

Testimony in Support of SB198: End Child Marriage in Ohio
Presented to Ohio Senate Judiciary Committee
May 22, 2018

Chair Bacon, Vice Chair Dolan and Distinguished Committee Members:

I am a survivor of a forced marriage. The cycle of abuse that leads up to such a situation is extremely difficult to escape from even as an adult. As a child, it is nearly impossible. We think our judicial system is built to protect to us in the face of any injustice. I have lived through a life of abuse as a child, and as an adult, and I know that is not the case. I was raised by an abusive father, and everyone around us knew what kind of man he was, how he beat his wife and children, but no one did anything. My mother was too afraid and too manipulated by a cultural background to do anything. Turning 18 was not a significant number for me, that signaled my freedom. I was a US Citizen, born and raised in the US for most of my life. But how was I supposed to get out, if I didn't know anyone who could help me, did not the financial means or the emotional and physical support necessary to get out? I did not have access to any of my legal documents. I was not allowed to get a driver's license. I wasn't allowed to get a job. I wasn't allowed to get an education. I wasn't allowed to step out of the house, except when I was accompanied by one or both of my parents. I wasn't even allowed a cell phone. Internet access could be revoked whenever my father pleased. I had no money, and nowhere to go. I had a younger sister who I knew would suffer the aftermath if I ever left. So I stayed. And I went through 3 forced engagements, and eventually a forced marriage at 22.

My marriage fell apart before I began living with my husband. But the cycle did not end there. My parents' forced me into a marriage, and then ended it when it did not suit their needs. After my marriage dissolved, they decided to take me back to Pakistan and marry me off again over there. After everything I had endured, I knew I could never go to Pakistan, not in my current situation when I would be worse off than I was now. I escaped in the middle of the night in May 2015, by briefly using an internet phone app to call a local shelter. I was terrified, having taken a step for myself for the first time in my life. The first thing I did was get restraining orders against my parents. A few months later, my fear that my sister would suffer for my actions, materialized. My parents forcefully took her to Pakistan, took away her passport, and planned to marry her off. She had just turned 18. With the help of Unchained at Last and the US Embassy, she was able to return the US safely and is now a junior in college.

I was truly one of the lucky ones, who was still an adult when I went through my forced marriage, and managed to escape before I was also abused at the hands of my husband. Had I stayed, I would have been abused, because my parents' made sure to find me marriage proposals who would keep me in the same atmosphere as they did, and who would deny me all the freedoms they did. I cannot imagine how I would have survived, or what I would have done had I been a minor. I just know that it took me four years after becoming an adult to escape. As a child, I may never have escaped that situation. I was an adult when I accompanied my parents' to a courthouse to get my marriage license. I was too terrified to say anything. Had I been a minor, what protection would I have had? I know that my sister had just turned 18, and if she didn't have me to help her on the US end of things, she would probably have not gotten out. I know that many young women I know have been forced into teenage engagements that have led to early forced marriages, all in the name of culture, religion, and parents' knowing what's best for their children. I know that these women were like me, who had no one, and did not know how to escape a cycle if they didn't have any way of getting out of it. I know that abuse is traumatizing enough

at any age, but as a child, with the additional vulnerability of knowing you have no rights for yourself and are at the mercy of your parents', the very people who you are supposed to trust unconditionally, makes it so much more traumatizing. I know we need to better protect our children, and make sure that they cannot be violated and forced into anything when they are minors. Ending child marriages is one of the steps we can take to ensure that our children are protected by the law. Please support SB198 with an amendment to end all child marriage in Ohio.

Very truly yours,

Hufsa Chaudry