I believed I was to blame for any punishment I received, that if I just loved him more he would change. Needless to say, this did not happen.

My first time going to a strip club was the evening of my 18th birthday. I was nearly 8 months pregnant at the time and was completely mortified. He reassured me that this would bring us closer together, and because I still believed my only value was my ability to please him, I went along with it. He paid for me to receive a lap dance while he watched. As my daughter kicked in my womb as this was happening, I hated myself and the life I had that she was about to be born into.

The trips to the strip club became more and more frequent, and I ended up working there just after my daughter was born. This had been his plan all along, and he knew exactly how to prey upon the



vulnerabilities of mine to make this happen. I tried to reframe what was happening in my head to survive the shame... creating this illusion that I was creating an art form, providing company to men who just needed attention, that there was power in being the object of their desires. Let me say that more clearly... I had become brainwashed to consider myself a sexual object and servant to those who could pay me for my time and how they chose to use it. My self-esteem was nonexistent.

When I was finally able to leave my perpetrator when I was 19, I carried all this shame with me. The rejection and abuse from my mother during my childhood, becoming a mental health patient at 14, marrying and dropping out of the 10th grade at 16, all the sexual abuse and exploitation, the manipulation, the violence, the drugs, the drinking, working in a strip club... all of it was suddenly realized as the polar opposite of what I wanted my life to be like.

Donna Pollard is a leading advocate in the campaign to end child marriage in the United States. She is Founder and President of Survivors' Corner, a nonprofit that creates a supportive network to empower survivors of trauma. Donna partnered with Tahirih to draft and pass a 2018 law limiting marriage to legal adults in her home state of Kentucky, and another law limiting child marriage in Tennessee, where she was married. She continues to press for reforms nationwide.

# Michelle

Email from Michelle to Tahirih

My mother and father were drunks. They separated when I was 14. It became apparent that I was in the way of my mother's drinking and many, many men.

I was an honor student in High School. I had been talking to the brother of my cousin's boyfriend. I was 14 and he was 21. I did not think anything because he was so kind to me. He listened and took me back and forth to school because my mother was never there, or too drunk to get out of bed with whomever. We lived outside of my school district, so I had no bus to ride since she did not enroll me locally. He also fed me. We became close. It did end up being sexual, which I did not think anything of at the time because I was young and alone.

One day in September 1983, just a few days before my 16th birthday, my mother came home and threw me out. Told me to get out. So I did, I went and stayed with a friend from school.

About a week later, I was in my Honors English class and put in handcuffs by an Officer for being a runaway. Later I found out, when asked by my mother's family where I was, she told them I ran away from home. At the time I was, as I said, an Honor Student, worked a little job at McDonald's and [was] studying for my SAT's. When I was placed in the Juvenile Detention Center I was strip-searched and made to bathe in front of an Officer there and they gave me clothes to put on. I was placed in a single cell just like you see on TV.

Later that day I was told that...my mother took the paper out on me as a runaway when I was still 15, and they could hold me till she came to get me. My mother came the next day. She told me that in order for me to get out I would have to marry my friend/boyfriend or she would leave me in there. I was terrified.

He was 23 and I just turned 16 a few days later. I agreed just to get out of there. I was young, dumb and scared. She also told me that if I would marry him that I could stay with her until I found somewhere to go. She went to him and he agreed to get me out of the situation. She took me to the local courthouse

and made me marry someone I did not want to, because she had the power over me and there was nothing I could do.

Once we got married we walked outside the Courthouse and she said “now get out of my house!” Here I was an Honor Student, now married with no place to go. We ended up living in the back of his truck in the camper part in the woods while I went to school and showered at a friend’s. I ended up being on the Honor Roll almost all the way thru High School and graduated in 1985. He ended up abusing me and did so for years.

Again, he was 23 and I was a week over 16. I was pregnant multiple times and miscarried over 5 times due to the abuse and being hit in the stomach over and over. I lost a child who died inside me while I was 5 months pregnant. It was horrible. I had no one to confide in and nowhere to go because I was 16, 17 and 18 and all my friends still lived with their parents so there was nothing they could do. I was too ashamed to tell anyone and did the typical lying about black eyes and bruises.

I went from aspirations of Law School to being forced to marry someone that I now consider a child molester because he and my mother preyed on me and there was nothing I could do...because I was too young and had no voice.

While Michelle is not ready to fully and publicly share her story, she is also not ashamed. She knows the importance of exposing the details of the brutal abuse she experienced throughout her childhood and her forced child marriage. She shared her written story with legislators in several states, including Georgia, where it helped secure the enactment of a 2019 law limiting marriage to legal adults.

## Morgan

**“Reflections of a Child Bride”**  
Essay by Morgan L Meadows, M.E.d

When I was 16, my parents entered into a marriage agreement with my first husband, who was 10 years older than I. Since I was trafficked between the ages of 3 and 23, this arranged marriage was simply one more event in which I was required to “be obedient to my parents,” as this Biblical injunction was often touted. My step-father had facilitated my entry into being trafficked for experimentation, pornography, prostitution, and domestic labor until I was effectively passed to the man who became my legal husband.

The marriage license was obtained in Virginia. My mother signed it while my step-father, my husband-to-be, and myself were crowded at the Clerk’s counter at the Front Royal Courthouse. We were new residents of the town, since my parents had moved my brothers and I from rural Pennsylvania just a few weeks after the engagement. While the wedding ceremony took place 3 weeks after I turned 17, the marriage license was obtained while I was still 16.

No one in that town or in the religious community we briefly became a part of knew us. Walking down the aisle in a winter-white dress my mother had chosen, and being looked at by a sea of a 100 unknown faces, nearly caused me to pass out from rapid and shallow breathing. In a few minutes’ time, with few words spoken, I became a child-bride, destined to be owned by a man with violent tendencies and unhealed trauma of his own.

At the wedding reception my fever spiked to 103°, because, as I discovered the next day, I had contracted mononucleosis. Back to my wedding night: my new legal guardian took me early to the motel.

I was given a negligee that was too large for my body type. Evidently, we consummated the marriage, but I remember nothing more until about 4:00 a.m. the next morning. I was awakened in an icy bath. My husband was trying to bring my fever down from 104°. It didn't work. I was taken to the emergency room for an examination. When the attending physician learned that I was an underage bride, he directed all the exam questions to my new legal guardian. If I had not been laying on the exam table, with my feet in stirrups and put through a pelvic exam, I would have been entirely invisible – even to myself.

Thinking back on the events that led to this legal marriage, I believe the initial agreement was reached when I was 14. I recall my step-father mentioning two men's names, men he believed I should go to as a wife. I certainly felt shocked, but my experiences had taught me not to show my authentic feelings. One

man was shorter than I and at least 18 years older – so in my adolescent mind I was relieved it turned out to be the younger man.



The man who became my first husband had, at the age of 21, tried to go into the military to turn his life around. Because of his 4-felony record, he was rejected by the army. At 22 he became a newly converted Jehovah's Witness. Eventually I would learn about his family's pattern of violence. Being raised in a strong Catholic household, this violence included beatings from his father, isolation, several years-worth of molestation by an older brother, and later, when he sought help from a priest, that priest molested him. At

13, he ran away from that situation and joined a Southern California gang, becoming addicted to drugs but still attending a high school, and learning to pimp out girls. While still in his teens, he was drawn to work in a restaurant. The owner mentored him through several years, despite the fact that he served time on 4 different sentences, as a juvenile. His last confinement was for beating up a police officer and stealing his gun, shortly before his 20th birthday. And now you know what my parents thought of me.

I wasn't a daughter that was loved. My parents, in their alcoholism, were highly dependent on me to run the household and bring in an income. They had already removed me from school as soon as I turned 16. Several months later, as members of our congregation learned of the pending marriage, a few questioned my parents' judgement. My step-father's answer was: "We raised her to be a good wife to someone. Better now than later." My mother's answer was: "I was married at 16. If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for her." My mother was, in fact, coerced to marry my birth father when she was 16, after only one week's acquaintance. But that is a story for another day.

When I matured enough to make a successful escape, 13 years had elapsed, with four failed escapes and one suicide attempt to my former name. Now, after many years of therapy, pursuing an education, raising four healthy children (all now in college), I am developing my work as a consultant to professionals and community members involved in the restoration work of former victims. In January of



2019, I began to give testimony to my State's representatives during the current legislative session, to assist with the passing of three bills that benefit juvenile survivors of human trafficking.

My life experiences in healing, and through my doctoral studies, have led me to the formation of a model residential learning design center that accommodates survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence. My team is forming this year, and we are planning to establish an NGO legal entity called the Lavada Learning Design Center. Lavada means "cleansed."

Morgan Meadows has dedicated her life to making positive change, working locally as an advocate for survivors of violence and sharing her story to raise awareness of the harms of human trafficking and child marriage. She shared her story in hopes that her experiences will help people understand how "grooming" can be a potent force in teaching someone to accept abuse and exploitation as a normal part of life, and to inspire stronger reforms.

## Jennifer

Email from Jennifer to Tahirih

At the age of 15, my mother forced me to move in with a man 12 years my senior. After two years had passed, our religious community coerced me into a marriage with him at the age of 17. I was shocked at how the marriage legitimized the pedophilia, and how suddenly, because I was now a "married woman," the years of abuse were suddenly my fault.

I was treated like a slave. He raped me, beat me, deprived me of sleep, food, and education. I had no way out, as my parents were no longer responsible for me and he was the sole provider.

At the age of 30 I was finally able to escape his abuse. I have started my life over from scratch with my daughter.

This madness must stop for girls everywhere. It does happen here, in America. It does happen to American citizens and immigrants alike.



Jennifer shared her story in order to help advance the campaign to end child marriage in the United States. Her experience has been shared with legislators in several states that have taken up legislative reforms, including in Georgia, where it helped secure the enactment of a 2019 law limiting marriage to legal adults.

My name is Sara and in 1995 I was 15 years old when my father arranged my “spiritual” marriage to a 28-year-old man. I was sixteen and pregnant when I was legally married to him in Reno, N.V. He was almost twice my age, and I was clearly pregnant. No one ever asked if I consented. Instead, a permission slip from my father consented for me. This permission slip allowed my ex-husband to circumvent statutory rape laws while the evidence of my rape was as plain as the pregnant belly I carried with me.

My father and my mother divorced when I was five. I was mainly raised by my dad but was sent to live with my mom at twelve years old. Living with my dad was a nightmare. From a young age gender-roles were ingrained into my life. My father’s household was extremely abusive.



At 15, I had been living with my mom in Colorado for almost three years after being separated from her most of my childhood. I was sent to visit my dad in California that summer and my mom assumed I would return for my sophomore year to Colorado. When I arrived, my dad told me that I was going to be married. I did not have a driver’s license or a job. I was a freshman in high school and like most teenagers my age, I was completely dependent on the adults in my life, and naive of what a marriage meant.

My father introduced me to a stranger that summer who I was spiritually married to that same evening. I was left in this stranger’s care that night and for the next seven years.

My mother was not even aware of the marriage as no requirements are made under the [Nevada] laws. I felt powerless to do anything against my dad or my ex. I was afraid, confused, and traumatized. I had no freedom. In all senses of the word, I felt kidnapped. I was forced into a relationship I never chose for myself. I never felt I was in a real marriage, it felt more like a prison to me. I was five months pregnant when we were legally married in Reno, NV where the marriage laws permit girls

to marry with the consent of one parent which equated to a permission slip written by my father. The only thing I remember about that trip was that I wanted to go sledding on the way back home to the Bay area. It was the first time I had seen snow since leaving Colorado and my mom’s house.

My escape was to fight for my education, which I did tooth and nail. When I was finally able to support myself at age 23, seven years later – I left him.

It took me another three years to divorce him. I left my marriage after struggling to overcome so many barriers that normal young adults my age would never have to think about. To get a divorce, I had to navigate a complicated family law system with limited financial resources and with two small children to support. Once again, the law allowed him the upper hand. He hired an attorney, while I could not afford one. I ended up forgoing any spousal support and agreed to a small amount of child support which was not enforceable as he left the country as soon as we separated.

I fought to keep my small family together, and I fought to keep a roof over our heads. It was a daily struggle even though I worked full time and was a part time student. No child should have to endure what I had to. My childhood was stolen, and all the opportunities that it offered were taken away from me at 15.

I still struggle with depression and anxiety. The effects of being forced into a childhood marriage have had unending consequences well into my adulthood and have had a major impact on my children's lives.

Sara Tasneem is a leading survivor advocate in the campaign to end child marriage, raising awareness through extensive media engagement and providing testimony in support of bills to limit and end child marriage in several states. She wrote and presented the above testimony in support of AB 139, a 2019 bill aiming to end child marriage in Nevada.







# SURVIVOR STORIES

As public interest in the movement to end child marriage in the United States grows, survivors are often contacted by multiple media outlets to share their stories. This section is comprised of these publicly shared stories, compiled from multiple media sources and one-on-one interviews with Tahirih.

# Trevicia

**“WHEN A PARENT IS ABUSING THEIR POWER TO PARENT, AND A CHILD DOESN'T HAVE A VOICE, THEN STATES HAVE TO PROTECT THE CHILD... CHILDHOOD IS FOR LEARNING AND BUILDING THEIR CHARACTER SO THEY ARE PREPARED FOR ADULthood. IT'S NOT FOR DEVOTION TO A MAN.”<sup>4</sup>**

Since she was a very young girl, Trevicia remembers her mother having difficulty coping, and times when she would be sent to live with friends or relatives. At the age of 12, her mother started discussing Trevicia's marriage with church leaders, and by 13 she was coaching Trevicia for marriage. When an ex-convict joined the congregation, the church leadership believed that getting him married was the best way to help him reintegrate into society. This man was a violent felon, but he was also the nephew of the head of the church. It was decided that Trevicia would be the one to rehabilitate him.

She was a high school freshman when her mother picked her up from school, and, as Trevicia piled into the backseat with her textbooks, her mother announced that Trevicia would be married that very day. There was no discussion, no explanation. Afraid to question her mother, Trevicia sat shocked and confused on the drive to the Houston courthouse. She was just 14 years old, still wearing the red knickers she had put on for her audition for the school's performance of *Annie*. The groom was 26 years old, and just out of prison. Despite these obvious red flags, the Justice of the Peace performed the marriage as if there was nothing alarming about the picture in front of him.

All of a sudden, Trevicia was expected to function as an adult. Within the first month of their marriage, the man hit her. But when Trevicia called her mother to ask if she could come back home, her mother said no. The marriage was not only violent, it was also full of instability. Trevicia's abuser was in and out of work and could not provide for basic necessities like food or a place to live. At one point, they were homeless and wound up sleeping on the floor of a church.

A year after the wedding, Trevicia became pregnant. She was humiliated in her high school cafeteria when a severe bout of morning sickness led her to vomit all over the table, and she had to transfer to a new school for pregnant teenagers.

It was not until her abuser sexually assaulted a neighbor and returned to prison that Trevicia could finally start to break free and rebuild her life. Just 16 at the time, she called the local government agency for human services and was referred to community resources. She sought out further education and job skills and was eventually connected with an organization that helped her to file for divorce at age 17.

**“It was my mom's way of getting rid of me to be honest, of getting rid of her problems. She saw the responsibility of raising children to be so overwhelming.”**

As quoted in Rebecca Beitsch, “Child Brides Join Push to Raise Marriage Age,” *Pew Charitable Trusts: Stateline* (May 12, 2017).

**“I was not asked any questions... there were no remarks made whatsoever. The proceeding was conducted as though it was two consenting people happily marrying.”**

As quoted in Laura Hallas, “She Was Forced into Child Marriage in Texas. Now She Wants to End the Pain for Others,” *The Dallas Morning News* (July, 2018).

She would have filed earlier, but was unaware that she was legally entitled to do so, having assumed that she had to wait until she turned 18.

Dr. Trevicia Williams has attained advanced degrees as a single, working mother. She is founder of Real Beauty Inside Out, an organization that helps mothers and daughters develop healthy relationships. After her testimony helped secure a historic new law limiting marriage to legal adults in Texas, she has continued her advocacy through media interviews, speaking events, and advocacy for legal reform in other states.

## Genevieve

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**“PEOPLE KNEW IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. I EVEN ASKED FOR HELP – A PLACE TO LIVE, SOMEONE TO INTERVENE – BUT NO ONE RESCUED ME. I WAS JUST A ‘POOR WHITE TRASH GIRL’ WITH A DIFFICULT, MENTALLY ILL MOTHER, AND NO ONE GAVE MY BEING MARRIED OFF TO A 42-YEAR-OLD MAN A SECOND THOUGHT.”<sup>5</sup>**

Genevieve<sup>6</sup> had a tough childhood. Her volatile mother was abusive and had an untreated mental illness. For a while she lived with a foster parent in another state. Her education was choppy and interrupted as she bounced between public and home school, with long stretches without any real schooling at all. By the time Genevieve was 14, she was effectively teaching herself from workbooks a few grades behind where she should have been, while working long days alongside her alcoholic stepfather.

The lack of stability left Genevieve feeling lonely and isolated, and she suffered from anxiety and depression. She felt she did not matter to anyone and did not hold any value herself. She got to the point where she gave up thinking about her future. She simply made it from one day to the next.

When Genevieve was 15, she started hanging out with a family that lived down the street. The 42-year-old father was divorced and living with his two young sons. The father sought out and talked to Genevieve, paying her the attention she was desperate for and positioning himself as her only friend. She began to sneak out to be with him, lying about where she was headed.

Preying on her vulnerability, the man offered Genevieve drugs and alcohol and eventually their relationship turned sexual. Even though what he was doing felt wrong to her, since she had been molested before, she assumed the problem was with her. She also feared that if she spoke up, no one would care or believe her and she would just be left all alone again.

Her mother suspected what was going on. She called the police and the man was arrested. But everyone seemed to treat Genevieve like she was at fault. The officer who interviewed her treated her as a rebellious teenager, and her mother told her that she had ruined the man’s life. He would go to jail and lose his children because of her.

Her mother then negotiated a deal with the man who molested her daughter: he would pay Genevieve’s mother an initial sum of money and an ongoing portion of income from his tree-trimming business. In return, she would let him marry Genevieve to avoid criminal charges. The only option put before Genevieve was to “fix what she had done” and become his wife.



The process of finding a place to have the ceremony began quickly, as the adults turned to figuring out where a 15-year-old girl could be married with her mother's consent and no questions asked. The man's impending court date meant the clock was ticking. While the adults shopped around for a state with suitably lax protections, Genevieve tried to find a way out. She desperately called family and others, telling them that she was getting married and asking for a place to stay, but no one took her in.

The family rented a car and drove to a courthouse in Utah, but the judge there refused to perform the marriage. She was tired of seeing children having children, and though Genevieve's mother tried to convince her, the judge refused. Their encounter in Utah gave Genevieve hope that the marriage might not happen after all. Instead, Genevieve's mother took her to a notary public, granted her abuser power of attorney over her, and handed Genevieve over to him.

The next morning, he packed Genevieve into a borrowed RV and drove across the country to Mississippi, the nearest state where he believed they could be married. All the way there, he repeatedly told her she had to go through with the marriage and that she just had to "toughen up". "Every night from Texas to Mississippi I cried and begged him to just take me back home, he refused and said we had come this far and I was his. He pointed out that I no longer had a home. My mother had signed over power of attorney to him, she didn't want me. I was his property to do what he wanted with."<sup>7</sup> Desperate for a way out, whenever they stopped Genevieve looked through every phone book for her estranged father.

Eventually they arrived at the courthouse in Jackson, Mississippi. Genevieve was wearing a black and white polka dot dress, holding out hope that the judge would see reason, just like the judge in Utah. But when her abuser approached a judge and asked if he would marry them, the judge laughed and said, "Well, I don't want to marry *you*, but I'll marry *her*!"

After a quick ceremony, 15-year-old Genevieve was married to her 42-year-old abuser.

Once back in California, Genevieve moved into a trailer a few doors down from her mother with the man who was now her husband. She did not go to school. Instead, she spent long days trimming trees and doing landscaping work. She was trying to scrape together enough money for food as her husband turned out to be addicted to drugs and alcohol.

Genevieve was completely isolated. Everyone looked askance at the 15-year-old bride, wondering why she was married at all, and especially to a 42-year-old man. People frequently asked if they had married for religious reasons, even though they never went to church. His sons hated that she was in their home, kids her own age wanted nothing to do with her, and adults were baffled by the situation. Genevieve began drinking heavily to escape her life.

Nevertheless, she worked slowly towards her independence, pursuing a GED and getting a job outside the tree trimming business. As she was still a minor, every step she took required his approval – he had to sign her up for the GED program and sign off on her work permit. And every step provoked a backlash. Her abuser became paranoid about her meeting other men and his violence escalated. One night, he violently slammed her head into the corner of their countertop. After this incident, Genevieve's

**"They asked me what was going on and I refused to talk to them. I was conditioned by this time not to talk to the police. So I kept quiet for the most part. I did tell the cop that I would really like to go to school. No government agency ever followed up with me afterwards."**

Genevieve Meyer, "Start Somewhere,"  
*Resiliency Foundation* (June 11, 2016).

**"As a child bride you are isolated...None of the kids my own age wanted anything to do with me after I married, and adults didn't know what to do about the situation. It left me feeling like I didn't belong anywhere and that I was a social outcast."**

Email to Tahirih



older brother finally intervened, telling her enough was enough. He bought her a ticket out of town and promised her she could stay with him while she got on her feet.

Genevieve had finally gotten away from her abuser, but she was not yet in a good place. Deeply traumatized by years of abuse and with only a fifth-grade education, she found it challenging to function on her own. Seemingly simple things – using a bus pass, renting a room – were completely overwhelming. She found herself in a new, unhealthy relationship, and ended up pregnant at age 19.

The pregnancy gave Genevieve new strength because she knew she had to provide for and protect her daughter. She found another job and a place of her own, and over time was able to save up the several hundred dollars she needed to finally file for divorce.

Unfortunately, her ex-husband, to whom she had been forced into marriage as a child, filed for parental rights of her daughter as a means to continue his power and control over her. Even though the girl was not his child, since she had not been officially divorced when she conceived, the law presumptively made her husband the girl's father. Genevieve fought hard for sole custody without visitation, but the judge sided with her ex – telling her that she “should have been more careful” about whom she married. Eventually Genevieve was able to relocate and her ex-husband did not pursue visitation. Finally free, Genevieve has built a life of her own.

**“I have been a decade behind for the last 20 years and have busted [it] to catch up to where most people my age are.”**

Email to Tahirih

Genevieve Meyer has completed two college degrees, and recently earned a Masters of Business Administration. She began blogging in 2016, and went more public with her story in 2018. In June of 2019, Genevieve co-founded and launched the Resiliency Foundation, which aims to build confidence and empower victims of sexual abuse, human trafficking, and forced marriage to become advocates for social change. Genevieve is passionate about ending child marriage, starting with her longtime home of Indiana.

## Evie

**“THEY OWN YOU. YOU’RE NOT AN ADULT; YOU DON’T HAVE ANY RIGHTS. YOUR HUSBAND BECOMES YOUR WARDEN, TELLING YOU WHAT TO DO, WHEN TO DO IT, AND HOW. YOU’VE ENTERED A LIFETIME PRISON SENTENCE.”**

Evie’s<sup>8</sup> mother had to quit school after the third grade to help raise her siblings. When she had children of her own, one of the biggest things she wanted for them was an education. With that foundation, she believed, they could accomplish anything they wanted in life. She was deeply disappointed when Evie dropped out of school, having gotten pregnant in middle school.

Evie had met the father of her child at the Catholic church their families both attended. They started dating when she was 13 and he had just turned 18. While they got some funny looks from their fellow parishioners, no one ever tried to stop their relationship. Evie eventually stopped going to church, feeling

driven away by their judgment.

When she became pregnant, Evie borrowed her older sister's clothes to hide the pregnancy for as long as she could, but at a petite 98 pounds, the truth soon came out. While her mother placed a high value on her children's education, when she found out Evie was pregnant, there was no discussion: the baby could not be born out of wedlock, so Evie had no choice but to be married. Things unfolded quickly from there. Her mother took her to the courthouse to sign off on the marriage, and then continued on her way to work. Only Evie's sister attended the marriage ceremony to bear witness.

Shortly after Evie's daughter was born, she became pregnant again. Her son was born just 10 months later. By age 15, she was a married mother of two.

Evie had gotten good grades in school, doing tenth-grade work in her ninth-grade year. She tried to continue her education with in-home schooling, but she could not concentrate with two babies who needed her constant attention. By the time she decided to get her GED in her early 20s, the pre-test showed that she was reading at a third-grade level – she had not read anything but children's books for years. She had to study incredibly hard to raise her reading level for the GED, and was thrilled when she got the news she had passed. She hoped for a hug or congratulations, but instead her husband cut her down with spiteful comments.

Her husband had been abusive even before they got married, and continued to assert his control over Evie afterwards. He even got jealous when she went to the doctor, asking if she liked it when the doctor's hands were all over her.

Evie also had to ask her husband's permission to get a job, since this meant she would no longer be home with the kids. She got her first job at 17, working at the same fast food restaurant as her sister-in-law. Her sister-in-law would inform Evie's husband any time she thought Evie had "misbehaved." Evie learned to avoid eye contact, staring at the ground while quietly asking for orders, so that her husband would not hear that she had been "flirting with customers".

Terrified of losing her children, Evie chose not to try to leave her husband and endured his abuse. He often threatened to take them away, saying "You can leave me, but my children aren't going anywhere." When her first child was born, she hardly let anyone touch her as she was scared that the baby girl might be taken away from her because she had her so young. Evie did not understand her rights and her husband manipulated her fears.

A few years ago, Evie finally separated from her husband, more than 30 years after they married.

**"You feel those eyes looking at you and you feel guilty; you feel dirty. Like, 'what did I do to myself?'"**

**I accomplished a lot. I went back, got an associate's degree, a bachelor's. But I still feel that shame. I still think about that little girl..."**

Interview with Tahirih

**"I truly want to be an advocate for change in the laws to help others like me. To give them a voice."**

Email to Tahirih

Determined to pursue her education and independence, Evie Lane went on to earn not only her GED, but also associate and bachelor's degrees, and now operates her own small business. She has only recently begun sharing her story with the media and state legislators. Evie testified in support of a 2019 reform bill in South Carolina and is keen to continue lending support in other states, particularly the six states that still have pregnancy exceptions—like the one that enabled her marriage back in 1985.

# Katherine

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**“IT’S HARD TO GO BACK TO THOSE DAYS, EVEN NOW.  
I JUST WANT TO GO BACK AND HUG THAT LITTLE GIRL.”**

Katherine<sup>9</sup> was born into a large Catholic family in Texas, with 10 children in all. Both of her parents had disabilities and struggled to make ends meet, frequently relying on their church community for support. Eventually her parents separated, and then divorced. When the divorce came through her mother was unable to cope.

One consequence of the divorce, and the financial squeeze it put on the household, was that her mother decided that her daughters, aged 14 to 16 and who were still living at home, should marry and leave the house. Within a few weeks, Katherine’s older sisters left home with their boyfriends, but Katherine did not yet have one. This did not deter her mother, though, who had already been entertaining interest in Katherine from a smooth-talking man who had been coming by the house to meet with her while Katherine was at school. When a shocked Katherine went to her mother about her science teacher saying he wanted to have sex with her, her mother decided to arrange Katherine’s marriage immediately.

Katherine was told at 4:00 p.m. that she would be married to this stranger at 8:00 a.m. the next day. In a panic, she stayed up late with her best friend searching for any way out of the marriage, but with no way to support herself and nowhere else to go, she was left with no other option than to accept her mother’s will. She tried to set her mind on what she knew about marriage from church – that it was a lifelong, holy union between one man and one woman – and to push aside the feeling of abandonment.

Immediately following the ceremony, Katherine’s life went into a surreal and frightening free-fall. Her new husband took her away to a hotel and inside an empty banquet room he stood her up on a table so he could inspect her naked body. He motioned towards another room, and other men started coming in to look her over. Next, Katherine’s husband – barely four hours after their marriage ceremony – set her up in a hotel room with a bottle of whiskey and a directive that she was to make the men he would send in happy.

Assuming she was meant to play hostess, Katherine did so as graciously as she could. The first man broke down and cried, saying her sweetness had turned him around, and the second just took the drink she poured for him. When the third man made clear he was intent on sex, Katherine realized what was really going on. She fought back and fended the man off, and when her husband came back to the room, she made it clear that this was not an option. When he realized he could not make money by forcing Katherine to have sex, her husband instead forced her to serve as a full-time, live-in caretaker for his grandfather.

In the years that followed, Katherine’s abuser would tell her repeatedly that she was ugly, and that her

**“When she fell apart, she took the house apart.”**

Interview with Tahirih

**“It was one of those pivotal moments in your life that you don’t forget. I wasn’t just 14, I was a 14-year-old Catholic girl, and all of this came out of left field.”**

Interview with Tahirih

own mother had not wanted her. He told her “I own you, you can’t do anything unless I tell you.” In time, Katherine came to understand that he had paid her mother to take her away.

Katherine tried to get away from her abuser a few times, once using grocery money to pay for a bus ticket to Austin. But within six months, her abuser came with his uncle to bring her back to Louisiana. Eventually she ran away again, and again he brought her back.

When Katherine’s son was born, her abuser became increasingly violent and spiraled deeper into drug abuse. Katherine, still only 17 years old, grew afraid for their safety, and once more she decided to leave. Katherine appealed to her grandmother for help and was given a small amount of money and a car. Katherine fled, and this time her abuser never came after her. Their marriage was over.

Katherine spent many years in therapy trying to undo the damage that had been done to her sense of self-worth. At one point, she had five engagement rings from different men, one of the ways she made up for not feeling wanted as a girl. Katherine married again at age 18, and though they had a daughter together, the marriage was shaky – ultimately, they would separate, divorce, remarry and divorce again. She describes her second husband as a decent man, but that he often complained that he was paying the price for what had happened to her.

Katherine went on to have a career as a successful businesswoman. She dedicated herself to serving her community, with a special passion for “people projects” that helped other women and families turn their lives around. Katherine’s daughter, Francisca Ortega, is a journalist with the Houston Chronicle. In January 2016, she shared her mother’s story in an article about child marriage in Texas. This story helped inspire a 2017 law that limited marriage to legal adults in Texas, and continues to move legislators in other states to push for their own reforms.

## Elizabeth

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**“WHILE I WAS FINALLY ABLE TO ESCAPE AND DIVORCE THE MAN I MARRIED IN THE CULT, CREATE A FAMILY OF MY CHOOSING, EARN BOTH UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE DEGREES AND CREATE AN ACCOMPLISHED CAREER, I STILL LIVE WITH THE SCARS OF LOSING MY CHILDHOOD. I HAVE FREQUENT NIGHTMARES AND HAVE A VERY HARD TIME TRUSTING OTHERS EVEN THOUGH I HAVE GONE THROUGH YEARS OF THERAPY.” <sup>10</sup>**

When Elizabeth was seven years old, her mother and step-father opened a natural healing clinic out of their home. Ultimately, with Elizabeth’s stepfather as its leader, this clinic grew into a 200-person cult called the “Fellowship.” The group was obsessed with purity and cleansing, and made women and children especially subservient. They moved around every few years, finally settling on an isolated 150-acre residential compound. To support the Fellowship financially, they made part of the compound into a kind of holistic retreat, which also helped hide its true nature from the outside world.

Elizabeth’s stepfather was very abusive, beating his stepchildren and psychologically manipulating them and the other members of the Fellowship. He controlled every aspect of their lives, and Elizabeth never felt safe at home. She reached out to her biological father to get help several times but could never bring

herself to disclose the abuse. This last outlet was cut off when Elizabeth was 12; her stepfather legally adopted her, and promptly ended all contact with her biological father.

When she was 15, Elizabeth fell in love with a 19-year-old international student studying at a local university and living on the Fellowship compound. They met in secret for months, which allowed them to spend time together and talk privately.

One night, while they were meeting in the Fellowship's restaurant after it had closed for the evening, another member of the Fellowship discovered them together and reported it. They were brought to her stepfather, who kicked the young student out of the compound immediately.

Elizabeth's own punishment was swift and severe. First, she was made to strip down to her underwear and to sit before all the Fellowship's staff in the community room. They berated her, calling her a whore and forcing her to "confess" before turning to more hands-on, painful "cleansing techniques." They held a pillow over Elizabeth's mouth to muffle her screams as they dug into her body and examined her to make sure her hymen was still intact.

As part of this "cleansing," Elizabeth was confined to her bedroom and then informed that she could only be redeemed by marrying another member of the Fellowship—though she could "choose" which one. Knowing that "no" was not an option, Elizabeth named a 28-year-old who was a relative newcomer to the Fellowship. She hoped she could eventually convince him to help her escape, though she knew even broaching the subject with him would be highly dangerous.

After a month-long "courtship" period, her stepfather and other Fellowship leaders agreed that she should be taken to Nevada to be married. By then Elizabeth was 16, and the leaders knew they could get a marriage license for her with nothing more than her parents' consent.

Elizabeth hoped that somehow the wedding would not happen, that someone at the courthouse would prevent it, would pull her aside and ask her if she was okay. Once there, she tried to signal that she was being married off against her will, using her body language to communicate her unhappiness and desperation. She avoided eye contact and kept her eyes downcast, but no one at the courthouse ever asked if she was alright. No one asked whether she wanted the marriage. No one asked her anything at all.

After a quick ceremony, 16-year-old Elizabeth was legally married to an adult man nearly twice her age. She was brought back to the Fellowship for a second ceremony before the membership, after which the marriage was consummated. Within days, Elizabeth and her new husband were taken overseas with her stepfather and other cult members to scout out a new home for the group. Once there, Elizabeth's passport was confiscated and she was restricted to cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the younger children. She had no opportunity or time to plan an escape.

A few years later, they returned to California and Elizabeth began to detect cracks in her husband's adherence to the Fellowship and she decided it was time to make her move. They talked through the night and eventually she convinced him they should try to leave together. On the night of their escape, they made their way through the woods toward a car they had asked his family to leave hidden on the side of the road. At one point, another member of the Fellowship caught and confronted them, but they made a break for it and managed to get away.

**"There wasn't one person... that asked me a question about whether I was willfully marrying this man. Even if a judge had been involved, I was living in such fear in the cult that I would not have told them."**

As quoted in Elizabeth S. Taylor, "Testimony in Support of AB 139" Nevada Senate Judiciary Committee (May 1, 2019).

It took several more years for Elizabeth to obtain a divorce and begin a life of her own, the whole time struggling to support herself and to overcome the lasting impacts of her stolen youth.

Elizabeth S. Taylor is now writing a book about her experiences. She wrote to California legislators and the Governor to urge them to pass protective reforms and spoke out publicly for the first time in March 2019, testifying in support of a Nevada bill that aimed to ban child marriage in the state.

## Ashley\*

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**“I NEED TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS...MY LIFE IS STILL COMPLICATED  
AND [PUBLICITY] WOULD NOT BE GOOD.” <sup>11</sup>**

When Ashley was in high school, she dated a man who was nearly ten years older. She was living with her grandparents, with whom she often clashed. Believing that Ashley should become a wife and mother rather than the doctor she aspired to be, Ashley’s grandmother pushed her to get married quickly. While Ashley had not thought of marriage at the time, she initially acquiesced. Her boyfriend had been good to her up to that point, and marriage would be a way to get her out of her grandparents’ strict home. Ultimately, she felt helpless to resist her grandmother’s pressure.

Soon after they were engaged, however, Ashley’s fiancé became controlling and violently abusive. When she tried to leave the relationship, he flew into a rage, refusing to accept her decision and threatening to kill her grandparents if she ever tried to leave him again. While she never took that risk, Ashley’s grandparents were not as protective of her and were, by this time, well aware of the abuse and more than willing to look past it to ensure the marriage could move forward.

Still, Ashley held out hope that the marriage would not come to pass. She felt sure that they would be stopped at the courthouse when they went to get a marriage license, or that someone would pull her aside to ask questions of a bride so young. In the end, no one did.

No one had the chance. It was Ashley’s grandmother alone who went to the courthouse and obtained the license for Ashley to be married. Ashley herself was not even there, and so she never had the opportunity to reach out and safely disclose the threats, abuse, and coercion she was facing. Feeling she had no way out and that there was no one who could help her, Ashley soon found herself shaking and faint with fear at the altar, marrying her abuser.

Ashley’s husband became increasingly abusive and controlling after the wedding – forcing her to drop out of school and subjecting her to constant emotional, physical, and sexual violence. His behavior was brutal, bizarre, and unpredictable, and he terrorized Ashley. When she went to her grandparents to appeal to them to take her in and protect her, they sent her back off to her husband, saying that divorce was out of the question.

Several years after they were married, her abuser died. She was pregnant at the time, and still very young. She struggled to support herself and her baby.



Ashley has worked hard to rebuild her life, but laments all that she lost as a child bride and all the ways she is still impacted by the repercussions of her marriage. Ashley is now back in school pursuing a technical degree.

\*Ashley is not the survivor's real name. She testified in support of a bill to address child marriage in her state, and subsequently spoke with reporters at that time. Feeling that her anonymity is being threatened, however, she has since pulled back from public exposure. Nonetheless, she remains committed to doing what she can to protect other girls from the nightmare she endured as a result of her child marriage, and for that reason agreed to share her story under a pseudonym for this report.

## Dawn

**“THE MARRIAGE WAS A WAY TO COVER UP THE RAPE. THE MARRIAGE WAS A WAY TO KEEP ME FROM BEING AN UNWED TEEN MOTHER. THE MARRIAGE WAS A WAY TO AVOID ANY CHILD SERVICES INVESTIGATION. THE MARRIAGE WAS A WAY TO AVOID ANY CHILD NEGLECT CHARGES AGAINST MY PARENTS. THE MARRIAGE WAS A WAY TO KEEP MY HUSBAND OUT OF PRISON.”<sup>12</sup>**

When Dawn<sup>13</sup> was 11 years old, her father remarried and decided to start his new life by relocating to Texas. Dawn's new stepmother asked a family friend to look after her, so that Dawn could finish out the fifth grade at her school in California.

This man soon began molesting Dawn. He told her that she was mature enough to be in a sexual relationship, but that she should not tell anyone else because other adults would not understand. Dawn kept the abuse a secret until about a year later, when she became pregnant and her parents found out.

Her parents were upset, but they did not go to the police. They turned instead to “damage control,” since it would be deeply embarrassing to the entire family for Dawn to have a child out of wedlock. Abortion was not an option for her conservative father, who made it clear that the only way forward was for Dawn to marry her abuser. Scared, confused, and afraid to disappoint her family, Dawn complied.<sup>14</sup>

Looking back, Dawn realizes just how exploitative the situation was. The marriage was not in her best interest, but a way to obscure the abuse and shield her parents and their friend from prosecution. By marrying her, her abuser evaded statutory rape charges and her parents avoided both a child abuse investigation and the perceived shame of their daughter being an unwed mother.

Despite the fact that Dawn was only 13 and the groom was 32, the judge asked only a single question and was satisfied with Dawn's one-word answer. Even if the judge had made an effort to determine whether she was being abused, Dawn would not have

**“I feel like I was a throw-away child. I was tossed around from home to home and, at the quickest opportunity, married off.”**

As quoted in Ellen Wulforst, “Child Brides Call on U.S. States to End ‘Legal Rape’,” *Thomson Reuters Foundation* (October 24, 2018).

**“[A] child is not going to ‘out’ their family. The child will protect their family.”**

Email to Tahirih

said anything; she was a terrified child. Nonetheless, this simple exchange was enough for the judge to sign off on a marriage between a pregnant child and the man who molested her.

Dawn had two children by the age of 15, the pregnancies causing her to miss both seventh and eighth grades. Her husband controlled everything – she did not have money unless he gave it to her, and could not go to the store or to school if there was no gas in the car. Sometimes he would leave town for work, leaving her alone for days at a time.

Three years into their marriage, Dawn began to recognize that her husband was a pedophile. She grew worried about her children's safety and ended the marriage. At age 16, she was a divorced mother of two. When she left, her family ostracized her and made it clear that she was not to ask for help. Left with very few options, Dawn was thrust into adult life without access to crucial support systems and safety nets. When she tried to apply for public benefits, caseworkers assumed she had parents to support her. They told her to go back home.

Finding a place to live was also a struggle. Dawn knew her best chance would be to meet landlords in person, with both her children present, since perhaps they would assume a mother of two must be old enough to rent. She finally found someone willing to rent her a room and got her first job assembling bicycles at a Toys R Us.

The custody battle began immediately following Dawn's divorce. Both her in-laws and her abuser had lawyers of their own, but Dawn could not afford one. She represented herself, spending her days in the law library researching her rights and how to win the fight for her children. She passed so much time in the courthouse, it began to feel like her second home.

Dawn's parents joined the custody battle as well, but on her ex-husband's side. Her stepmother went so far as to write a letter to the court saying that Dawn was not old or mature enough to care for her children – despite the fact that her parents had considered her old enough to marry at 13. Dawn was devastated by their lack of support, but ultimately, through her fierce determination, she won her case.

For several years after she left her abuser, Dawn was so poor she had trouble providing the basic necessities for her children. She lived in constant fear that they would be taken away, but slowly built a stable life. Dawn attended university to study criminal justice and has worked with survivors of domestic violence and abused and neglected children as a Court Appointed Special Advocate.

While she remains estranged from her parents, other family members reached out to support her after Dawn began sharing her story. Some had no idea what had happened to her. Dawn had felt like an outcast in her family for a long time, but she is now able to rebuild relationships with some relatives.

**“We went to the county courthouse, and a judge asked if I wanted to be married. My answer was ‘yes.’ For a couple of weeks, I’d been told that marriage was best for me, and that I needed to tell the judge that.”**

As quoted in Nicholas Kristof, “An American 13-Year-Old, Pregnant and Married to Her Rapist,” *The New York Times* (June 1, 2018).

**“I’m showing up now. Showing up whole, and I’m being loved.”**

Interview with Tahirih

Dawn Tyree is now a professional organizer and short story author, and hopes to write a book about her journey. She shared her story publicly for the first time with *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof and has since embraced her role as an advocate to end child marriage in California and across the country.



**“I FEEL LIKE MY LIFE WAS TAKEN FROM ME.  
THE ONES WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT ME, DIDN'T.” <sup>15</sup>**

A small Pentecostal church was the center of Sherry's<sup>16</sup> childhood. The church had a parsonage attached where clergy and their families lived. When her mother married the assistant pastor, this parsonage became Sherry's home. Young Sherry loved her life at the little church, helping her mother cook pies and barbecue for various community events.

Sherry's aunt lived nearby, in the same house as their church's bishop, and Sherry would often stop by on the way to school to ask for lunch money. One day, when Sherry was eight years old, the bishop answered the door instead of her aunt. He told Sherry to come inside his bedroom to get her lunch money, then made her lie down on the bed and raped her. In pain and confused, Sherry continued to school, stopping off at the bathroom to wash off the blood that had run down her legs. With no words to describe what had just happened and no idea what to do about it, a few days passed before Sherry tried to tell her mother. But Sherry's mother immediately accused her of lying, leaping to defend the bishop and discredit her daughter. Sherry was devastated.

That was the first of many rapes Sherry suffered as a child. She was raped several more times by the bishop, she was raped by her stepfather, and she was repeatedly raped by a church deacon. All the church leadership had keys to the parsonage where she lived, and the deacon would let himself in at night. She was assaulted so frequently that Sherry came to accept that being hurt and violated was just part of life.

One day, Sherry was pulled out of class and examined by the school nurse. She was told to gather her books and go to the front office, where her mother would pick her up. As soon as she got in the car, her mother informed Sherry that she was pregnant – a term that carried little meaning for the bewildered young girl.

A doctor confirmed that Sherry was seven months along. Finally forced to confront reality, Sherry's mother and the church elders decided that, to avoid any further embarrassment for her family or the church, Sherry would have to be sent away to await the baby's birth. Sherry's mother handed her over to the bishop, who raped her again on their drive to Miami.

When Sherry went into labor, she was dropped off at the hospital to deliver her baby all alone. Just 10 years old at the time, she remembers lying on a gurney in a hallway, laboring through early contractions while passersby stared rather than offering assistance or compassion. When she returned to Tampa with her daughter, child welfare authorities started to ask questions. To deflect attention and shield the church leadership from rape charges, her mother decided that Sherry should marry the 20-year-old deacon.

**“...I fell through [a loophole], and no one actually protected me. They protected him by putting the handcuffs on me, instead of putting the handcuffs on him, and he was the rapist.”**

As quoted in Caitlin Nolan, “Florida Woman Forced to Marry Her Rapist at Age 11 Fights to Change the Law,” *Inside Edition* (January 22, 2018).

At the age of 11, Sherry's mother drove her to the courthouse and, with the signature of a judge who was fully aware of her age, Sherry was married. Her mother made her a white dress, veil, and wedding cake for the small ceremony that night at church. Sherry did everything she was told, even smiling for a photo. Sherry had become a mother and wife before she'd even finished the fifth grade.

Sherry's married years were miserable. While other children her age attended school, she was home changing diapers, cooking and cleaning, fighting with her husband, and worrying about money. Sherry struggled to find work, as employers were unwilling to hire someone so young. Sherry loved school and had been a bright student, but had to drop out for good in ninth grade. She cried every day, exhausted and in despair. Finally, at age 17, she turned to Legal Aid for help, and they gave her a \$75 check that enabled her to file for divorce. With little money saved and six children to care for, she then requested shelter from the local housing authority.

Sherry would endure two more abusive marriages before finally breaking free, taking charge, and changing her life in 2013. She went back to school and obtained her high school diploma, founded a non-profit, wrote a novel based on her experience, and has now become a leading advocate for ending child marriage in the United States.

Sherry Johnson is the founder of Svon Foundation, Inc., an organization dedicated to ending child marriage in the United States. She spent years raising awareness and lobbying Florida lawmakers to reform the laws that failed her as a child – a feat she finally accomplished in 2018. Sherry has now taken her fight across state lines, successfully pushing for 2019 legislation that limited marriage to legal adults in Georgia, and set a firm age floor in Louisiana. For more on Sherry's journey in her own words, read her memoir, *Forgiving the Unforgivable*, an excerpt of which is included with permission in Appendix A.

**“I was kicked out of school three times...Every time I got pregnant, [I] couldn't go to school.”**

As quoted in Caitlin Nolan, “Florida Woman Forced to Marry Her Rapist at Age 11 Fights to Change the Law,” *Inside Edition* (January 22, 2018).

**“You can't get a job, you can't get a car, you can't get a license, you can't sign a lease, so why allow someone to marry when they're still so young?”**

As quoted in Nicholas Kristoff, “11 Years Old, a Mom, and Pushed to Marry Her Rapist in Florida,” *The New York Times* (May 26, 2017).

## Monica\*

**“I WILL SUPPORT IN ANY WAY POSSIBLE TO MAKE SURE THAT WHAT HAPPENED TO ME NEVER HAPPENS TO ANY OTHER YOUNG LADY!” <sup>17</sup>**

Monica,<sup>18</sup> a survivor of forced marriage when she was 14, recalls what it was like within the infamous “House of Prayer” congregation in northwest Atlanta. Girls and women lived under especially strict controls, and Monica was made to stay home from school. Families were conditioned to follow the pastor's orders, including avoiding contact with anyone outside the church. Many families were also made financially dependent on the pastor, and loyal to him without question.

Eventually, the pastor was sentenced to two years in prison for aggravated assault and cruelty to children. Among other abuses, he had directed congregants to administer severe beatings to children during services, including whippings of teen girls like Monica. Forty-one children were taken into protective custody as part of the case. Investigators also found that he had ordered several girls to marry after they became pregnant or had allegedly had sex.

In Monica's case, one day, the pastor asked a man nearly twice her age to stand up in church and point out whom he wanted to claim as his bride. The man, who was a stranger to her, picked her out. Though Monica protested and resisted, ultimately, she was forced to submit. Monica was taken out of state to be married, then returned to live in Georgia as a "child bride." After suffering years of brutal abuse, Monica finally escaped.

Monica shared her story directly with Tahirih staff working to end child marriage in Georgia, where her experience demonstrated to legislators the danger of relying on parental consent as a supposedly protective measure. Monica's story helped move legislators to pass the 2019 law that instituted several new safeguards in Georgia, and limited marriage in the state to legal adults.

## Sonora

**"I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW OTHER COUNTRIES COMPREHEND THAT IT'S WRONG, BUT IN OUR COUNTRY SOMEHOW IT'S RIGHT. I THINK IT'S LITERALLY SEXUAL ASSAULT... IT'S LEGAL RAPE." <sup>19</sup>**

Sonora<sup>20</sup> was raised in a strict religious family for whom prayer, God and the Bible were the center of life. She was homeschooled after second grade, although this "schooling" really meant helping her mother to manage the household. From the age of five, her parents taught her that education was not important and that instead it was her calling to be a wife and mother. By her early teens, Sonora's time was spent cooking, cleaning, and caring for her younger siblings, and she was not allowed to socialize with other children her age or to date.

Her future husband, whom her stepfather had known for a long time, started coming around the house when Sonora was 14. He was a 25-year-old Christian rock musician whose autograph Sonora had displayed on her bedroom wall since she was 12 years old. He began to write her letters talking about marriage. Her parents also began to encourage and even insist on the idea of her marrying the musician. When she went on a mission trip at age 15, the pastor – who had courted his own wife when he was the leader of her church youth group – also asked her when the two of them would be getting married.

Not long afterwards, they were engaged. Marriage initially seemed to Sonora like a path to freedom from her regimented home life. About halfway into their three-month engagement, however, Sonora looked at her husband-to-be and was suddenly struck by the fact that she barely knew the man and did not find him attractive. She brought her doubts to her pastor, but he told her that such thoughts were the work of Satan, who was trying to keep her from marrying so she would fall into the sin of extramarital sex. When

Sonora's best friend and her parents also dismissed her misgivings as the devil's work, she began to believe them.

Nonetheless, Sonora decided to confront her parents and tell them that she did not want to get married yet. She was hopeful that she could convince them that she was old enough to take on some measure of independence since they already saw her as a grown woman ready for marriage. She presented a plan she thought they might find acceptable: she could move into a group home with other young women from church, enroll in a local college, and get a job. She wanted to wait on marriage, date a little, and have a chance to see what was out there in the world.

Her parents refused. Sonora would marry her fiancé, and she would marry him when they told her to.

Resigning herself to the marriage and hoping to assuage her fears, 16-year-old Sonora went to her local library. She checked out every book she could find on arranged and child marriage, all of which were written in the 1960s and sent the message that "love is a choice," and "love is something you grow into." Feeling a bit better, Sonora went ahead with the marriage.

A few years later, at 19, Sonora made her first attempt to leave what had become a toxic marriage. At that point she had a daughter that was nearly two years old, had just started working at a local athletic club, and thought between her earnings and some child support she could afford a place of her own. She went to her husband to tell him she was leaving, although at the time it felt more like she was asking permission from a father figure than asserting her independence as a grown woman.

Her husband flew into a rage, telling Sonora she could not leave and that he would kick her out on the street if she tried. He threatened to never let her see her daughter again and that he would tell everyone they knew that she was a sinner who had been unfaithful to him. Sonora's family took his side. Her brother and his wife traveled from out-of-state to convince her to stay with her husband, since divorce was considered a grievous sin in their community. Sonora lost heart, feeling she was up against too much since she knew her husband came from a family that was well-off, and that he would use all his resources to fight her in court.

Seeking to bind Sonora more strongly to the marriage she wanted to leave, her husband pressured her to have another child. She refused, but one night after she had too much to drink, he took advantage of her lowered defenses and she got pregnant again.

After the birth of their son, Sonora's husband made a conscious effort to keep her pregnant – making no mystery of the fact that this was a deliberate plan to keep Sonora locked into the marriage she wanted so badly to escape. Ultimately, they had six children together, and adopted two more. Sonora's husband used her own body against her for years, augmenting his control by ensuring she never had access to a bank account.

She finally managed to extricate herself from his control and leave the marriage when she was 34, a full 15 years after her first attempt. Emotionally fragile and with little in the way of financial or social support, she was initially unable to prevent her husband from taking full custody of their children. Only after two years of recovery was Sonora able to get back on her feet, build a circle of supportive people around her, hire a lawyer, and fight for her children, succeeding in winning joint custody.

**"[Marriage] was the only choice presented to me...People saw it as consent because I wasn't kicking and screaming. But if anyone asked me what I really wanted, I didn't want that ... I wanted to go to college. I wanted to get a job. I wanted to date people."**

As quoted in Ellen Wulforst, "Child Brides Call on U.S. States to End 'Legal Rape'," *Thomson Reuters Foundation* (October 24, 2018)

**"I felt so stuck, and I couldn't leave without my daughter."**

Interview with Tahirih



Now 40, she still has six children at home, and supports her family with a job as a massage therapist. Over her long journey, Sonora has continued to yearn for further education. She got her GED and would like to become an attorney. Working to end child marriage has reaffirmed her passion for advocacy.

Sonora Fairbanks first shared her story nationally in a June 2018 *New York Times* column. Since then, she has continued to raise awareness and support reforms, including by lobbying California lawmakers to end child marriage in the state.

**“IT SHOULDN’T HURT TO BE A  
CHILD AND CHILD MARRIAGES...  
HURT CHILDREN.”<sup>21</sup>**



# APPENDICES

## Appendix A

*Excerpt from memoir written by  
Sherry Johnson and self-published in 2013*

### **EXCERPT FROM *FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE – PURPLE IN A DARKER COLOR* BY SHERRY JOHNSON**

*Note – Sherry’s memoir was published before she had gone fully public with her story. She refers to herself by a pseudonym, Destiny, throughout. Here, Destiny/Sherry speaks with Sarah, a counselor.*

“As a child I lived in the church parsonage with my mother and stepfather. At the age of five I was fondled by the drummer’s son at my church that came in when my parents left me at home alone to go to early Morning Prayer.”

The counselor gasped.

Destiny said, “Oh no wait, it gets better. So save your shock for the really good parts.”

Sarah was taken aback by the pained yet comical sarcasm.

“At the age of eight I was raped by the Bishop, several times. I told my mother about it; she said that I was lying.”

Sarah sat there dumbfounded but continued to listen without interruption.

“Not only did she not believe me but she informed the entire congregation that I was a liar and had an evil spirit. She told them not [to] believe anything I said. Then my stepfather was watching me through holes he had put in their bedroom closet that shared a wall with the bathroom. I have no idea how long he watched me but one day I caught his eye staring. I quickly got out of the tub. The next time my mother left me alone with him he was on top of me raping me.”

Destiny patted Sarah’s hand as the woman let out a sad little yelp. Without missing a beat she continued with the twisted tale.

“I got involved in an argument they were having one day and he tried to hit me but got the wall instead. After this I figured she would believe me. I told her; she had no response. But apparently she did say something to my stepfather because he confessed his sins to the church leadership. This time she said I brought it on myself and that him losing his position was my fault. At this point I’m a nervous wreck, deathly afraid of men and harboring hate for my mother. Then one of the deacons in the church started to rape me. There was absolutely no point in telling my mother, so I didn’t. This got exposed because I



was found to be seven months pregnant by my school when I was nine. They notified my mother and she chastised me. When I finally understood what was going on she sent me to live with the Bishop's wife. And yes this is the same Bishop who started raping me to begin with. Oh did I mention he drove me to his house in Miami and raped me on the way down there, right on the side of the road."

Sarah was in tears now. Destiny pulled tissues out of the box on her desk and handed them to her. She continued.

"When I had the baby and came home the Deacon still stopped by every now and then to rape me. When my mother discovered this her solution was for us to get married. For some reason we had to go down to Clearwater for the marriage and at 11 years old my mother married me to my 20-year-old rapist. I had six children while I was married to him, but one belongs to another Deacon. That wasn't a rape though. But that's another web of drama. Can you imagine this for me?"

Sarah braced herself, afraid of what could possibly come out of Destiny's mouth next.

"I lived in the room I was raped in. I was married to one of my rapists, living under the roof of one of my other rapists. He was helping to raise my children! But anyways, after every child was born my husband would leave me to fend for myself. Finally at age 18 I had enough and he was put in jail for nonpayment of child support and I got a divorce. Now I'm 18 years old with six children and there's this other guy that comes along and courts me. After about a year I give in because this seems a lot easier than doing it on my own. I've been married to him now for eight years and we have three children together. My youngest is only six months old. I have no real friends. My husband doesn't really care for children, mine or his. He doesn't really talk to me and we struggle to make ends meet. Despite his lack of support I managed to get a business certification which is a big deal for me because I only got through the ninth grade."

Destiny paused to check on Sarah.

"You okay? You ready for me to go on?"

Sniffling, Sarah said, "Yes."

Sherry Johnson is the founder of Svon Foundation, Inc., an organization dedicated to ending child marriage in the United States. She spent years raising awareness and lobbying Florida lawmakers to reform the laws that failed her as a child – a feat she finally accomplished in 2018. Sherry has now taken her fight across state lines, successfully pushing for 2019 legislation that limited marriage to legal adults in Georgia, and set a firm age floor in Louisiana.

# Appendix B

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## INTERSECTION OF CHILD MARRIAGE WITH OTHER HARMS, AND HOW EXCEPTIONS TO MINIMUM MARRIAGE AGES ALLOW AND EXACERBATE HARM

### Child marriage can...

- Facilitate marriages that are forced/coerced
- Provide a cover-up for sexual violence and a workaround for predators
- Exacerbate calculated “grooming” by an older male of a young girl to normalize aberrant behavior, isolate her from friends and family, and increase her emotional dependence on him
- Be tied to human trafficking or sexual exploitation
- Be tied to exploitation of children for the abuse of marriage-based immigration laws
- Shield parents who are abusive, neglectful, or unfit from investigation, and/or give parents a way to offload further responsibility for a child
- Result from physical, psychological, emotional, and economic abuse and threats, including manipulation of religious faith and threatened loss of family or community if a girl refuses or leaves a marriage
- Increase vulnerability to domestic violence
- Relate to/result in multiple victimizations
- Interrupt or curtail education
- Increase medical and mental health problems
- Lead to teen pregnancy, or, if already pregnant, to rapid second births
- Increase financial dependence and exacerbate risk of poverty
- Increase the instability of both “child brides” and their children
- Be driven by outdated and inaccurate assumptions about what is in the best interests of a pregnant minor, or about social stigma or legal penalties to unwed motherhood
- Trap children in abuse without the legal rights and practical resources adults have to escape violence and stay safe
- Prey on children’s lack of knowledge of their legal rights and lack of access to legal counsel, and put “child brides” at a harsh disadvantage in divorce and custody proceedings
- Perpetuate harmful intergenerational cycles of child marriage, poverty, abuse, or other harm

### Laws that permit child marriage ratchet up these risks, because...

- Parental consent exceptions empower abusive, neglectful, or unfit parents, as well as parents with inaccurate notions about what is in a child’s best interests
- Pregnancy exceptions treat a red flag of possible sexual violence as a green light for marriage; undermine statutory rape laws; and make pregnant girls more vulnerable to force and coercion
- Weak judicial approval exceptions result in judges that can neither detect threats nor protect children against them
- Un-emancipated minors lack the legal rights and practical resources to help them prevent an unwanted marriage, and gaining those rights only after marriage comes too late
- Married minors can fall in a legal gray space re: whether they are fully emancipated or still under the legal control of a parent/spouse, what rights and options they have to protect themselves, and what benefits and services they can access
- Low or no age floors, and no restrictions on age differences, enable children to be locked in marriages with profound power imbalances
- The patchwork of U.S. laws on child marriage makes it easy for predators or abusive parents or partners to take girls across state lines to evade scrutiny and to access laxer laws



# Appendix C

## RESEARCH ON THE IMPACTS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Physical Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women who marry before age 19 have a <b>23% greater risk of developing a serious health condition</b> (diabetes, cancer, heart attack, or stroke).<sup>22</sup></li> <li>• Teen girls who marry tend to have <b>more children, earlier, and more closely spaced</b>.<sup>23</sup> They are:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Much more likely to get pregnant than unmarried teens (130% more than those who live with a partner)<sup>24</sup></li> <li>» More likely to have their first child before age 18<sup>25</sup></li> <li>» 40% more likely to have a second birth within 24 months of their first<sup>26</sup></li> <li>» Nearly three times more likely to have at least 5 children<sup>27</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Young women and girls experience high rates of dating and domestic violence. Those age 16-19 face <b>intimate partner violence victimization rates almost three times the national average</b>.<sup>28</sup></li> <li>• Women who marry as children are <b>more likely to seek health services</b>.<sup>29</sup></li> </ul>
Mental Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women who marry before age 18 are more likely to report <b>stressful life events</b> and present significantly <b>more psychiatric disorders</b>, such as:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» mood and anxiety disorders, like major depressive disorder</li> <li>» antisocial personality disorder (prevalence nearly 3x higher)<sup>30</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Being isolated from typical support networks (school, friends, family) and feeling a lack of control over their lives can contribute to a “child bride’s” poor mental health. Agencies working with girls facing or trying to escape forced marriages report that nearly all have <b>contemplated or attempted suicide</b>.<sup>31</sup></li> </ul>
Economic Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child brides tend to <b>come from poverty and remain in poverty</b>.<sup>32</sup></li> <li>• Girls who marry underage are up to <b>31 percentage points more likely to live in future poverty</b>.<sup>33</sup> For teen mothers, getting married and later divorcing can more than double the likelihood of poverty.<sup>34</sup></li> <li>• Earning potential and work opportunities are limited by interrupted education and low education levels — girls who marry under age 19 are:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» <b>50% more likely to drop out of high school</b></li> <li>» <b>Four times less likely to graduate college</b><sup>35</sup></li> </ul> </li> <li>• These dynamics result in a woman’s <b>limited ability to become financially independent</b> in case of domestic violence or divorce, and <b>increased vulnerability to multiple victimization</b>.</li> </ul>
Social Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>70-80% of marriages that are entered under age 18 end in divorce</b>.<sup>36</sup> In fact, according to one study based on census data, <b>23% of children who marry are already separated or divorced by the time they turn 18</b>.<sup>37</sup></li> <li>• The negative outcomes above become <b>cyclical and intergenerational</b>.</li> </ul>

# ENDNOTES

- 1 For a table of common harmful dynamics of child marriage and the common ways in which systems fail to protect children, see Appendix B. For research and statistics on how child marriage harms children, see Appendix C.
- 2 Because this compilation and report is focused on campaigns to change state marriage-age laws, we have not included stories of U.S. survivors whose forced marriages were religious rather than civil/legal, were conducted overseas, or took place after age 18. We have also omitted any story for which we were not able to confirm the survivor's present permission to retell it, regardless of public availability, since survivors can sometimes have a change of heart about disclosing personal details or be put at heightened risk through further exposure. We also have not included any stories of individuals who have not self-identified as a victim or survivor of child marriage.
- 3 For updated legal analyses, a review of the progress made in changing state laws, and an outline of the work that remains ahead, please see the resources available at [tahiri.org/childmarriage](http://tahiri.org/childmarriage).
- 4 As quoted in Devin Tomb, "I Was Forced into Marriage at Age 14," *Good Housekeeping*, (June 22, 2017) (<https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/a44478/trevicia-williams-child-marriage-in-the-united-states/>). Trevicia's story is based on personal exchanges with Tahiri and on additional reporting by Heather Leighton, "Former Child Bride in Texas Aims to Change Marriage Laws, Says 'Child Marriages Hurt Children,'" *The Houston Chronicle* (April 23, 2017) (<http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/texas/article/Child-marriages-in-Texas-11084472.php>); Rebecca Beitsch, "Child Brides Join Push to Raise Marriage Age," *Pew Charitable Trusts: Stateline* (May 12, 2017) (<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2017/05/12/child-brides-join-push-to-raise-marriage-age>); and Laura Hallas, "She Was Forced into Child Marriage in Texas. Now She Wants to End the Pain for Others," *Dallas News*, (July 11, 2017) (<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2018/07/11/forced-child-marriage-still-problem-texas>).
- 5 "Resilient Butterfly," *Fort 806 Podcast*, (December 9, 2018) (<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/resilient-butterfly/id1435008603?i=1000425448921>).
- 6 Genevieve's story is based on email and phone exchanges with Tahiri staff; on her blogs available at her foundation's website at <https://resiliencyfoundation.com/blog/>; and on a podcast where she was interviewed about her life story, "Resilient Butterfly," see *supra*, n. 5.
- 7 Genevieve Meyer, "Start Somewhere," *Resiliency Foundation* (June 11, 2016).
- 8 Evie's story is based on email and phone exchanges with Tahiri staff and on reporting in Avery G. Wilks, "SC has let child marriages wreak 'devastating' harm. Now, there's a push for change," *The State* (January 17, 2019) (<https://www.thestate.com/news/politics-government/article224673175.html>) and Lauren Sausser, "In SC, pregnant girls as young as 12 can marry. There've been 7,000 child brides in 20 years," *The Post and Courier* (June 21, 2018) ([https://www.postandcourier.com/health/in-sc-pregnant-girls-as-young-as-can-marry-there/article\\_6a86577c-5cf9-11e8-a6f9-1fe34ede1b02.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/health/in-sc-pregnant-girls-as-young-as-can-marry-there/article_6a86577c-5cf9-11e8-a6f9-1fe34ede1b02.html)).
- 9 Katherine's story is based on phone and email exchanges with Tahiri staff and on reporting by her own daughter, Francisca Ortega, "A Child Bride in Texas," *Houston Chronicle*, (January 27, 2016) (<http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/A-child-bride-in-Texas-6787300.php#photo-9309859>).
- 10 Oral testimony before the Nevada Assembly Judiciary Committee in March 2019; Elizabeth's story is based on email and phone exchanges with Tahiri staff and on both her oral and written testimony to the Nevada legislature.
- 11 Email to Tahiri. The story of "Ashley" is told under a pseudonym, per her request, since she fears the exposure and re-traumatization that would result from coming forward publicly. It is based on public reporting, but per the survivor's request and to help re-establish her anonymity, we have omitted some identifying details included in public reporting, and have not cited the articles that include those details.
- 12 As quoted in Nicholas Kristof, "An American 13-Year-Old, Pregnant and Married to Her Rapist," *The New York Times* (June 1, 2018) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/01/opinion/sunday/child-marriage-delaware.html>).
- 13 Dawn's story is based on reporting by *The New York Times*, *supra*, n. 12, the *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, *infra*, n. 19, and on email and phone exchanges with Tahiri.
- 14 Additional details about Dawn's story have been drawn from a documentary on child marriage survivors produced by A&E, "I Was a Child Bride: The Untold Story" (April 25, 2019). Other survivors featured in that special and in this compilation are Donna Pollard, Lyndsy Duet, and Sherry Johnson.

- 15 As quoted in Moni Basu, “Sherry Johnson Was Raped, Pregnant and Married by 11. Now She’s Fighting to End Child Marriage in America,” *CNN* (January 31, 2018) (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/29/health/ending-child-marriage-in-america/index.html>).
- 16 Sherry’s story is based on exchanges with Tahirih staff as well as on reporting by *CNN*, *supra*, n. 15, and Nicholas Kristof, “11 Years Old, a Mom, and Pushed to Marry Her Rapist in Florida,” *The New York Times* (May 26, 2017) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/opinion/sunday/it-was-forced-on-me-child-marriage-in-the-us.html>); Caitlin Nolan, “Florida Woman Forced to Marry Her Rapist at Age 11 Fights to Change the Law,” *Inside Edition* (January 22, 2018) (<https://www.insideedition.com/florida-woman-forced-marry-her-rapist-age-11-fights-change-law-39835>); and Brendan Farrington, “Forced to marry her rapist at 11, woman finally changes Florida law,” *USA Today* (March 10, 2018) (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/03/10/forced-marry-her-rapist-11-woman-finally-changes-florida-marriagelaw/413284002/>). Additional details are from Sherry’s self-published novel: *Forgiving the Unforgivable*.
- 17 Email to Tahirih. The story of “Monica” is told under a pseudonym, per her request, since she continues to fear a backlash from members of her family and former community, and the re-traumatization that would result from coming forward publicly.
- 18 Monica’s story is based on email, phone, and in-person exchanges with Tahirih, and on reporting on the House of Prayer case.
- 19 As quoted in Ellen Wulforst, “Child Brides Call on U.S. States to End ‘Legal Rape’,” *Thomson Reuters Foundation* (October 24, 2018) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-childmarriage-reform/child-brides-call-on-us-states-to-end-legal-rape-idUSKCN1MZ024>).
- 20 Sonora’s story is based on reporting by the *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, *supra*, n. 19, by *The New York Times*, *supra*, n. 12, and on email and phone exchanges with Tahirih.
- 21 Dr. Trevicia Williams, as quoted in *The Houston Chronicle*, *supra*, n. 4.
- 22 Compared with a study cohort of those who married between age 19 and 25. See Matthew E. Dupre and Sarah O. Meadows, “Disaggregating the Effects of Marital Trajectories on Health,” *Journal of Family Issues* (Vol. 28, No. 5, May 2007, 623-652), at pp. 630-636, and 646-647, available at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0192513X06296296>; see also Bridget M. Kuehn, “Early Marriage Has Lasting Consequences on Women’s Mental Health,” *news@JAMA* (August 29, 2011), posts by *The Journal of the American Medical Association* (“research has linked such early marriages to a higher risk of HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, cervical cancer, unintended pregnancy, maternal death during childbirth, and abortion; early marriage is also associated with malnutrition among offspring”), available at <http://newsatjama.jama.com/2011/08/29/early-marriage-has-lasting-consequences-on-women%e2%80%99s-mental-health/>.
- 23 See Naomi Seiler, “Is Teen Marriage a Solution?” (*Center for Law and Social Policy*, April 2002), at p. 8, available at <http://www.clasp.org/resources-and-publications/archive/0087.pdf>; see also *infra*, n. 24.
- 24 See Wendy D. Manning and Jessica A. Cohen, “Teenage Cohabitation, Marriage, and Childbearing,” *Population Research and Policy Review* (April 2015), 34(2): 161-177, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4426270>.
- 25 *Id.*
- 26 See Gordon B. Dahl, “Early Teen Marriage and Future Poverty,” *Demography* (August 2010: 47(3): 689-718), at 691, n. 2, available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3000061/>.
- 27 *Id.*
- 28 See [loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Dating_Abuse_Statistics.pdf) factsheet available at [http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Dating\\_Abuse\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.loveisrespect.org/pdf/Dating_Abuse_Statistics.pdf).
- 29 See Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertet & Bernard Le Foll, “Child Marriage in the United States and Its Association with Mental Health in Women,” 128 *Pediatrics* 524 (September 2011), available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2011/08/24/peds.2011-0961.full.pdf>.
- 30 *Id.*
- 31 As observed by the Tahirih Justice Center’s Forced Marriage Initiative and other legal and social service-providers in the national Forced Marriage Working Group that Tahirih chairs.
- 32 See *supra*, n. 29; see also “Poverty,” *Girls Not Brides* factsheet, available at <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/themes/poverty/> and Abby Phillip, *The Washington Post* (WorldViews: July 23, 2014), “Here’s proof that child marriage and poverty go hand in hand,” available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/07/23/heres-proof-that-childmarriage-and-poverty-go-hand-in-hand/?utm\\_term=.bfb5429c75c3](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/07/23/heres-proof-that-childmarriage-and-poverty-go-hand-in-hand/?utm_term=.bfb5429c75c3).
- 33 See *supra*, n. 26, at 714. The author defined “early teen marriage” as marrying before age 16. *Id.*, at 693.
- 34 See research cited by College of William & Mary Law School Professor Vivian E. Hamilton, in “The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage” (*Boston University Law Review*: December 2012) 92 B. U. L. Rev. 1817, 1820 and at n. 15, available at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.
- 35 See *supra*, n. 26, at 691.
- 36 See *supra*, n. 34, at 1820, n. 10 and n. 11.
- 37 See Alissa Koski and Jody Heymann, “Child Marriage in the United States: How Common Is the Practice, And Which Children Are at Greatest Risk?” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* (June 2018: 50 (2), 59-65), at 61.



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