

NEW GEORGIA LAW WILL PROTECT VULNERABLE GIRLS BY LIMITING MARRIAGE TO LEGAL ADULTS

On Monday, May 6, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp signed H.B. 228 into law, limiting marriage to adults age 18 or older, with a narrow exception only for 17-year-old minors that have been emancipated after a special proceeding before a juvenile court. The legislation also contains other key measures to prevent abuse and exploitation in the guise of marriage, such as a 4-year limit on the age difference between a 17-year-old and an intended spouse.

The Tahirih Justice Center – national leaders in the fight to end violence against women and girls and experts on forced and child marriage – is proud to have helped draft and advance this bill through the legislative process with lead sponsor Representative Andrew J. Welch (R-McDonough).

[McGuireWoods Consulting](#) senior vice president and director, [Ashley Groome](#), along with vice president, [Danica Key Thompson](#), worked pro bono to help navigate the bill through the 2019 legislative session, and their strategic guidance helped ensure the bill's success.

“It was an honor to work with the Tahirih Justice Center on this legislation,” Groome said. “The law will help protect young girls and hopefully change the trajectory of their lives.”

Tahirih opened an Atlanta office in 2018 and has led successful campaigns to enact similar legislation in Virginia, Texas, Kentucky, and Ohio, in addition to advising and assisting many other states in their reform efforts. Since Tahirih launched its [national campaign to end child marriage](#) in 2016, a total of 17 states (including Georgia) have been inspired to raise their minimum marriage age or put in place other safeguards.

Based on data that the Tahirih Justice Center obtained from the Georgia Department of Health, **approximately 10,000 children under age 18 were married in the state of Georgia between 2000 and 2015**, many of them married to much-older adult spouses. Georgia's new minimum marriage age law will not only help protect Georgia's children from forced marriages, but also from the [lifelong, irreparable harm](#) that can come from marrying too young, even if by choice. These harms can include up to 80% divorce rates, 50% greater high school drop-out rates, much higher likelihood of future poverty, more short and long-term medical and mental health problems, and increased vulnerability to violence.

“It is always an humbling experience working on public policy to promote and improve outcomes on health, safety and the wellbeing for young women and girls in Georgia,” Thompson said.

Going forward in Georgia, only legal adults capable of supporting and advocating for themselves can enter the legal contract and potentially lifelong commitment that marriage entails. This helps ensure not only that girls will not be forced into marriages against their will, but also that if they do make the decision themselves to marry, they will have the ability to leave a violent home if they face abuse.

Tahirih's Senior Counsel for Public Policy and Strategy, Jeanne Smoot, issued the following statement on the new law:

“Tahirih is thrilled to see this landmark legislation made law. We're deeply grateful to Representative Welch for his leadership, passion and vision and to the strong bipartisan co-sponsors who rallied to this important cause. We applaud Georgia for closing legal loopholes in its minimum marriage age laws that can put girls at acute risk of forced or coerced

Tahirih Justice Center is a national non-profit that protects courageous immigrant women and girls who refuse to be victims of violence through free legal and social services, public policy advocacy, and training and education. Visit www.tahirih.org for more information and www.tahirih.org/childmarriage to learn more about their work on this issue.



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marriages and other abuse. With this new law, Georgia can proudly take its place at the forefront of the national movement to tackle child marriage in America.”

The robust coalition supporting HB 228 included many civic and faith-based organizations and coalitions that advocate for the health and wellbeing of Georgia’s children and families or for survivors of family violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. We were also privileged to partner with leading national survivor-advocates on this effort, who gave input on the development of the bill and helped with legislative outreach, Sherry Johnson of Florida and Donna Pollard and Dr. Judy Wiegand of Kentucky.

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