



*Protecting Immigrant  
Women and Girls  
Fleeing Violence*

## Written Testimony in SUPPORT of House Bill 168

*Relating to the age at which a person in this state may marry.*

*Submitted to the Texas House Committee on Judiciary & Civil Jurisprudence, Subcommittee on  
Family & Fiduciary Relationships  
For Hearing on April 7, 2025  
Katharina Dechert, Houston Policy & Advocacy Manager*

Chair Dutton, Vice Chair Hayes, and Honorable Members of the Committee:

The Tahirih Justice Center (Tahirih) is a non-profit legal advocacy organization has been serving survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and other abuses since 1997. Tahirih has five offices across the country, including one in Houston.

Tahirih has unique legal and policy expertise in forced and child marriage as U.S. problems. Through Tahirih's Forced Marriage Initiative, launched in 2011, we have worked on several hundred cases involving women and girls nationwide. Tahirih has also compiled extensive research on child marriage in the United States, including a 50-state statutory compilation, an in-depth report that compares and analyzes all states' minimum marriage age laws and exceptions, a compilation of stories from survivors' of child marriage in the United States, and a policy brief reflecting on progress made in the national movement to end child marriage since 2016. <sup>i</sup> Tahirih worked in close coalition with other Texas organizations and survivors of child marriage to support the state's previous marriage age reform in 2017.

### **We applaud the leadership of Representatives Rosenthal, Hayes, Johnson, and Orr in sponsoring HB 168, and submit this testimony in strong support.**

This important reform would take a simple, powerful step to protect Texan children by matching the state's minimum marriage age to its legal age of adulthood (age 18), <sup>ii</sup> eliminating the exception in current law that permits emancipated minors to marry early.

This reform will build on the accomplishments of the 2017 reform by accomplishing two critical objectives—preventing forced marriages of children and preventing early marriages that put children at acute risk for devastating, lifelong consequences.

Forced marriages can happen in the U.S. for many reasons. They can arise in families and communities where parents expect to control the marriage choices of their children, or where marrying young is the norm. Some individuals are pushed to marry to prevent or address sex or pregnancy outside of marriage, or as a cover-up for rape or sexual abuse. Sometimes, an abusive dating partner will threaten or coerce an individual into marriage. In other cases, sexual predators can target, "groom," and then pressure vulnerable girls to marry them in order to further isolate and control them, and to have round-the-clock access to them without fear of prosecution. Children can also be compelled to marry when abusive or neglectful parents try to offload them onto others. Some parents even seek to gain financially from such arrangements, making these marriages a form of human trafficking.

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**In many cases Tahirih has worked on, children were sold to be married off to an adult and then further trafficked when their new spouse sold them to his own friends or acquaintances to use.**

While both adults and children can face forced marriages, children are especially susceptible to coercion, and are particularly disempowered when it comes to advocating for themselves because of their legal status as minors. Many “escape routes” that are wide open to adults are closed or much more challenging to access, for minors; even an emancipated minor may find it more difficult to escape than they would as an adult.

Of critical and equal importance, the bill will also spare girls from the domino effects of marrying underage, which can dramatically heighten their vulnerability to abuse. Up to 80% of marriages involving someone underage end in divorce, and teen mothers who marry and later divorce can be made worse-off long-term—more than twice as likely to live in future poverty—than teen mothers who do not marry. <sup>iii</sup>

Women who marry as teens are also more likely to have more children overall and to do so more quickly, to drop out of school, to have fewer work opportunities, and to wind up poor. They also experience more medical and mental health problems, both short- and long-term. All this can increase their dependence, and limit their options in the event of divorce or domestic violence.

In sum, there are significant child-protection concerns inherent to every child marriage.

There is a rapidly growing national movement to overhaul minimum marriage age laws that put children at risk. Since 2016, 13 states and Washington, D.C. have banned child marriage: Delaware, New Jersey, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, Michigan, Washington, Virginia, and New Hampshire have all passed bills prohibiting marriage under age 18 with no exceptions.

Two of these states first passed more complex bills limiting marriage to legal adults (age 18 or older, but with a limited exception for court-emancipated minors), similar to the law passed by Texas in 2017. While these laws were somewhat effective compromise measures, significantly reducing marriage under age 18, they do still leave a door open for some minors to face the significant, lifelong harms of early marriage. Both New York and Virginia, at the urging of child marriages survivors, later returned to their previous reforms to do what Texas is considering now – banning child marriage entirely.

The data in Texas shows how the 2017 reform has fallen short of protecting all minors from the harms of child marriage:

- While the reform reduced the number of children who married by a significant margin, eight children under 18 still married in the first 6 months after its implementation. <sup>iv</sup> This is a significant decrease from the numbers marrying prior to the reform, but harm prevented to other children will mean little to these eight if they face the known lifelong harms of child marriage.
- Child marriage still primarily impacts girls. Prior to the 2017 reform 85% of children married were girls; that number is now 88%.
- Children are still marrying partners much older than themselves. In the first six months after implementing the 2017 law, Texas had already allowed an adult man to marry a child 7 years younger than himself.

Texas should re-assert its place as a leader in protecting children from adults who would twist the institution of marriage into a tool of abuse and control.

**The Tahirih Justice Center urges this Committee to report House Bill 168 favorably, setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 without exception.**

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<sup>i</sup> A full copy of Tahirih’s 50-state report, along with other resources, is available at [www.tahirih.org/childmarriagepolicy](http://www.tahirih.org/childmarriagepolicy).

<sup>ii</sup> See Tex. Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code § 129.001.

<sup>iii</sup> See specific statistics and sources cited in Tahirih Justice Center, “Child Marriage Poses Serious Risks to Children,” *available at* [www.tahirih.org/childmarriagepolicy](http://www.tahirih.org/childmarriagepolicy).

<sup>iv</sup> See data on file with Tahirih Justice Center. Data was gathered for the period of September 2018 – February 2019, and compared to the equivalent period prior to the new law’s 2017 implementation.