



Written Testimony in SUPPORT of SB 548

Submitted to the Oregon House Committee on Judiciary


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My mother forced me to marry a high school boyfriend, threatening injury or death. After 7 months, my husband strangled me. Twelve years and five forced pregnancies later, I managed to escape the marriage with my three daughters. My parents, husband, and the legal system destroyed by my health and my life.

– Oregon Survivor of Child Marriage, submitted anonymously to Tahirih Justice Center

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Chair Kropf, Vice Chairs Chotzen and Wallan, and 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 unique legal and policy expertise in forced and child marriage in the United States. Through Tahirih's Forced Marriage Initiative, launched in 2011, we have worked on several hundred cases involving women and girls nationwide, including in Oregon. 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 2016.¹

We submit our testimony in strong support of SB 548.

This important reform would take a simple, powerful step to protect Oregon children by matching the state's minimum marriage age to its legal age of adulthood (age 18) eliminating the exception in current law that permits 17-year-olds to marry with one parent's permission.

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.

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.

We know from over a decade of case work that when a child faces forced marriage, it is almost always their own parent who are the perpetrators. For these children parental consent is not a safeguard.

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.ⁱⁱ

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 enacted laws prohibiting marriage under age 18 with no exceptions.

Two more states – Maine and Missouri – have passed laws banning child marriage in 2025 that now await signature by their respective governors. Several more states still have legislation pending that would, like SB 548, ban marriage under age 18.

Oregon should 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.

Tahirih Justice Center urges this Committee to report Senate Bill 548 favorably, setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 without exception.

ⁱ All research and reports are available online at www.tahirih.org/childmarriage.

ⁱⁱ See research compiled in “Child Marriage Poses Serious Risks to Children,” available at <https://www.tahirih.org/pubs/child-marriage-poses-serious-risks-to-children/>.