

**Written Testimony
for the Record to the House Judiciary Committee**

Date: 2/20/2020

For the Hearing on Legislation HB 1231- Family Law- Authorization for a Minor to Marry

SUPPORT

As a nation that prides itself on the values of freedom and liberty, it is both shocking and startling to hear that the oppressive practice of child marriage prevails in the state of Maryland. We are a part of the Global Equality Now club at Reservoir High School, a club that advocates for gender equality through fundraising for education and empowerment worldwide and in our own community. We strongly feel that the marriage age in Maryland should have a minimum of 17, with no exceptions.

As teenagers, we recognize that the current law creates a situation in which we could be married without our full consent, permanently changing our goals and prospects. We are all familiar with child marriage horror stories filled with verbal, physical, and emotional abuse. To continue to allow child marriage, even with the hundreds of scarred voices emerging from this injustice, is both cruel and immoral.

While researching child marriage in Maryland, we found that more than 3,100 minors were married between the years 2000 and 2014 with 85% of these minors were girls. In these child-adult marriages, the children are often married off due to cultural, religious, and financial reasons. However, research by Tahirih Justice Center indicates that these unstable marriages can cause higher rates of mental disorders, and double the chances of homelessness. These unsettling statistics add tremendous amounts of personal and financial costs for children in these arrangements.

During times of desperation, it is unrealistic to believe that teens will make reasonable adult decisions involving lifetime commitments when being strongly influenced (or coerced) by family, pregnancy, or partners. The least we can do to protect these children is to provide avenues to leave their current situations and ensure that the marriage is not coercive. We, as teenagers in the state of Maryland, experience law-binding limitations due to our age and inexperience in decision-making. We must be 18 to vote. We must be 21 to drink. And we must be 21 to adopt because we are all aware that teenagers are unlikely to have the proper ability and resources to care for a child. If we cannot be trusted to handle such situations until we are more mature, how is marriage any different?

In a nation that provides basic human rights, it is unsettling that minors can be coerced into marriage. Our legislators should take a stand with us and prioritize this bill in hopes that it will become law by the end of the session. Failure to pass this bill will diminish the hopes of many girls to have the chance to give back and participate in their community. By supporting this bill, we can finally end this destructive cycle.

Global Equality Now (GEN) Club Members:

Radhika Shah, Doreen Maleta, Maria Ahmed, Maria Newell, Anny Zhu, Camila Mendez, Maddy Bloodworth, and Marrie Alumyar

Janine Kucik, Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher and GEN Club Teacher Advisor
janine_kucik@hcpss.org