House Community & Family Advancement

Wednesday, April 11, 2018

PROPONENT TESTIMONY OF:

Sarah Wolf-Knight

Advocacy Coordinator

YWCA Dayton

IN SUPPORT OF:

HB 511 – Marriage Age

*To make changes to the laws governing the ages at which persons may marry*

House Community & Family Advancement

Chairman Ginter, Vice-Chair LaTourette, Ranking Minority Member Boyd and distinguished

members of the House Community and Family Advancement Committee, thank you for the

opportunity to testify today on Ohio House Bill 511.

My name is Sarah Wolf-Knight, and I am the advocacy coordinator at YWCA Dayton. As you may know, YWCA Dayton serves Montgomery and Preble counties as both counties’ only domestic violence shelter. Our skilled clinical team and crisis support specialists offer an array of services to women and children impacted by violence, including case management, housing support, and a 24-hour hotline. YWCA Dayton shelter services offer a wide variety of programming to help women and children improve their personal safety, encourage self-sufficiency and empower women to survive, cope, and re-enter the community safely.

Current Ohio law requires that boys be at least 18 years old to marry. However, due to an unnecessary gender distinction, girls are permitted to marry at 16 years of age, provided parental consent is given on the marriage license. 16 years, however, is not the age floor in the State of Ohio. This state is one of few states that provide exceptions to allow those under the age of 16 to marry in circumstances where the teen girl is pregnant and receives parental and judicial consent. Under these circumstances, girls of any age can marry.

Child marriage is a documented issue in this state that disproportionately affects girls. According to a recent report by the Dayton Daily News, 4443 girls aged 17 or younger were issued marriage licenses from 2000-2015 in the state of Ohio, including 59 under the age of 15[[1]](#endnote-1). Data collected in a study of child marriages in the US between 2000 and 2015 discovered that 77 percent of the children were minor girls being wed to adult men, often with substantial age differences[[2]](#endnote-2).

Child marriage has a marked impact on the future of young girls in the US, particularly when it comes to healthcare and education. Research shows that women who marry before the age of 18 are 50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to complete college[[3]](#endnote-3). Child brides are also often unable to negotiate access to safe sex and medical care, which has led to higher rates of STDs and early pregnancies among this population. Child marriage has also been correlated with a higher risk of chronic disease onset and higher instances of mental illness, particularly depression and nicotine dependence[[4]](#endnote-4).

While there are many reasons that YWCA Dayton has chosen to take a stand on this issue, we are particularly concerned with the proven relationship between child marriage and domestic violence. As a service provider for survivors of gender based violence, we recognize that there is a strong link between child marriage and domestic violence. A recent study found that women who marry before the age of 18 are three times more likely to have been beaten by their spouses than woman who married at 21 or older[[5]](#endnote-5). It is also important to note that in some cases, marriage licenses are issued to circumvent statutory rape laws.

Those girls who are abused or are otherwise unhappy in their marriage face insurmountable barriers if they wish to leave their spouse before they turn 18. A minor cannot contract an attorney, she cannot file a suit in her own name, and she cannot seek help at a domestic violence shelter. These child marriages are characterized by spousal age gaps, power imbalances, social isolation, and a lack of female autonomy. These risk factors are also demonstrated risk factors for domestic violence, and the same inequitable gender norms that give rise to child marriage also perpetuate violence.

House Bill 511 would take key steps to closing these gaps in Ohio law and keeping young girls safe, it fails to protect the 17-year-old girls who are most affected by this issue. The single most effective way to end child marriage in Ohio would be to set the legal marriage age to 18, with no exceptions.

YWCA is on a mission to eliminate racism and empower women and in alignment with this mission, we support House Bill 511, but urge the committee to consider adding increased protections for young girls by amending House Bill 511 to raise the minimum age for marriage in this Ohio to 18 years old with no exceptions.   
  
If you have any questions, or would like any additional information, please do not hesitate to contact YWCA Dayton at 937-461-5550.

1. Bischof, Laura A. (2017, September 7). “Should children be allowed to get married? In Ohio, thousands do.” Dayton Daily News. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Unchained at Last (2017). Child Marriage – Shocking Statistics. Retrieved Retrieved October 2017, from Unchained at Last: Un-arrange a Marriage...Re-Arrange a Life: http://www.

   unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-shocking-statistics/ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hamilton, Vivian E. (2012). The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage. Faculty Publications. Paper 1430, p. 1841. Retrieved from http://

   scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. WORLD Policy Analysis Center (2015). Assessing National Action on Protection from Child Marriage. Retrieved from https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/WORLD\_

   Fact\_Sheet\_Legal\_Protection\_Against\_Child\_Marriage\_2015.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. WORLD Policy Analysis Center (2015). Assessing National Action on Protection from Child Marriage. Retrieved from https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/WORLD\_

   Fact\_Sheet\_Legal\_Protection\_Against\_Child\_Marriage\_2015.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-5)