

Hating Girls

An Intersectional Survey of Misogyny

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BRILL

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Child Marriage

A War on Girls

Donna Pollard

Child marriage has devastating impacts on children resulting in intergenerational traumas and cycles of poverty and it must be stopped with common sense legislative reforms. Between 2000 and 2015, there have been over 200,000 cases of child marriage in the United States. More than 85% of these marriages are between a child bride and a much older adult male.¹ Family instability, limited educational and career opportunities, and significant diminished mental and physical health due to child marriage are evidenced by 80% of these marriages ending in divorce,² a 50% greater likelihood of the girl dropping out of high school,³ psychiatric disorders three times as high as women who married as adults,⁴ and a 23% greater risk of developing a serious health condition, such as diabetes, cancer, heart attack or stroke.⁵ Horrifically, child marriage also places the minor in an even more vulnerable position than they may have been in prior to the marriage, as in many states, child protective services have no authority to intervene in cases of minors being abused by their spouse.⁶ My direct experience as a child bride, having married a man fifteen years older than me when I was just sixteen, has driven me to fight in every corner of our nation to ensure no other child becomes the victim of legal loopholes that allow predators to hide their offenses behind a marriage license.

I was thirty-two years old when I first realized my perpetrator's crimes against me were not my shame to carry. Despite having run away over a decade

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- 1 Tsui, Anjali, Dan Nolan, and Chris Amico. 2017. *Child Marriage in America: By The Numbers*. PBS Frontline.
 - 2 Hamilton, Vivian E. 2012. *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*. Boston University Law Review.
 - 3 Seller, Naomi. 2002. *Is Teen Marriage a Solution?*. Center for Law and Social Policy.
 - 4 Le Strat, Yann, Caroline Dubertet, and Bernard Le Foll. 2011. *Child Marriage in the United States and Its Association with Mental Health in Women*. 128 *Pediatrics*.
 - 5 Dupre, Matthew E., and Sarah O. Meadows. 2007. "Disaggregating the Effects of Marital Trajectories on Health." *Journal of Family Issues* 630–636 and 646–647.
 - 6 Tahirih Justice Center. 2019. "Tahirih Justice Center Child Marriage Background." *Tahirih Justice Center*. 07 01. Accessed 10 15, 2020. www.tahirih.org.

before from the crippling dysfunction of my early life, I never quite shook the image of my younger self as unlovable and I blamed myself for all my pain. After all, my mother had beaten me with a belt until my flesh welted with beads of blood as far back as I could remember. Her hot breath pungent with vinegar and onions hung heavy in my face as she screamed for me to shut up when I was being too needy, too much like a child—so I must have been *bad*, *unlovable* and *to blame*.⁷ And as an undesirable child, I internalized so much hate for myself that whatever actions the adults in my life took that may have pained me, I always saw myself as the root of the problem. This self-loathing paved the way for me to fall prey to a predator's manipulation for many years to come.

Yet, twelve years before my big epiphany I somehow found it within myself to leave a horribly abusive, exploitive, toxic marriage to a man I had married at sixteen. It was at twenty years of age—when I had been married for four years—some glimmer of wisdom deep inside me began to softly glow beneath the cracks of my woundedness. I began questioning my husband's actions. I began standing up for myself and feeding the desire for, and belief in, my independence. This wisdom was beckoning me to realize I had value in life beyond the limitations of youth, sex, drugs, and whatever else he had cast as my identity to keep me as his slave. And so I ran, and I ran hard, pounding blood and sweat into the pavement beneath my feet a new identity that was the polar opposite of anything I had ever known. This new world would be a place where I was a stellar student and star employee out of desperation to prove to others that I was worthy.⁸

Of course, my perpetrator never counted on me being able to unearth any molecule of strength and resiliency within myself to be anything other than the malleable child he first encountered when I was fourteen. He saw me as an anxiety plagued, insecure child starved for affection and attention. The man who was fifteen years my senior, only saw my abusive past, my fear of abandonment, and all the trauma seeping forth from my young teenage pores as the perfect concoction for his manipulation and exploitation. He could sense these vulnerabilities just as a wild cat stalks, senses, and savors the weakness of its prey. My vulnerability was a sage comfort to him.⁹

7 Harris, Cathy. 2016. *Shame Expressed as Self-Blame: The Trauma Response We All Need to Understand*. Accessed 10 13, 2020. <https://www.acesconnection.com/blog/shame-expressed-as-self-blame-the-trauma-response-we-all-need-to-understand>.

8 Hollowood, Tia. 2018. *Complex PTSD and Perfectionism*, *HealthyPlace*. March 07. Accessed 10 15, 2020. <https://www.healthyplace.com/blogs/traumaptsdblog/2018/03/complex-ptsd-and-perfectionism>.

9 Prevent Child Abuse Nevada. 2011. *Abusers and Grooming Tactics*. Accessed 10 13, 2020. https://nic.unlv.edu/pcan/CSA_Abusers.html.

Many studies have identified the specific characteristics of perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Young ages, lower education levels, childhood victimization, mental illness, and pregnancy were among commonalities of those who were victimized as adults.¹⁰ Child brides often share these vulnerabilities.

My perpetrator was smugly confident by the time he had wrung out all sense of a moral compass and dignity I had remaining, I simply would no longer be able to handle suffering through this existence any longer. “No one would blame you if you killed yourself” he told me on several occasions, sometimes coldly and other times eerily as though he were an old friend compassionately offering me a way out of my hell. But this is one act I did not fall victim to. I guess he and I both underestimated me.

To understand how I ended up marrying a person who was essentially my counselor at an inpatient behavioral health facility I was admitted to when I was fourteen, one must have full transparency into my history. Both the traumatic foundation I was born into and the archaic laws and policies that perpetuated this perverse cycle of abuse as part of a cultural (but perhaps patriarchal is a word that rings truer) norm resulted in my marriage to a pedophile. Though progress has been made on legislative reforms in multiple states,¹¹ the unwillingness of many legislators across our nation to address these atrocities furthers the victimization of children who are vulnerable to this gross human rights violation.

My initiation into this world came when my mother was in her mid-forties and to say having a child at that age was completely unexpected would be a severe understatement. Despite having married as a teenager herself, just two weeks shy of her fourteenth birthday, she gave birth to one other child. My sister also suffered from the dysfunction and she was a recipient of the pain our mother brought from her own unhealed wounds. But as the more compliant child, my sister was spared some of the aggression I had to endure as the more rebellious and precocious child. This became the justification my mother would use to attempt to beat me into submission. Perhaps more potently though, it was the internalization I came to temporarily accept of myself as an identity grossly unlovable and strikingly to blame for all the wrongs in my life.

The reprieve from mother’s volatility came when our father was home on weekends. As a long-distance truck driver, he was on the road more times

10 Nosek, M.A., Hughes, R.B., Taylor, H.B., Howland, C.A. 2004. “Violence against women with disabilities: The role of physicians in filling the treatment gap.”

11 Tahirih Justice Center. 2020. “Understanding State Statutes on Minimum Marriage Age and Exceptions.”

than not, yet I always felt a stronger sense of kindness and caring from him than I ever did from my mother. But his time at home was infrequent at best and my yearning for paternal love—for love in general—was never satisfied. Perpetually longing for this dream of a loving family, I fell prey to a pedophile who promised me the world and delivered the unraveling of my innocence. And the law in all three states involved in allowing my victimization remained firmly on his side.

I can still recall the energizing rush of both anticipation and dread when the CD arrived from the Department of Vital Statistics containing the data by year. Knowing in order to make any progress towards change, I had to have evidence that this was a major problem in Kentucky, I had spent months contacting the Department and following up multiple times as my requests went unanswered. When the CD finally arrived, I rushed to the library so I could download the statistics on a flash drive and review in detail the hidden crimes in the backyards of Kentucky families across the state. Nothing could have prepared me for the harsh reality of how bad the problem really was. Between the years 2000 and 2015, in Kentucky alone there were nearly 10,000 cases of child marriage.¹² The youngest child was a pregnant thirteen-year-old girl married to a thirty-three-year-old man.¹³ Though her pregnancy was evidence of rape, instead of being charged with this heinous crime, her rapist was given a marriage license to hide his moral depravity. This legal marriage license also allowed him to continue raping her and it also gave him access to her child. This outrageous crime was permissible thanks to the laws in Kentucky that allowed children to wed through legal loopholes until Senate Bill 48 was passed in 2018. Prior to this legislative change, children sixteen and seventeen could marry through parental consent alone by going to the County Court Clerk—no questions asked.¹⁴ Even if the clerk determined there was a predatory situation and feared for the child's safety, they had no authority to intervene when the parents of the minor consented to the marriage. Such was the case when a seventeen-year-old girl was married to a seventy-two-year-old man.

Furthermore, there was *no minimum age floor* as long as a pregnancy was involved.¹⁵ In these cases, a judge would preside over the petition to give his judicial stamp of approval. Even when there was substantial age disparity, and knowing the pregnancy was evidence of rape, judges still authorize the marriages. Unfortunately, there was little concern for a female child's well-being

12 Kentucky Department of Vital Statistics. 2018.

13 Survivors' Corner. 2018. "Exploitation of the Married Child."

14 Survivors' Corner. 2018. "Exploitation of the Married Child."

15 Survivors' Corner. 2018. "Exploitation of the Married Child."

and with no regard for long term consequences of an early marriage and childbirth. Indeed, multiple Kentucky judges authorized the marriage of perpetrators to the little girls they raped.¹⁶ Yes, you read that correctly. Judges authorized marriages involving children impregnated by pedophiles.

Instead of being awarded a marriage certificate, these pregnancies could have, and should have, been evidence in statutory rape cases. But because of the archaic systems that are designed to treat females as sex objects with little or no intrinsic value these legal loopholes continue to exist in the majority of states which undermine protections from these crimes against humanity. To allow child marriage is essentially giving a child rapist a license to destroy a young girl's potential for a life of sovereignty and self-sufficiency. As though child marriage itself is not harmful enough, other systems in this tangled web of oppression keep girls entrapped in these vicious cycles with nearly insurmountable barriers to protective services.

I experienced these barriers in a myriad of ways, both before and after the marriage occurred. In many instances, the police could have intervened on my behalf and in others concerned citizens could have made reports. But no one did. Our society is so desensitized to predators grooming young girls with little regard for their potential or value. Both men and women turn a blind eye toward abuse, or they *blame the victim*, labeling the victim as *loose* or *asking for it* with the way the victim dresses or behaves. For example, when my perpetrator was pulled over for a defective headlight, the police did not question why a fifteen-year-old girl was in the car with him. And the hotel staff where I was taken while my mother left me alone with him for hours never raised any alarms either.

I had just turned sixteen a couple months before my mother consented to give me to my perpetrator; he was nearly 31. I was still a resident of London, Kentucky at that time and he drove down from Indiana to take me to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee where he thought we could get married without question since it's a well-known spot for quick, easy weddings. He was right. The clerk did not glance up from her computer when taking our information when she asked which one of us was the minor. It felt cold and transactional, like I was just being auctioned off to the next adult to have control over my life. I remember clearly sitting in that chair, my heart sinking into my ribcage, wondering to myself, "Is this what marriage is?" I dared not speak up—who do you disclose

16 Kentucky Center for Investigative Reporting. 2018. Accessed 10 13, 2020. <https://kycir.org/2018/03/06/kentucky-child-marriage-bill-clears-senate-committee/#:~:text=Kentucky%E2%80%99s%20current%20statute%20allows%20children%20aged%2016%20and,17%20years.%20Some%20were%20as%20young%20as%2013.>

your fear to when all the authorities in your life are making the horrible decisions that cause you the fear in the first place?

Later that evening, we travelled back to London, Kentucky. Though the agreement he had made with my mother was that if she would consent to the marriage, I would finish out my tenth-grade year living with her, he had other plans and was clearly dedicated to protecting himself from any legal repercussions. During that last night living with my mother, as a newlywed sixteen-year-old girl, my perpetrator told me we had to consummate the marriage (despite having already been sexually active) so she could not change her mind and file to have the marriage annulled.

This was a new concern of his, presumably because he realized he illegally took a minor across state lines for marriage while having no intention to honor the agreement made with my mother.¹⁷ With my mother asleep across the hallway, the marriage was consummated; a condom left as evidence in the bathroom. As I trembled and cried and wondered what on earth was about to become of my life, he shoved my clothing and a few other items in a black garbage bag he tossed over the deck to load into the green Ford Explorer in preparation for taking me *home* to Indiana the next morning.

I ended up having to drop out of school before I completed the 10th grade. Upon moving into his new apartment in Clarksville, Indiana, I tried to enroll in Clarksville High School, just up the street from the apartment complex we lived in, but the assistant principal would not allow it. She said I would become pregnant quickly, and they could not have that at their school.

I had to begin working full time as a grocery store cashier to provide for my thirty-one-year-old husband who would spend his days getting high and drunk. He was violent and manipulative. I was traumatized and broken.

But I did try to fight back even though I was a married and “emancipated” minor. Unless specific, meaningful, enumerated rights are prescribed, emancipation is meaningless. Despite working full time, when I tried to escape at both sixteen and seventeen, I was refused housing by two Indiana apartment complexes because I could not enter into a contract as a minor. I was even refused refuge in a domestic violence shelter because I was not yet of legal age. I recall arguing with the woman at the front desk, telling her “you don’t understand—I’m *married*. How can I be married but not qualify for shelter?” She told me to call my mom and ask to come home. This was especially deflating as I had done

17 United States Department of Justice. Mann Act, 18 U.S.C. § 2421 et seq. Accessed 10 13, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/jm/criminal-resource-manual-2027-mann-act>.

that. My mother's response was unsettling. "You made your bed and now you have to lie in it."

The police in southern Indiana did not feel it necessary to investigate further when the neighbors called because of the violent fighting in our home. The policemen would speak to my perpetrator (who they could only see as my husband) who assured them I had emotional issues that he was helping me work through. I was furious with the sense of hopelessness I felt. I had no credibility in this world of adults.

When I was sixteen, I became pregnant the first time. My doctor did not question the fact that my spouse was fifteen years older than me. When I miscarried, they performed a suction DNC at Clark Memorial Hospital, but the procedure did not successfully remove all of the placenta. I could have died two weeks later when I spiked a high fever from the toxins the remaining placenta was releasing in my body. It took two days and discharging some of remaining tissue before I could convince my perpetrator to take me back to the hospital.

I became pregnant again when I was 17. My daughter was born just about a month after I turned 18. I spent my 18th birthday, heavily pregnant, taken to a strip club by my perpetrator for his own gratification. Shortly after I gave birth, he forced me to go to work at the strip club. Again, I had no credibility and no value—and he was going to make certain I never would.

My final breaking point came when one day he was pressuring me to do something I felt horribly uncomfortable with and I stood my ground and said no. He then proceeded to choke me as my daughter, a baby at the time, looked up from her spot on the floor closely situated to where we were. She laughed. In her innocent mind, we were playing. I knew in that moment I had to get out of this situation for my sake *and hers*.

But I was in no position to take care of a baby while I was still just a kid myself, at this point living in public housing in New Albany, Indiana and collecting food stamps to feed myself, my child, and my perpetrator. The judge awarded custody of my daughter to my perpetrator, a college graduate in his thirties. And the court awarded him child support as well to be paid by me. At this point, I was a twenty-year old high school drop-out making barely above minimum wage.

Labels had become my identity: behavioral health patient, child bride, high school drop-out, stripper, deadbeat, victim. Though these were identities unsuited to the essence of who I really was or my potential, once these seemingly insurmountable obstacles were washed away, these identity labels clung to me like duct tape. It took every molecule of strength I could muster to stand against what so many institutions and laws had reinforced about my existence; at best, I was an incompetent and incapable child. At worst: my body,

educational opportunities, protective rights, credibility and income belonged to my husband—like a piece of property.

Let me state the obvious. The institutions and legal system of Indiana failed both me and my child multiple times. The legal systems in Kentucky (where the marriage was consummated) and Tennessee, (where the marriage was legitimized) did as well. There are so many others like me across the nation whose humanity and value are ripped away and this process is sanctioned by the institutions and legal systems that seek to annihilate our humanity—yet, we will not be silenced.

What do I do when my credibility, my education, my body, my child, my income has been ripped away from me and given to my rapist who hid his offenses behind a marriage license? I fight to end child marriage across our nation and refuse to let this ever happen to another child. The biggest threat of disruption to an oppressive system is the marginalized who choose to no longer live in fear of discomfort, judgment, or being ostracized for defying the status quo. I choose disruption over oppression every day.

Choosing disruption is what led me to initiate the legislative initiative in Kentucky back in 2018 to end child marriage through parental consent. I partnered with a phenomenally dedicated team from a national organization—the Tahirih Justice Center—that was equal parts grace and grit. They were polished, reasonable, and tenacious. Most importantly, they were kind, compassionate and genuinely human in their advocacy for social justice.

Through numerous conversations with legislators, children's advocacy groups (such as Kentucky Youth Advocates,¹⁸ Kentucky Child Advocacy Centers,¹⁹ and Exploited Children's Help Organization)²⁰ and other stakeholders (such as Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs,²¹ Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence,²² and the National Association of Social Workers—Kentucky)²³ we learned very quickly that a zero tolerance policy for child marriages was not feasible. Many Kentuckians—including elected officials—were not ready to look at the narrative of child marriage through a lens that depicted the practice as a form of criminal activity, a form of child abuse and neglect. So many of our neighbors across the Commonwealth wanted to remain with a narrative that perpetuated the story line of a young

18 Kentucky Youth Advocates. <https://kyyouth.org/>.

19 Children's Advocacy Center of the Bluegrass. <http://kykids.org/>.

20 Exploited Children's Help Organization. <https://echo-ky.org/Default.asp>.

21 Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs. <https://www.kasap.org/>.

22 Kentucky Coalition Against Domestic Violence. <https://kcadv.org/>.

23 National Association of Social Workers—KY Chapter. <https://naswky.socialworkers.org/>.

girl in need of a man to *take care* of her. They were also extremely resistant to an infringement on parental rights to consent to marrying their child off to a grown man who ultimately would have many more legal rights and opportunities than his underage bride.

Several conversations left me exasperated, with people (mostly white men) making comments like *well, it's better than her having a baby out of wedlock and if that's what the parents want, I'm sure they have their reasons—it's not for the government to decide*. In discovering the uphill battle that we were going to face in pushing for reform, we realized in order to make anything happen, we were going to have to draft legislation that would accomplish the next best thing.

We wrote the bill to set a minimum age for marriage at 17, with judicial approval and clear criteria that must be assessed before the marriage license could be granted. Some of these criteria included ensuring the age disparity between the minor and the person intended to become their spouse was not greater than four years, requiring proof of age for both parties, determining if there had been a history of domestic or sexual violence, and requiring the minor had completed either their high school diploma or GED and was capable of self-sufficiency among other high bar requirements. We also included a requirement for the minor to be interviewed independently in the judge's chambers so they may ask questions to identify if the child was being coerced. And most importantly, we made granting the marriage license simultaneous with emancipating the minor; this way, the seventeen-year-old could elect to walk out of the courthouse without legal dependence on anyone within or outside of a marriage taking place.

I met with Senator Julie Raque Adams, a full packet of information in hand, over coffee one morning to ask her to consider sponsoring the legislation. I gave her the statistics and the bill draft, information on reforms other states had adopted, and perhaps most importantly my direct testimony. She teared up while listening and said, "I can't wait to get started on this."²⁴

It was not an easy feat by any means, but the bill did pass both legislatures with minimal opposition, likely attributed to the robust media coverage we were receiving on our efforts and public outcries to end child marriage. Other states have since followed suit and adopted similar variations to our bill, outlawing child marriage through parental consent and requiring criteria be assessed and met before a judge may grant the marriage license. Despite the violence, the exploitation, the economic disadvantages, the perceived lack of credibility, I refused to hang my head in fear or shame any longer. You see,

24 Meeting with Senator Julie Raque Adams. September 2017.

I believe the reason I have survived all these things is to use my experiences to protect other girls from being trapped in a life like I was and to show my oldest daughter, even if from afar, that I have taken a horrible situation and done the best I could to make it right for others.

Since the atrocities of my early life, I have gone on to earn my bachelor's degree in Business Administration, graduating Summa Cum Laude. I founded a nonprofit, *Survivors' Corner*, to provide a supportive network for trauma survivors looking to make social justice changes. I travel frequently as an advocate giving testimony before legislative committees and as a keynote speaker nationally and internationally. And I share this not to be self-celebrating, but to demonstrate the resiliency that comes from giving pain a purpose.

I have an inner sense that the reason I survived all the atrocities from my past is to share the process of healing my own trauma, finding self-love, and embracing the power I possess as a woman with others so they may do the same. I am confident I exist on this earth to help foster a path forward of inclusion for those of us who have spent far too long silenced on the sidelines. When we are fully alive with purpose and demonstrate living powerfully in our authenticity, we achieve the best revenge to those who would rather us shut down. After all, another's crime against us is not our shame to carry.

But before we can experience this liberation as a nation, we must change the antiquated laws that allow child marriage to continue. It is only then we will have true change to disrupt cycles of abuse and poverty and elevate the status of women to a place of equity and equality within humanity. The devastating impact of child marriage must be stopped first by implementing common sense laws that prevent predators from hiding their offenses behind a marriage license. Additionally, our society must begin to see girls as human beings with intrinsic value.

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