



Working to end sexual violence in Maryland

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Testimony Supporting Senate Bill 250
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January 20, 2021

The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault (MCASA) is a non-profit membership organization that includes the State's seventeen rape crisis centers, law enforcement, mental health and health care providers, attorneys, educators, survivors of sexual violence and other concerned individuals. MCASA includes the Sexual Assault Legal Institute (SALI), a statewide legal services provider for survivors of sexual assault. MCASA represents the unified voice and combined energy of all of its members working to eliminate sexual violence. We urge the Judicial Proceedings Committee to report favorably on Senate Bill 250.

Senate Bill 250 – Repeal: Marriage as a Defense to Sex Crimes

Like many states, Maryland's law was based on the premise that marriage was consent to sex and that, therefore, a man could not rape his wife. Unlike many states, Maryland has not yet firmly rejected that antiquated and fundamentally disrespectful concept.

Senate Bill 250 brings Maryland into the modern era and eliminates marriage as a defense to all sex crimes. An identical bill passed the House of Delegates last session, supported by men and women, Republicans and Democrats.

Historically, most rape statutes in America included language that specified that rape was forced sexual intercourse with a woman not your wife, reflecting historical views that a wife was a husband's property or that marriage itself was a non-revocable and continual consent to sex.

Currently, Criminal Law §3-318 continues to provide that marriage is a defense to certain sex crimes. It is not absolute bar to prosecution in all sex crimes cases. Prior to 2004, some offenses involving vaginal intercourse could be prosecuted if the parties had met certain separation requirements and the rape involved force or threat of force. In Maryland in 2004, the General Assembly expanded protections for spouses who were not separated, adding provisions so all vaginal rapes involving either force or "threat of force" could be prosecuted regardless of whether the parties were separated. Additionally, if the parties have a limited (or absolute) divorce, marriage is not a defense.

In cases involving the capacity of a victim, marriage continues to be a defense to sex crimes. In 2017, in what one hopes is unintended consequences, when the definition of rape was changed to include all sex crimes involving penetration (not just vaginal intercourse), married people lost

more protections because marriage became a defense to sex crimes involving oral sex, anal sex, and penetration with an object. Prior to the 2017 changes, marriage was a defense only for cases involving vaginal intercourse.

Disparities between prosecution of sex crimes and other types of intimate partner violence are inexplicable. Assault, stalking, sextortion, revenge porn, homicide, and other crimes against a person may be prosecuted without regard to the marital status of the parties. Singling out sexual violence as a type of crime that married people should have less protection from is anomalous. This also creates striking inequalities between couples who have chosen to marry and those who have not. For example, a person who rapes their unconscious spouse could not be prosecuted for rape, but a person who raped their unconscious domestic partner could be – even if the married couple had been together for a matter of days and the domestic partners had been cohabiting for decades. Connecticut repealed its law allowing marriage as a defense to sex crimes in 2019, citing concerns about parity between sexual assault in the case of spouses or other intimate partners and the investigation and prosecution of other family violence crimes.

In states across the country, states are changing the outdated and archaic laws that disregard the rights of married people to control their own bodies and sexuality and amending marriage out of sex crimes codes. A 2006 research article found that as of May, 2005, in 20 states, the District of Columbia, and on federal lands, there are no exemptions from rape prosecution granted to husbands. *Marital Rape: New Research and Directions*, Raquel Kennedy Bergen, with contributions from Elizabeth Barnhill, National Online Resource Center on Violence Against Women (February 2006). Some states have not simply repealed laws permitting marital rape, but gone further and affirmed the application of sex crimes protections to married people. *See, e.g.*, Va.Code Ann., §18.2-61: rape statute applies “whether or not” the victim is the spouse of the actor; *State v. Willis*, 223 Neb.844 (1986), there is no “spousal-exclusion” to sexual assault charges. Senate Bill 250 would not make Maryland first in efforts to modernize marital rape laws, however, it would help prevent the state from being last in this historic shift.

Marriage should never be a defense to any sex crime. A little bit of sexual assault is not OK.

**The Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault urges the
Judicial Proceedings Committee to
report favorably on Senate Bill 250**