



January 26, 2021

Dear Madams/Sirs:

My name is Karen Jarvis and I am a resident of Howard County. I am submitting the following testimony in support of Maryland House Bill 242 - The Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry.

I am a member of the Zonta Club of Howard County. Our group is one of 1,433 clubs worldwide representing Zonta International, Inc. a non-profit organization, 22,000+ members strong. Zonta International is a leading organization of professionals empowering women worldwide through service and advocacy. It envisions a world in which women's rights are recognized as human rights and every woman can achieve her full potential. In such a world, women have access to all resources and are represented in decision making positions on an equal basis with men. In such a world, no woman lives in fear of violence.

One of Zonta's fervid causes is to end violence against women, including child marriage. Child marriage, which is marriage of an individual under age 18, is particularly damaging to girls. In the United States, almost 90 percent of minors who married between 2000 and 2015 were girls.¹ Research has shown that young married women suffer negative psychological, social, educational, and financial consequences. Legislation plays a crucial role in protecting children and preventing them from being forced and coerced into marriages.

While Maryland House Bill 242 increases the marrying from 15 to 17, it falls short of the forward movement of other states banning marriage under age 18. Between 2018 and 2020, five states – Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and West Virginia – banned marriage under age 18 without “exceptional circumstances,” which include parental consent or pregnancy. Maryland's contiguous neighbor Delaware was the first state in our nation to end child marriage.

In the global context, early and forced marriage happens across countries, cultures and religions. According to Girls Not Brides, each year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18, that is 23 girls every minute, and nearly one every 3 seconds.²

The United States is no different from the rest of the world when it comes to endorsement of child marriage. America's patriarchal values contribute to the attitude that marriage of a minor is acceptable. This means that our male-dominated culture helps determine how a girl should behave, how she should dress, who she should see, who to marry, and what to do with her body, for example. Oftentimes families closely guard girls' sexuality and virginity and aim to protect family honor if a girl has relationships or becomes pregnant outside of marriage. Within this same

¹ FRONTLINE. “Child Marriage in America By the Numbers,” Anjali Tsui, July 6, 2017.

² Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 1,500 civil society organizations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfill their potential.

reality, we must consider that the resistance to legalizing marriage at 18 in Maryland is to fall prey to the beliefs and practices of our male-dominated society.

As Maryland contemplates age 17 as the legal age when an individual should participate in an adult relationship called marriage, we must consider whether that same individual be able to make adult, life-changing decisions of her/his own. Thus, the introduction of emancipation of a minor. An order of emancipation has the same effect as the petitioner reaching the age of 18 and generally confers on the petitioner all the rights and responsibilities of legal adulthood. Currently, in Maryland, there are no statutory provisions for the emancipation of a minor.

We should not consider the intention of a minor petitioner for emancipation to be focused on buying alcohol from the corner liquor store, as an adult 21-year old is permitted today. Rather, minor emancipation is a way for an individual to make her/his own life-changing decisions, including entering a legal contract without parental consent. For example, perhaps she wants to sign an apartment lease to escape an abusive family household. Or maybe he wants to manage his own money that he earned from working a part-time job after school and open a bank account without a parent's signature. An order of emancipation has the same effect as the petitioner reaching the age of 18 and generally confers on the petitioner all the rights and responsibilities of legal adulthood. Currently, in Maryland, there are no statutory provisions for the emancipation of a minor.

House Bill 242 states that an individual age 17 may not marry unless the individual presents a certified copy of an order granting emancipation and authorization for a minor to marry. I believe that if a minor child can be married, then that minor must be able to conduct her/his own affairs as a legal adult, as shown in the examples above. If a child bride is an acceptable status for a 17-year old girl in Maryland, then so should her freedom to make adult decisions as an emancipated minor.

In closing, I urge you to consider my presented testimony and the provisions put forth in House Bill 242 - The Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K.D. Jarvis". The signature is stylized with a large, looped "J" and a dot above the "i".

Karen D. Jarvis
Member, Zonta Club of Howard County