



TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Law and Justice Committee

FROM: Marci Hamilton, Esq. & Kathryn Robb, Esq.

RE: HB1455 – raising the minimum marriage age to 18 without exception

DATE: January 29, 2024

Dear Honorable Members of the Senate Law and Justice Committee,

By way of introduction, Professor Marci Hamilton is a First Amendment constitutional scholar at the University of Pennsylvania who has led the national movement to reform statutes of limitations to reflect the science of delayed disclosure of childhood sexual abuse and who founded CHILD USA, a national nonprofit think tank devoted to ending child abuse and neglect. Kathryn Robb is the Executive Director of CHILD USA Advocacy, an advocacy organization dedicated to protecting children’s civil liberties and keeping children safe from abuse and neglect. Kathryn is also an outspoken survivor of child sex abuse.

We urge you to vote “YES” on HB1455.

This legislation, if passed, would place Washington in the top six states in the nation for protecting children from the trauma of child marriage. Currently, **nearly every state in the United States permits child marriage in some form, and Washington is one of the worst in the nation with no minimum age for marriage.** While many states set a marriage age floor at 18, their laws still include an array of exceptions that “can in effect drop the true minimum marriage age much lower.” These loopholes—most commonly including parental consent, judicial approval, the lack of official proof of age requirements, and pregnancy exceptions—endanger children.

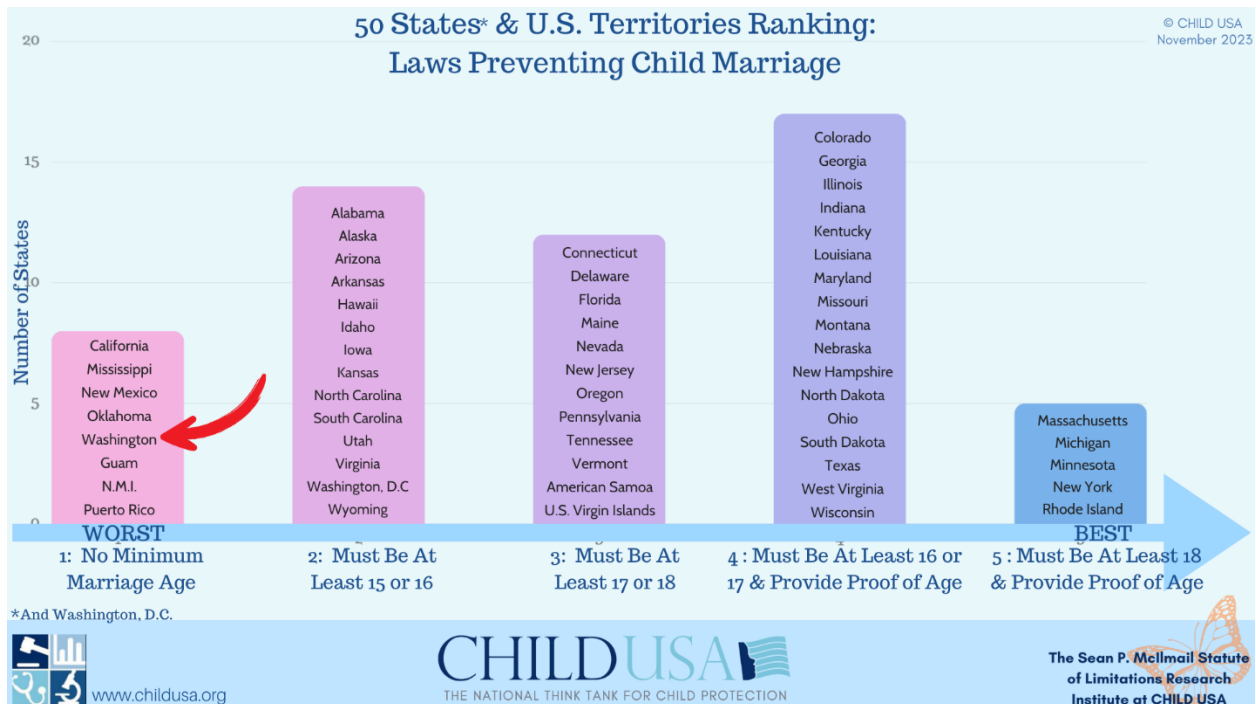
Child Marriage is Pervasive in the U.S. with Devastating Domestic Consequences

The above-mentioned legal loopholes may seem trivial on paper, but they result in tragic, life-altering consequences for children in the United States.

- Between 2000 and 2018, almost 300,000 adolescent minors were legally married in the U.S.—this is an average of 45 child marriages per day.
- An estimated 30,000–60,000 marriages occurred “at an age or spousal age difference that should have been considered a sex crime.”
- The majority of U.S. states permit marriage as a defense to statutory rape.



- Between 70% and 80% of marriages involving a child in the United States end in divorce, and child marriage followed by divorce doubles the likelihood that child mothers will descend into poverty.
- Girls in the United States who marry before the age of 19 are also 50% more likely to drop out of high school and four times less likely to graduate from college.
- Victims of child marriage in the United States are acutely vulnerable to higher rates of psychiatric disorders as well as physical, emotional, or verbal abuse.



Washington does not escape these consequences. As evidenced in the graph above, Washington has some of the weakest child marriage laws in the nation. Unfortunately, these laws have permitted abusers to harm children.

To protect children and secure their futures, the practice of child marriage must be prohibited under the law. In the absence of a federal prohibition against child marriage, it falls to each state to establish marriage laws that close these loopholes and effectively ban child marriage.

Ultimately, state and federal laws that (1) ban marriage for persons under the age of eighteen, without exception, and (2) require all marriage applicants to furnish official proof of their age, will most effectively thwart child marriage nationally and truly protect children. We commend you for moving towards this goal and taking up the charge on behalf of Washington's children.



For more information about child marriage reform, visit <https://childusa.org/child-marriage/> or email info@childusa.org. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance on this or any other child protection issues.

Sincerely,



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