



**MICHIGAN SENATE
DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS WHIP**

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Chairman Jones and Members of the Judiciary Committee,

Below, please find a letter from a constituent of mine who wishes to remain anonymous but feels very strongly about House Bill 4480.

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Good afternoon senators. I wish I could deliver this message in person, but my custody case is ongoing and I fear provoking a negative response from the court.

I'm writing in support of HB4480.

I'm 39 years old and have two beautiful children - a toddler and an infant. I live and work in Lansing Michigan.

I am a Michigan native, graduating from Holt High School and Kalamazoo College. I went on to get my Master's degree from UC Berkeley and spent 5 years studying foreign language abroad. I hold certificates in business analysis and project management and am a PMP. I am what you might call "overeducated".

In the workplace, I manage million-dollar IT projects for one of the largest insurance companies in the world. I run a team of computer programmers and they actually listen to me.

At home, I am a survivor of 16 years of domestic violence.

Sixteen years is a long time. Why would anyone tolerate abuse, particularly years and years of it? The truth is domestic violence starts small. It sneaks up on you. Rarely does it start with a fist to the chin. If it did, victims wouldn't stay.

The mental image most of us have of an abuser – of a low-income, uneducated, meat-head – cause us to miss the red flags early in a relationship. Abusers are exceptionally charming. The nicest people you'd ever meet. They are doctors, lawyers, computer programmers and college professors. In the early days, they sweep their partners off of their feet. They are attentive, doting and protective – filling a deep psychological need that many of us have. In the beginning they show you Jekyll. Only later, and behind closed doors, do you see Hyde.

Domestic violence starts small, with comments like "you weigh more than I do", "you're not very nice", and "it makes me really unhappy when you mention your ex-boyfriend." As victims mold themselves to please their partner, the abuser gains more power and more control. I lost 30 pounds, grew obsequiously polite and deferential and never raised my exes name again.

Then there are a few outbursts of rage and you think, "Gee, that was strange and frightening. Everything seems back to normal now, though. I want everything to be normal, so I guess I'll avoid doing that thing that upset my partner". You build a mental list that gets longer and longer as the incidents of violence get closer together. Like cooking a frog, the water starts out cold and you are lulled into a false sense of security. By the time the water is boiling, it's too late.

It's been well documented that abusive partners escalate their attempts at control when children enter the picture. The joy that children bring to most parents is not shared in the same way by an abuser. Abusers innate sense of entitlement is threatened by these tiny intruders that have shifted the focus of the family away from catering to the abuser. Abusers realize that they have a new "hook" in their partner, and that the chance of them leaving has decreased. Children are a fresh tool used to frighten and punish their partners. Nothing ensures compliance from a parent faster than a threat to their child.

Shouldn't a good parent protect their children by ending the relationship? Unfortunately the reality is much more complicated. Victims get stuck when the very institutions built to protect us work to further entrap us. While in the relationship, society tells us we are stupid to stay and that it's our responsibility to get out in order to protect the children. There are even "failure to protect" laws that penalize the non-abusive parent for exposing children to violence. However, once you leave the relationship, society does an about-face and accuses you of violating the abusive parent's right to parent when you try to take steps to protect the children. Whereas a protective parent can take many steps to shield their children from the abuse while still in the relationship, once it ends, children are now delivered unprotected into the hands of an abusive parent. And this is all under court order.

I stayed in my relationship longer than I should have. I didn't recognize what was happening to my family until a child got hurt. Even then, it took months to build up the courage and the resources to leave, primarily because I couldn't figure out a way to leave and still protect my children. I knew my partner would seem like Dad of the Year to anyone outside the home.

As I entered the family court system this fall, my nightmare came true. I have been mocked, threatened and harassed by my exes attorney, CPS and even the court. I was told by Friend of the Court that a woman of my background and education could have fabricated everything, and that the presence of witnesses to the abuse is proof that I have orchestrated the whole thing. I've

been told that since I had access to bank accounts, a car and my husband reported to work each day, that I could have easily effected an escape. I was told that I should have known my partner came from a different culture than mine, and it was suggested that I seek communications counseling. As punishment for raising concerns about international child abduction, a section was added to my parenting time order to include the right for my ex to take our children overseas for a "substantial" period of time to visit his family. When our marriage counselor – a PhD psychologist – recommended supervised visitation and raised concerns about our children's safety with their dad, his recommendation was suppressed.

Unlike in the criminal courts where the worst that can happen is not being believed and the perpetrator getting off, in the family court system not only are you not believed, you are *punished* for making the accusation. Under factor "J" of the Child Custody Act, in the courts eyes, I have been labeled the "unfriendly parent".

Senators, this is not paranoia and it is not unique to my case. It's happening to victims and their children every day in courts across the country.

On October 28, I had to force a kicking, screaming, hysterical 3 year old into the back of his dad's car as he begged me not to. As he screamed, "Mommy, I'm scared!" The court has ordered me to betray my instincts and betray my child's trust. No good parent would put a child alone in a room with a violent animal. Yet the courts routinely order protective parents to do so with a violent parent.

We are causing harm. The common wisdom that children are resilient and bounce back is both trite and patently untrue. Dozens of studies now tell us of the lasting harm even to our DNA of childhood exposure to domestic violence. Like deniers of the holocaust we can pretend this is not true to make us feel better, but the evidence is overwhelming.

There is something broken in our society when research shows us only 2 percent of victims lie about abuse, yet they are routinely disbelieved; when 85 percent of the claims of sexual abuse by protective parents result in custody being awarded to the abuser; when a woman and her children have to seek asylum in another country because our laws fail to protect them; when Michigan children are sent to jail for refusing visitation with their abusive father.

Children have a fundamental human right to live and grow safe from harm. They are fully human beings - not property, not chattel - and they deserve both our respect and our protection. Their right to safety supersedes an abusers right to parent. A biological connection is not sufficient excuse to expose children to a childhood of physical and emotional abuse with lifelong consequences.

A few weeks ago my 4 year old nephew was overheard coaching my son for a visit with his dad that night. "Don't let him hurt you", he said, "And if he does, make him stop."

These are not the conversations that 3 and 4 year old boys should be having about their caretakers. These children deserve a better life and they deserve our protection. I urge you to right a moral wrong. Please vote for HB 4480.