



**Statement from Zonta International, District 3, Maryland**

***IN SUPPORT OF SB 949***

**March 4, 2020**

Zonta International, District 3, its clubs and members throughout Maryland are speaking in support of passage of SB 949.

Zonta International is a global organization of professionals empowering women worldwide through service and advocacy for 100 years. We have been championing the advancement of women in Maryland since 1929. Maryland Zontians have focused their attention on eliminating child marriage in the state for the last several years.

The position of Zonta International is that marriage of any child under the age of 18 should be prohibited in all circumstances, as this is the age of majority and impacts other legal benefits and responsibilities. However, in the state of Maryland, we believe the current laws are so egregious that passage of SB 949, which would raise the minimum age of marriage to 17 and eliminate pregnancy and parental consent loopholes, is a critical and necessary improvement at this time. Zonta would welcome an

amendment to give such minors emancipation along with permission to marry.

Under current MD law, shockingly, children as young as 15 may marry. Statistics indicate that 3,500 minors under 18 were married in Maryland from 2000-2018. As states surrounding Maryland have strengthened their laws, Maryland has become a "destination wedding" site where parents take their daughters to force them into marriage, often to much older adults.

Since 2016, reforms in 21 states have limited or ended child marriage. Nearby states of DE, NJ, VA, NY, KY and OH now limit marriage to legal adults. **Zonta has been active in the last year supporting legislation to expand such protections in PA.**

Objections to raising the age of marriage include the so-called child in love. At most waiting for marriage is an inconvenience compared with the traumatic experience suffered by a child being forced into marriage and raped. Because such a child is not at the age of majority, she cannot take legal steps to protect herself, and often can't even get into a shelter.

Why not give a pregnancy exemption at a younger age? Such exemptions have been used to cover up rape and force girls to marry their rapist.

Evidence has shown that teen brides face greater vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence. They are more likely to drop out of

school. They have an increased likelihood of future poverty, requiring government assistance. Sex traffickers use lax marriage laws to support their victimization of young girls. And divorce rates of 70-80% occur in cases of marriage before age 18. How can this be beneficial to anyone, especially the girls so vicimized? How can this be sanctioned by the state of Maryland?

In summary, while Zonta International District 3 and the Zonta Clubs of Maryland would prefer legislation raising the minimum marriage age to 18 with no exceptions, at this time we strongly encourage you to pass SB 949.