

(Date)

The Honorable Kay Khan, House Chair  
Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
State House, Room 146  
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Sonia Chang-Díaz, Senate Chair  
Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities  
State House, Room 111  
Boston, MA 02133

RE: H.1478An Act To End Child Marriage in Massachusetts

We write to you today to express our strong support for S.24, *An Act to End Child Marriage in Massachusetts*, sponsored by Senator Harriette Chandler.

We are concerned that Massachusetts allows children under the age of 18 to marry. Nearly 1,231 children as young as 14 were married in Massachusetts between 2000 and 2016 - and 83.7 percent (1030) of them were girls wed to adult men. The oldest person during this time period to marry a minor was a 39-year-old man who married a 17-year-old girl in 2014. Child marriage victims are very difficult to identify and many victims do not come forward due to pressure from family or their soon to be spouse. Forced marriage victims experience significantly high rates of sexual abuse, economic threats and isolation.

Additionally, married minors do not have the legal rights of adults. A minor cannot easily secure financial or legal assistance to leave a marriage. As a result, they have no voice. They lack the legal tools to protect themselves from potentially abusive or coercive relationships and are often subject to the whims of their family or spouse.

Current law permits child marriage with the consent of a parent and approval from a judge in the Probate and Family Court. Judges do not have guidelines for presiding over these unique cases nor do they interview the minor privately to ensure coercion is not in play. By eliminating marriage for those under the age of 18, these bills would eliminate the threat of a minor being forced or coerced into a marriage. We feel this legislation will improve the Commonwealth's ability to address child marriage and protect this vulnerable population.

For that reason, we respectfully request the Joint Committee on Children, Families and Persons with Disabilities to release S.24 with a favorable report. Thank you in advance for your consideration of this important matter.

Sincerely,