



# AMERICAN ATHEISTS

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September 6, 2019

The Honorable Sen. James B. Eldridge  
Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary  
24 Beacon St. Room 511-C  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

The Honorable Rep. Claire D. Cronin  
Chair, Joint Committee on the Judiciary  
24 Beacon St. Room 136  
Boston, Massachusetts 02133

**Re: SUPPORT for H. 1478, An Act to End Child Marriage in Massachusetts**

Dear Chairperson Eldridge, Chairperson Cronin, and Members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary:

American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,000 constituents in Massachusetts, thanks you for holding a hearing on House Bill 1478, which would protect young people by ending child marriage in Massachusetts. A version of this bill unanimously passed the Senate, and so we are grateful that the Committee is taking up this issue as well. This life-saving bill would prevent young people in Massachusetts from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all-too-frequently across our nation. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation.

American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians.

Currently, Massachusetts law has loopholes that permit young people under the age of 18 to marry with parental consent and judicial approval. Appallingly, there is no minimum statutory age for these marriages. An estimated 1,200 minors were married in Massachusetts between 2000 and 2016,<sup>1</sup> the majority of which were girls marrying men.

The harm caused by child marriage is daunting. It damages the child brides’ health, irrevocably reduces their education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Abiraj N. (Jan. 19, 2019). Marching to End Child Marriage in Massachusetts. Human Rights Watch Dispatches. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/19/marching-end-child-marriage-massachusetts>.

violence. Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of getting divorced—and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are much more likely to end up in poverty than teen mothers who stay single.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 207,549 minors were married in the U.S. between 2000 and 2015, with 86% of those marriages being between a minor and an adult.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the U.S. State Department has called marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”<sup>4</sup> However, children can easily be forced to marry before they turn 18 and become legal adults, because they face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic-violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action. Unfortunately, a requirement of parental “consent” hardly mitigates the danger of forced child marriage because when a child is forced to marry, the perpetrators are almost always the parents. There will always be parental “consent” when there is parental coercion in the first place. Therefore, Massachusetts law currently contains no effective procedural safeguard against the danger of forced child marriage.

Child marriage robs young people of the right to choose their own path in life. By adopting H. 1478, Massachusetts would effectively eliminate existing loopholes and join states such as New Jersey and Delaware, which have taken proactive steps to end child marriage. We urge you to swiftly pass this important legislation to protect young people in Massachusetts. If you should have any questions regarding American Atheists’ support for H. 1478, please contact me at 908.276.7300 x309 or by email at [agill@atheists.org](mailto:agill@atheists.org).

Very truly yours,



Alison Gill, Esq.  
Vice President, Legal and Policy  
American Atheists

cc: All Members of the Massachusetts Joint Committee on the Judiciary

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<sup>2</sup> Hamilton VE. (2012). "The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage." William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository, Faculty Publications, 1430. Available at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.

<sup>3</sup> Tsui A, Nolan S, and Amico C. (July 6, 2017). Child Marriage in America: By the Numbers. Available at <http://apps.frontline.org/child-marriage-by-the-numbers/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al. (2016). United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls. Available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.