



## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 198: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE

SUBMITTED TO OHIO SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE MAY 22, 2018

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Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan, and Distinguished Committee Members:

The AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in support for Ohio Bill SB 198, with an amendment that would end child marriage in Ohio, without exceptions. The AHA Foundation thanks the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

The AHA Foundation encourages the Committee to vote to eliminate exceptions to the marriage age, and reserve marriage, a serious legal contract, for those who have reached the age of majority.

While the current minimum marriage age in Ohio is 18, the state allows for two major exceptions: children aged 16 and 17 can marry with parental consent, and children of any age are permitted to marry provided have a child. Pregnant girls of any age are allowed to marry if the juvenile court finds she intends to keep the child.

Within the current legal framework, there is no minimum age below which a judge cannot approve a marriage.

According to data collected by Unchained at Last, at least 4,660 children were married in the state of Ohio between 2000 and 2014. More than 91% of these marriages were girls married to adult men.

Children who have not yet reached the age of majority can easily be forced or coerced into marriage or trapped in an abusive marriage. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into accepting an unwanted marriage. Minors may also not have the resources to find a way out of the situation. They face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, file a legal action, etc.

The AHA Foundation has worked with potential victims of forced and child marriage from across the U.S., and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. In one case, Mena<sup>1</sup>, a U.S.-born minor, reached out to the AHA Foundation due to fear of being forced into an unwanted marriage. In spite of the fact that she could not yet legally vote, and was only just learning how to drive, her parents were planning her wedding to an older man whom she had never met. Due to state laws, all the courts needed was her parents' permission for the marriage to move forward. While the AHA Foundation was ultimately able to help Mena escape the situation, the reality is that it should not have been legally possible for Mena's parents to coerce her as a minor to marry. Those at risk must be protected by a comprehensive legal framework that guarantees their human rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to protect survivor's identity

Child marriage severely limits opportunities to health, education and economic freedom. It also increases risk of domestic violence. The chance of divorce is extremely high for children who marry – 70-80% of their marriages end in divorce. Given these factors, one case of forced or child marriage is one too many. If mechanisms are in place that allow for potentially thousands of cases to slip through the cracks, the common sense solution is to enact the necessary laws to close these gaps.

### **About the AHA Foundation**

The AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit founded by women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions, beliefs and backgrounds who are facing honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive. The AHA Foundation advocates liberty for all by championing human rights and individual liberties above cultural, social or religious imperatives.

Since 2007, the focus of the Foundation's programs includes: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S., 3) lobbying and outreach to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services. The AHA Foundation has trained more than 2,700 front line service providers on responding to cases of honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America's first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.