

Sungyoon Lim Testimony
SB0949 Family Law – Authorization for a Minor to Marry
Support with Amendments
March 4th, 2020

Thank you. My name is Sungyoon Lim and I am a student at Marriotts Ridge High School in Howard County. I am the leader of our school's Girl Up club. Girl Up is a movement to advance girls' skills, rights, and opportunities so that every girl can reach their fullest potential. I am testifying in support of SB0949 and the amendments proposed by the Tahirih Justice Center to further strengthen the bill.

I want to put front and center the stories of survivors who cannot be here. One is emotionally exhausted from testifying year after year. Another is not yet ready for public speaking but has shared her story in writing to support the movement to end child marriage. Others live too far away.

It is my privilege to share the story of Skyler. A survivor some of you may remember as she has testified before this very committee about her experience as a victim of child marriage on more than one occasion. Her story is just as relevant now as it was back in 2016 when she first tried to get a bill passed in Maryland and it is *her story* that has inspired me to speak out today.¹

I share her story with you as she has testified before:

Skyler was a victim of child marriage in Maryland. Most of you may believe child marriage only happens in 3rd world countries, but 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 Skyler and her perfect soccer mom did not look like an abuser and no one saw her for what she was and no one helped. Because the basement of the courthouse in Elkton, Maryland was not the first time Skyler was victimized.

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

This went on until the age of 16 when her mother decided she wanted Skyler out of the house and got an offer from a man twice Skyler's age to marry her.

And so, Skyler thought to herself "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".

She first met the man who was to be her husband on January 29th, 2009.

One week later, she was driven from Delaware down to a courthouse in Elkton, Maryland. In the basement her mother and step-father stood behind her and her soon to be husband, a man TWICE HER AGE, as they met with two clerks in charge of issuing marriage licenses.

In that small basement her whole life was stolen. One of the ladies there actually said to her as she stood there crying “cheer up, this will be the happiest day of your life, wipe them tears.”

Her whole life Skyler has wondered why no one at the court asked any questions. Why did no one say no?

As a 16 year old child married to a man twice her age, it was like he owned her. He abused and raped her and eventually she gave birth to two children whom he would ultimately kidnap. To this day Skyler is fighting for custody and every day she is wracked with fear about how close her daughter is to puberty.

Often she thinks of what her life would have been like as a normal 16 year old. Kids her age were worried about their collage applications and the party next Friday. Skyler was married and she wasn't allowed to leave the house, she wasn't allowed TV or radio. It was like living in a jail cell.

Her life as a child bride could have been prevented. If this had been the law 12 years ago, Skyler would be 12 years further ahead in her life – instead she is still trying to repair the damage and catch up. She has asked for your help in stopping this cycle of abuse, interrupted education, and poverty for four years.

Please make year 5 the year you act to protect the children of Maryland from the harmful impacts of child marriage and put an end to Maryland being the child marriage destination of our region.

Thank you.

¹ For more details of Skyler's story and those of many other former child brides stepping forward advocating for change, please see: <https://www.tahirih.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2019-Child-Marriage-Survivor-Story-Compilation-FOR-WEB.pdf>