



Philomena Project

*Advancing human dignity at the intersection of
child marriage, Canon Law, and Catholic culture*

January 2022

House Bill 83

Family Law - Emancipation of a Minor and Authorization to Marry

House Judiciary Committee

Position: SUPPORT

My name is Laura Bramon Hassan and I am the Executive Director of [Philomena Project](#), a global advocacy group addressing child marriage in Canon Law and Catholic culture. Through the Ban Child Marriage in Maryland group, Girls Not Brides, and other domestic and international networks, Philomena Project partners with advocates across civil and religious spheres to address child marriage in law, policy, and practice.

I offer written testimony in support of House Bill 83 and its proposal to raise the legal age of marriage in the State of Maryland to age 17, with attendant provisions regarding emancipation, a spousal age difference of four or fewer years, and protective measures including private interviews to probe the nature of the relationship between the intended spouses.

HB 83 goes a great distance in stopping the abuses and unnecessary sufferings that so many children exploited in child marriage face, including statutory rape, human trafficking, labor exploitation, greater incidences of marital violenceⁱ, and a greater risk of obstetric fistulaⁱⁱ or eclampsia, systemic infections, and preterm deliveryⁱⁱⁱ. And until pending federal legislation addresses loopholes allowing children to serve as spousal visa sponsors, HB 83 would offer a state-level protection to children whose families, guardians, or other actors might attempt to force a child into a marriage in which she or he serves as little more than an unwitting visa sponsor.

All of may sound a bit distant and abstract. To bring it home, I refer the House Judiciary Committee to a groundbreaking study on child marriage in the United States, finalized just last year in 2021 by Unchained At Last, a US-based organization. Unchained at Last found that in the United States, between 2000-2018 nearly 60,000 marriages “occurred at an age or spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.” In almost 50,000 of these marriages, “the marriage license became a ‘get out of jail free’ card for a would-be rapist under state law that specifically allowed within marriage what would otherwise be considered statutory rape.” And Unchained At Last found that from 2000-2018, over 3,000 children were married in the state of Maryland.

HB 83 is a step in the right direction, acknowledging that marriage is a commitment that should be entered into with free and full consent of both spouses, within a civil framework that ensures both spouses proper legal rights and protections.

ⁱ “Gender-Based Violence and Child Marriage.” Girls Not Brides, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-health/gender-based-violence-and-child-marriage/>. Accessed 11 Dec. 2021.

ⁱⁱ Tebeu, Pierre Marie, et al. “Risk Factors for Obstetric Fistula: A Clinical Review.” *International Urogynecology Journal*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2012, pp. 387–94. PubMed Central, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00192-011-1622-x>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ganchimeg, T., et al. “Pregnancy and Childbirth Outcomes among Adolescent Mothers: A World Health Organization Multicountry Study.” *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*, vol. 121, Mar. 2014, pp. 40–48. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-0528.12630>.