



TO: Delegate Luke Clippinger, Chair, Delegate David Moon, Vice Chair, and Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee

FROM: Marci Hamilton, Founder & CEO, CHILD USA; Professor, University of Pennsylvania, and Kathryn Robb, Executive Director, CHILD USA Advocacy

RE: SB0029 Family Law – Marriage – Age Requirements

DATE: March 21, 2021

Dear Delegate Clippinger, Delegate Moon, and Honorable Members of the House Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for allowing us, Professor Marci Hamilton of CHILD USA and Kathryn Robb of CHILD USA Advocacy, to submit testimony regarding SB0029. Marci Hamilton is the Founder & CEO of CHILD USA, an interdisciplinary think tank dedicated to the prevention of child abuse and neglect at the University of Pennsylvania, where she is a Professor in the Fels Institute of Government and a Senior Resident Fellow in the Program for Research on Religion. Kathryn Robb is the Executive Director of CHILD USA Advocacy, a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization dedicated to protecting children’s civil liberties and keeping children safe from abuse and neglect.

We urge you to vote “YES” on SB0029.

This legislation, if passed, would place Maryland in the top seventeen states in the nation for protecting children from the trauma of child marriage. Currently, **nearly every state in the United States permits child marriage in some form**. While many states set a marriage age floor at seventeen or eighteen, their laws still include an array of exceptions that “can in effect drop the true minimum marriage age much lower.” These loopholes—most commonly including parental consent, judicial approval, the lack of official proof of age requirements, and pregnancy exceptions—endanger children.

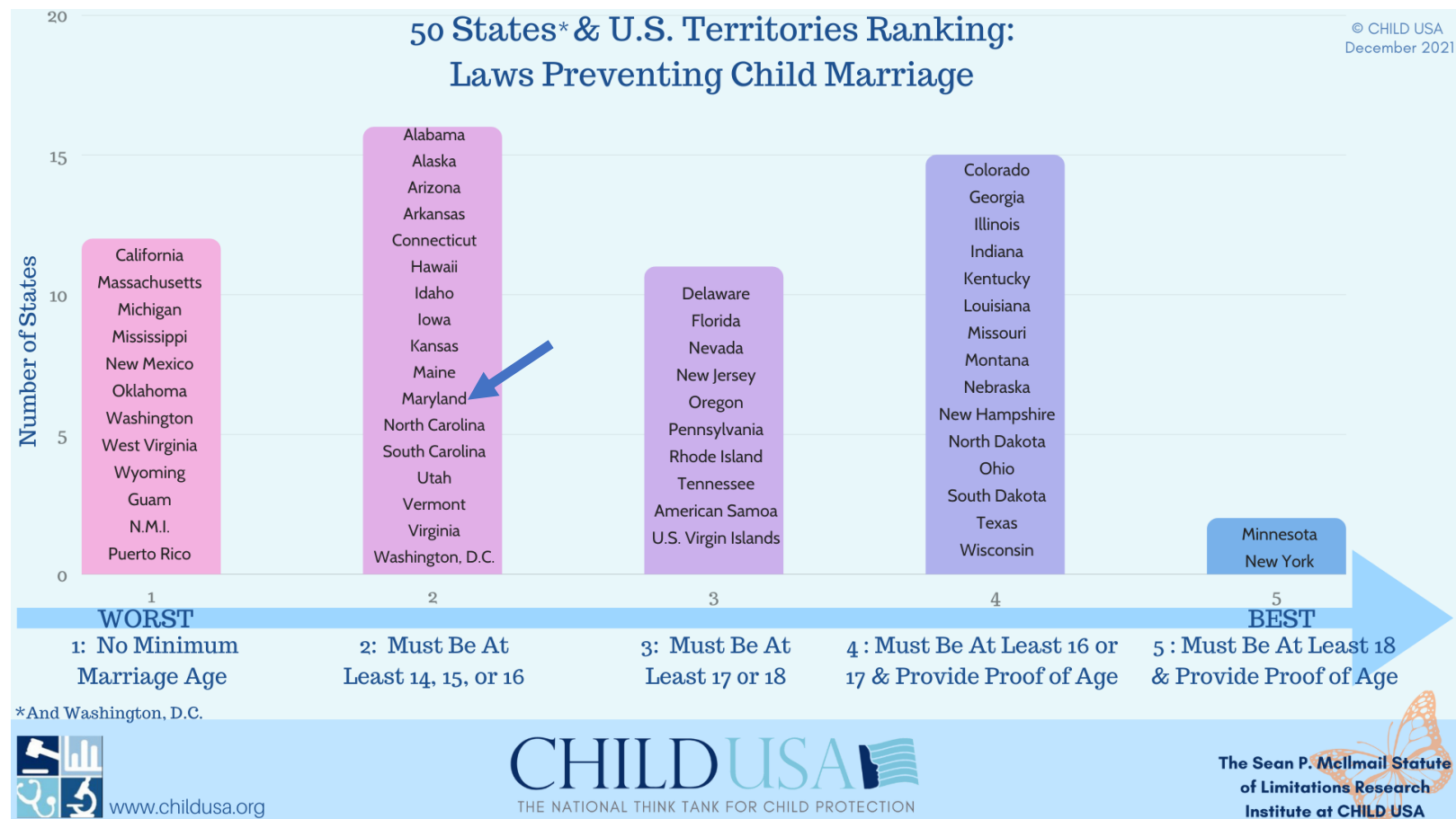
I. Child Marriage is Pervasive in the United States and Has Devastating Domestic Consequences

The legal loopholes mentioned above may seem trivial on paper, but they result in tragic, life-altering consequences for children in the United States.

- Between 2000 and 2018, almost **300,000 adolescent minors were legally married in the U.S.**—this is an average of forty-five child marriages per day.
- An estimated 30,000–60,000 marriages occurred “at an age or spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.”



- The majority of states permit marriage as a defense to statutory rape.
- Between 70% and 80% of marriages involving a child in the United States end in divorce, and child marriage followed by divorce doubles the likelihood that child mothers will descend into poverty.
- Girls in the United States who marry before the age of nineteen are also **50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college.**
- Victims of child marriage in the United States are acutely vulnerable to higher rates of psychiatric disorders as well as physical, emotional, or verbal abuse.



Maryland does not escape these consequences. As evidenced in the graph above, Maryland currently has some of the weakest child marriage laws in the nation. Unfortunately, these laws have permitted abusers to harm children. Skyler was a sixteen-year-old victim of repeated abuse at her mother’s hands. When her mother wanted her “out of the house,” she married Skyler off to a man twice Skyler’s age. At a courthouse in Elkton, Maryland, a clerk told Skyler to “wipe them tears” when she cried as the marriage license was issued. Skyler was repeatedly raped and abused by her husband throughout their marriage.

The practice of child marriage must be prohibited under the law, to protect children and secure their futures. In the absence of a federal prohibition against child marriage, each state must establish marriage laws that close these loopholes and effectively ban child marriage. Ultimately, a federal law that **(1) bans marriage for persons under the age of eighteen, without exception,** and **(2) requires all marriage applicants to furnish official proof of their age,** will be the most effective way to thwart child marriage nationally and truly protect children.

II. Conclusion

We commend you for moving towards this goal and taking up the charge on behalf of Maryland's children by removing the pregnancy loophole, raising the minimum marriage age to seventeen, and requiring official proof of age for all minors obtaining marriage licenses. For more information about child marriage reform, visit <https://childusa.org/child-marriage/> or email info@childusa.org. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance on this or any other child protection issues.

Sincerely,



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