



for every child

May 9, 2023

**Written Testimony in Support of HB4293-4302: Ending Child Marriage in Michigan
Presented to the Michigan House Judiciary Committee**

Dear Chair Breen and distinguished committee members:

On behalf of UNICEF USA, I am writing in support of HB4293-4302. This bill package will make 18 years old the minimum age of marriage in the State of Michigan, with no exceptions.

As President and CEO of UNICEF USA, I am constantly reminded how important it is that children have the right to be children. Too many children are deprived of this right, for far too many reasons. One of those reasons is child marriage. Worldwide, more than 650 million women and girls alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Some of those women and girls are right here in the United States. An estimated 300,000 children were married in the United States from 2001-2018. Eighty-six percent of those children married were girls - many of whom married adult men. At least 60,000 child marriages in the U.S. between 2000 and 2018 occurred at an age or with a spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.

From 2001 to 2021, data show that 5,426 children were married in Michigan. Under the current Michigan law, 16- and 17 year-old children are able to marry with permission from a parent or guardian, and children younger can marry at any age with both parental and judicial approval.

UNICEF considers marriage before the age of 18 a fundamental violation of human rights.. In all cases, child marriage has negative impacts on children. It leads to separation from family and friends, lack of freedom to interact with peers and participate in community activities, and decreased opportunities for education and economic participation. Because child marriage often results in child pregnancy, girls married at a young age face serious health risks. Teenage girls are much more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties. In addition, childhood pregnancy increases risks of nutritional deficiencies for both mother and baby, with permanent consequences. They also are also less likely to return to school, have a higher likelihood of suffering economic deprivation and poverty, and more likely to have a second child within two years of giving birth to their first child.

These risks are just as real for child marriages in the United States as they are anywhere. Children in the United States who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage. Girls who marry before the age of 18 are three-times more likely to experience domestic violence, 50% more likely to drop out of high school, and 31% more likely to live in poverty. For the sake of protecting children from abuse, we believe every single U.S. state must take steps to ban child marriage. As of today, only eight states have a no-exceptions ban on child marriage: Vermont, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New York, and Massachusetts. I encourage you to stand up for Michigan's children and make Michigan the ninth state on the list.

Child marriage is a violation of human rights and comes at a cost society cannot afford. On behalf of UNICEF USA, I urge you to take a stand for child rights and vote "yes" on HB4293-4302. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Nyenhuis".

Michael Nyenhuis
President and CEO