

February 7, 2025

Submitted via email

Representative Mark Pearson
Chair, House Committee on Children and Family Law
General Court of New Hampshire
23 Faith Drive
Hampstead, NH 03841

Re: Call to reject HB 433

Dear Chair Pearson:

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) writes to urge the House Committee on Children and Family Law to vote against HB 433, legislation that would lower the legal age of marriage in New Hampshire to seventeen years old for active-duty military members.

CFI is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing science, reason, and secularism in American law and policy. We have numerous supporters in New Hampshire.

Problematic Elements of the Bill

HB 433 provides: “The age of consent is 17 where ... [o]ne person in a couple intending to marry is, at the time of application for a marriage license, a member of the armed forces of the United States while on active duty” and “[t]he other person is 17 years of age or older” and “[a]t least one person is a New Hampshire resident.”

HB 433 further stipulates that “[i]f the other person is 17 and not also a member of the United States while on active duty, they must have written permission to marry from a parent or legal guardian.”

CFI’s Analysis

CFI opposes this bill because it allows marriage between individuals who are below the age of eighteen — **even though child marriage has been shown to be problematic for many reasons and despite the fact that New Hampshire enacted legislation just last year making eighteen the legal age of marriage in the state.**

CFI has consistently lobbied in favor of legislation banning child marriage in several states, including in New Hampshire last year. As we have long stated, child marriage is a scourge on any free society, and it is inextricably linked to the power of religious communities over the lives of individuals. In a very typical scenario, a young girl is married off to an older male member of her family’s religious congregation or community. Indeed, approximately 86



percent of child marriages in this country involve girls under the age of eighteen.¹ Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs documents that "religious beliefs and traditions are an important factor in child marriage" and that "religious leaders and communities commonly play central roles in betrothal and marriage rituals" involving child marriage.²

In total, a staggering 300,000 children were married in the United States between 2000 and 2018.³ Child marriage has been shown to lead to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse at high rates, and it leads to worse life outcomes such as isolation, humiliation, lack of education, and loss of career opportunities.⁴

New Hampshire has a chance to be a relative trailblazer on this issue—and, indeed, its legislature and governor took on that opportunity last year. The General Court of New Hampshire enacted SB 359, which raised the legal age of marriage to eighteen years old (with no exceptions), and then-Governor Chris Sununu signed the bill into law on June 14, 2024.⁵ SB 359 went into effect on January 1, 2025.

This was a true bipartisan effort in recognition of the fact that 407 minors were married in New Hampshire between 1995 and 2021, with 80 percent of them being young girls marrying men eighteen years or older.⁶ By enacting SB 359, New Hampshire laudably became the thirteenth state to completely ban child marriage, with no exceptions.

Now, HB 433 threatens to undo that progress. As the group Equality Now points out, there is a major difference between marriage at the age of seventeen and at the age of eighteen: "Minors are generally unable to enter into binding contracts, file lawsuits independently, or hire an attorney, all of which are critical should one wish to leave a marriage. Moreover, domestic violence shelters will often turn away persons under the age of 18, and CPS [Child Protective Services] and youth shelters are not designed to deal with issues of child marriage."⁷

For these reasons, Equality Now, Unchained At Last,⁸ and other organizations have advocated against HB 433. CFI joins their chorus.

Likewise, your committee heard testimony from Retired Army Specialist Brittany Wright, who testified that in 2013, after she ran away to escape the man who had been molesting and

¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/republican-who-got-married-15-wants-ban-child-marriage-1877367>

² <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/religious-challenges-and-child-marriage>

³ <https://endchildmarriageus.org>

⁴ <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-health/gender-based-violence-and-child-marriage>

⁵ https://gc.nh.gov/bill_status/legacy/bs2016/bill_status.aspx?lsr=2834&sy=2024&sortoption=&txtsessionyear=2024&txtbillnumber=SB359

⁶ <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/01/09/cassie-levesque-new-hampshire-child-marriage-524159>

⁷ https://equalitynow.org/news_and_insights/one-year-after-total-child-marriage-ban-new-hampshire-considers-new-exceptions

⁸ <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/take-action>



raping her since she was fourteen years old, police returned Wright to her parents, and they forced her to marry her abuser.⁹

Even though Wright testified both as a military veteran and as a survivor of sexual abuse by an older military spouse, she stated to your committee: **“Do not thank me for my service if you plan to use it as an excuse to justify the abuses that occur if we allow child marriage in our society under any circumstances.”**¹⁰

Conclusion

For the reasons provided above, CFI urges your committee to vote against HB 433. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Azhar Majeed', is written in a cursive style.

Azhar Majeed
Director of Government Affairs

cc:

Representative Debra DeSimone, Vice Chair, House Committee on Children and Family Law
Members, House Committee on Children and Family Law

⁹ <https://indepthnh.org/2025/01/28/emotional-testimony-on-proposed-military-exemption-to-underage-marriage-law>

¹⁰ *Id.*