

My name is Dawn Tyree and I am a survivor of child marriage.

I was 13-years-old when I was forced to marry my 32-year-old nanny. He had been sexually abusing me for two years and when I became pregnant, I was told that marriage was in the best interest of us.

My step-mother first tried to terminate the pregnancy - nearly killing me and my unborn son. When that failed, the trusted adults in my life coerced me into marriage.

I had no rights over my body. Not one adult talked to me about birth control, and 13 months after my son was born I gave birth to my second child. Having two children at the age of 15.

It was then that I began to plot my way out of the marriage. At 16-years-old and with two toddlers in tow, I was turned away from shelters.

Adult and Family Services told me to go back to my parents because they were the ones responsible for me. But my parents had disowned me for leaving the marriage. My husband had reported me as a runaway and law enforcement threatened to return me to my rapist.

I couldn't rent a hotel room.

How was I to think about working or going to school? I couldn't get anyone to help me with child care.

We lived below the poverty line for over a decade. Sometimes going without the essentials such as toilet paper and shampoo. We often lived without electricity.

My greatest fear was that my children would be taken away because of the way we lived.

The ripple effect of my child marriage has been devastating. My adult children struggle to survive. Mental illness, addiction, and poverty all repeating through two more generations. When will it stop?

We are doing a grave disservice by allowing minors to marry. Marriage is a decision that two consenting adults make together. The guidelines for marriage should reflect the same guidelines that we have in place for things such as voting, entering contracts, serving our country, or being "of age" to consent. You have to be 21 years old to buy tobacco, yet a child can marry, we must correct this atrocity.

If we are to evolve as a nation our laws must reflect our principles.

Thank you,
Dawn Tyree