



PROTECT CHILDREN FROM ABUSE AND EXPLOITATION

End Child Marriage in DC

What is the problem?

Under current DC law, clerks can issue marriage licenses to 16-year-old and 17-year-olds if they have written or in-person consent from one parent or guardian unless they were previously married. There is no mechanism in place to determine if the child consents to the marriage, or any evaluation for signs of harm or coercion. The parental consent exception fails to recognize that parental consent may in reality be parental coercion.

What legislative reform is needed to address this problem?

The best barrier against forced marriages of children, and against the many other risks and harms of child marriage, is to set a minimum marriage age of 18. This approach sets a simple, clear, and straightforward standard that leaves no room for misinterpretation or misapplication.

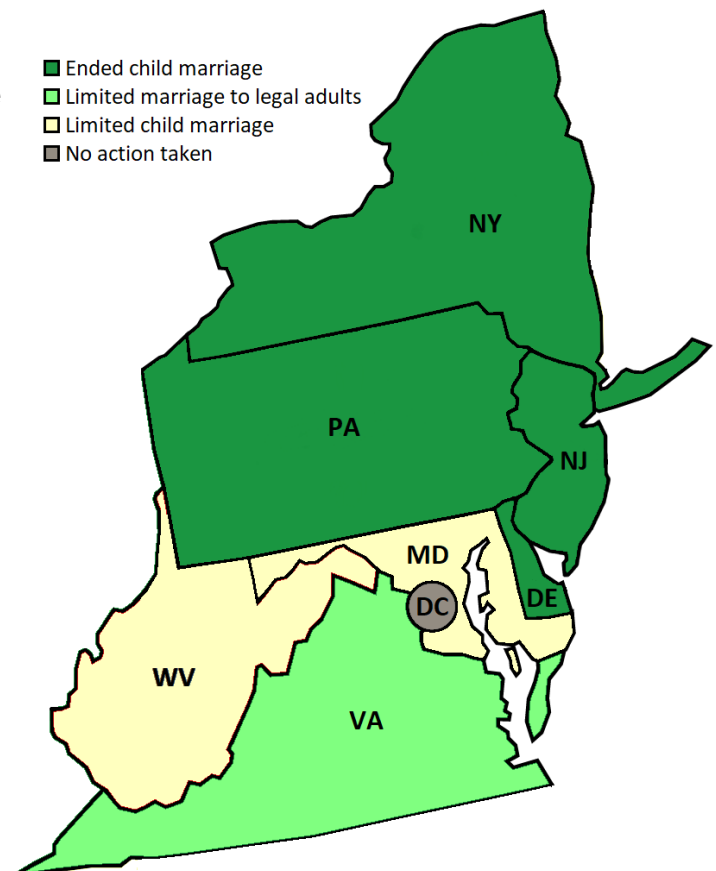
Girls should not be married before they have the legal rights and practical options that adult women would have to protect themselves from abuse. Underage abuse victims can face serious challenges to their ability to access services, rent an apartment, or earn enough to support themselves, which can either trap them in a violent home or leave them unhoused. Their limited options can also make them vulnerable to being taken advantage of by others who seek to abuse and exploit them.

Why is this legislative reform urgently needed?

41 minors were married in DC from 2012-2022. Most were married to legal adults, some of whom were twice their age. This reform responds to a serious problem with current law, which has no effective safeguards to protect children from potentially lifelong, devastating harm. Moreover, there is no residency requirement for minors to marry in the District. This is particularly worrisome given that DC's neighboring states, Maryland and Virginia, have recently passed reforms limiting child marriage in their respective states. The District's permissive minimum marriage age risks turning it into a regional destination for child exploitation.

How does DC compare to nearby states?

States across the country are moving to reform lax minimum marriage age laws like DC's. Since 2016, 34 states have passed a law to limit or end child marriage. 10 of these have ended child marriage entirely by setting 18 as the minimum age of marriage, no exceptions: Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, and Michigan. The northeast and mid-Atlantic regions have led the movement, amplifying the need for DC take action.



What about genuine, loving couples who want to get married before age 18?

Genuine couples can afford to wait two years to begin their “happily ever after,” and their chances of success as partners, parents, and people improve dramatically if they wait until adulthood to marry. But an underage, at-risk girl needs the law to protect her from being trapped in an abusive marriage.

Does this bill limit girls’ or women’s rights?

No. That’s because:

- A girl under age 18 doesn’t have the legal rights of an adult woman — that’s why this reform is needed.
- The reform slightly delays, but does not deny, a young person’s right to marry.
- DC already regulates the legal marriage age, this reform simply draws that line where it’s more appropriate so the ability to marry is reached at the same time that other legal rights are granted.
- Current law does not grant minors the ability to consent to a marriage. Consent is given by the minor’s parent on their child’s behalf, opening the door to parental coercion.

In fact, this reform actually enables and empowers girls to develop to their full potential as women.

What about teen mothers?

Child marriage doubles down on the negative consequences of teen pregnancy. Research shows that teen mothers who marry can be made *worse-off*, long-term, than teen mothers who don’t marry as teens. Girls who marry young face devastating, lifelong consequences, such as:

- **Greater vulnerability to domestic and sexual violence:** Young women and girls aged 16-19 face intimate partner violence victimization rates almost 3x the national average
- **Increased medical and mental health problems:** Women who marry as children are more likely to seek and access health services, compared to women who married in adulthood
- **Increased high school drop-out rates:** Girls who marry under age 19 are 50% more likely to drop out of high school
- **An increased risk of future poverty:** Girls who marry underage are up to 31 percentage points more likely to live in future poverty
- **Up to 80% divorce rates:** In fact, 23% of children who marry are already separated or divorced by the time they turn 18

My family members married underage. Why change the law now?

Many of our parents or grandparents married underage. Unfortunately we don’t truly know whether these unions persisted for love, or because it was very difficult to live as a single woman:

- **Before 1988**, landlords and property managers could legally reject single mothers’ rental applications
- **Before 1988**, women needed a male relative to sign a business loan
- **Before 1978**, it was legal to fire a woman from her job for becoming pregnant
- **Before 1974**, banks could deny women access to a credit card without a husband’s signature
- **Before 1972**, unmarried women did not have the right to legally access birth control

Research shows most child marriages today are not happy, successful unions. Protecting girls from abuse is worth asking the rare, exceptional cases to delay marriage by two years.

Summaries and maps of reforms passed since 2016, along with sources of the research on the harms of child marriage in the United States, are available at tahirih.org/childmarriage.

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