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May 9, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL

The Hon. Jimmie Wilson
Chair, Michigan House Judiciary Committee
Room 307, House Office Building
Lansing, MI 48933

Re: Testimony in support of H.B. 4293–4302

Dear Rep. Wilson and Committee Members:

I am writing on behalf of the FFRF Action Fund (FFRF AF) to voice support for H.B. 4293–4302, which would end child marriage in Michigan. FFRF AF is an affiliate of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including more than 1,000 members in Michigan. We work to ensure that our laws remain secular in order to protect the constitutional separation between state and church.

We strongly urge the committee to vote in favor of these bills, which will make the minimum age for marriage in Michigan 18 with no exceptions.

Although most minors who marry are 16 or 17 at the time, Michigan law currently has no minimum age for marriage, and the reality is that minors, lacking adult rights, can be easily forced to marry and can become trapped in those marriages. In an ironic and unjust twist, minors may be forced to marry, but are not “old enough” to file for divorce. This shows so clearly why a teenager who is not considered old enough to end a marriage should not be old enough to marry in the first place. A recent study¹ shows that almost 300,000 minors were married in this country between 2000–2018. Not surprisingly, 86 percent of the children married during this time period were girls, most marrying adult men with an average spousal age difference of four years. When minor boys married, the average age difference was 1.5 years.

While the federal criminal code prohibits sex with a child age 12 to 15, it specifically exempts those who first marry the child. Michigan should not allow its children to fall

¹ www.unchainedatlast.org/united-states-child-marriage-problem-study-findings-april-2021/#findings

victim to this disgusting loophole for child rape. Most child marriage licenses are essentially “get out of jail free” cards, because otherwise sexual contact would be considered statutory rape.

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof described one such incident, involving a 13-year-old impregnated by an evangelical Christian “counselor” decades ago.² He also cited a 2017 case in which a 11-year-old was forced to marry her rapist in Florida. Although the State Department deems marriage before 18 a human rights abuse, Kristof noted that while the United States is campaigning to end child marriage in Bangladesh and Yemen, it ignores the problem at home. It is up to state legislatures to fix this problem.

These are scenarios straight out of the Bronze Age Old Testament, whose Mosaic law essentially forces rape victims to marry their rapists.³ The bible treats girls and women as chattel and property. Girls go from being the property of fathers to the property of husbands, who, to quote Genesis, “shall rule over” them.⁴ In the United States even now, minors who flee an abusive spouse or impending forced marriage are typically considered runaways under state law, can be returned to their homes against their will or in some states, even charged with running away.

Earlier this year, Vermont became the eighth (!) state to ban child marriage. The FFRF Action Fund strongly encourages Michigan to become the ninth.

Sincerely,



Ryan D. Jayne
Senior Policy Counsel
FFRF Action Fund

² www.nytimes.com/2021/06/19/opinion/sunday/child-marriage-rape.html

³ Deut. 22:28–29 (“If a man happens to meet a virgin who is not pledged to be married and rapes her and they are discovered, he shall pay her father fifty shekels of silver. He must marry the young woman”) (NIV).

⁴ Gen. 3:16 (“To the woman he said, ‘I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.’”) (NIV).