

Human Rights Watch

Children's Rights

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/23/us-massachusetts-should-ban-child-marriage>

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Senate Vote Set on Bill to Prohibit Anyone Under 18 From Marrying

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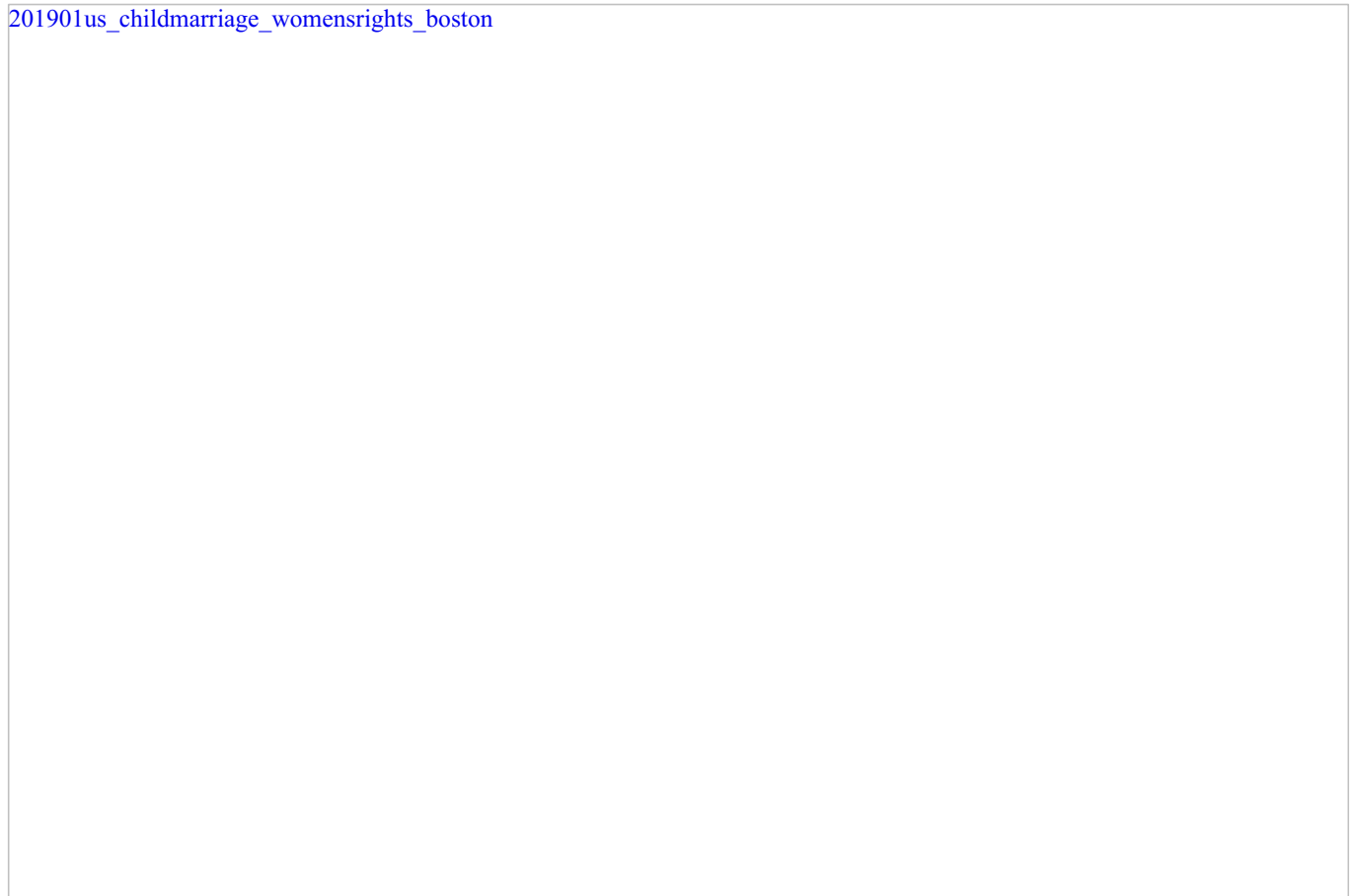
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Protesters from Unchained at Last speak in front of the Massachusetts State House in Boston to end child marriage in Massachusetts, May 2017. (c) 2017 Susan Landmann/Unchained at Last

(Boston) Massachusetts state senators should vote on July 25, 2019, for a proposed law to end child marriage in Massachusetts, Human Rights Watch said today. Senate Bill [S.2294](#) has broad bipartisan support and is backed by 35 Massachusetts-based organizations, as well as national and international groups.

The Massachusetts House Judiciary Committee should make the House version of the bill, [H.1478](#), a priority, and send it to the floor for a vote before the August recess.

Massachusetts state senators should take this long overdue step to protect children's rights, said [Nesha Abiraj](#), women's rights research fellow at Human Rights Watch. The overwhelming evidence is that marrying young exposes children to violence and health risks, and limits their ability to get help.

Senate Bill S.24, now S.2294, filed by Senator Harriette Chandler, and House Bill H.1478, filed by Representative Kay Khan, would prohibit marriage before the age of 18 without exception. The bills were refiled in January after being sent for further study in March 2018.

Between 2000 and 2016, more than 1,200 children under age 18 were married in Massachusetts, according to government data. Almost all of them were girls marrying adult men; and 57 were under age 16, the states legal age of consent.

The current law sets the minimum marriage age at 18 but allows children of any age to marry with permission from a judge and the child's parents. Some children marry because their parents force or coerce them, and in those cases, parental consent requirements amount to no protection at all.

Marriage places girls who are far more likely to be subjected to child marriage than boys at risk of harm to their health, curtailed education, poverty, and domestic violence. Married children [can face significant obstacles](#) in escaping abusive relationships and getting help. They may have difficulty retaining a lawyer, filing for divorce, or even seeking shelter. Massachusetts law limits how long children can stay in homeless shelters without parental consent, and several domestic violence shelters told Human Rights Watch that they do not admit children unless they are accompanied by a parent seeking shelter.

Human Rights Watch is working with a coalition to end child marriage in Massachusetts, which includes the [Office of the Child Advocate](#), the [Massachusetts Law Reform Institute](#), and the [Children's League of Massachusetts](#). The coalition also includes national organizations, such as [Unchained at Last](#) and [Tahirih Justice Center](#), and international organizations, including [UNICEF USA](#) and [Global Citizen](#). Several coalition representatives and constituents who have been supporting the bill will be present at the vote on July 25, including Human Rights Watch.

Other states are also ending child marriage. Delaware became the first US state to completely outlaw child marriage in May 2018, followed by New Jersey in June 2018. In both states, the bills had bipartisan support. Similar bills to ban child marriage have been introduced in other states. Recently in Pennsylvania, a similar bill to completely ban child marriage [passed unanimously](#), 195-0, in the House and is now before the Senate for consideration. [Bills to ban child marriage](#) are pending in nine states.

Human Rights Watch has carried out research for more than a decade on [child marriage](#) in countries around the world. It has also campaigned to end child marriage in the US, including in [New York](#) and [Florida](#).

We urge the House to bring their child marriage bill up for a vote before the August recess and for Governor Baker to sign it into law, Abiraj said. By ending the scourge of child marriage, Massachusetts can lead the way for reform in states across the country.

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