

May 2, 2025

Representative Jason Kropf
Chair, House Committee on Judiciary
900 Court St. NE,
Salem, OR 97301
Via Email: Rep.JasonKropf@oregonlegislature.gov

Re: S.B. 548 - Relating to Marriage - SUPPORT

Dear Chair Kropf and distinguished Committee Members,

On behalf of Equality Now, I urge lawmakers to address child marriage in the state of Oregon by increasing the legal age for marriage to 18 years, with no exceptions.

Equality Now is an international human rights organization working to protect and promote the human rights of all women and girls around the world. For over 30 years, Equality Now has partnered with international and civil society organizations, in the United States and globally, to strengthen laws and policies to advance gender equality and combat violence against women and girls, including sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and harmful practices.¹

Child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18 by international law, is recognized internationally as a violation of human rights, a form of violence against women and girls, and a harmful cultural practice that threatens the lives, well-being, and futures of girls and adolescents around the world.² Each year, 12 million girls globally are married before they become legal adults, most often to adult men many years their senior.³

¹ Equality Now, <https://www.equalitynow.org>

² International treaties and accompanying General Recommendations, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, recognize child marriage as a violation of fundamental human rights. *See also*, Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: United States Government's Response, USAID,

<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/child-early-and-forced-marriage-usg-response> (last visited Feb. 5, 2025);

U.S. Department of State, et al., United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (2024),

<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/US-Global-Strategy-to-Empower-Adolescent-Girls-2024.pdf>

³ *Where it happens*, Girls Not Brides, <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/where-child-marriage-happens/> (last visited Feb. 5, 2025).

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In the United States, nearly 300,000 children—primarily girls—were legally married between 2000 and 2018.⁴ **In Oregon alone, approximately 3,591 minors were married between 2000 and 2018.**⁵ Of these, records from the Oregon Department of Health show that 83% of children married between 2010 - 2014 were girls married to adult men.⁶

The devastating consequences of child marriage for women and girls are well documented,⁷ including in the United States. Like their counterparts in other countries, girls in the United States who are married before age 18 experience detrimental consequences even as adults. They report high rates of physical, sexual, financial, and/or emotional abuse during their marriages, as well as early and/or unplanned pregnancies and poor mental and physical health.⁸ Child marriage disrupts education and limits economic attainment, trapping girls in a cycle of poverty with little chance of becoming economically independent or secure.⁹ Girls who marry are more likely to drop out of high school, earn less over their lifetimes, and live in poverty than their peers who marry at later ages.¹⁰ Moreover, child marriage can easily result in the loss of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights, with survivors forced to have sex and endure pregnancy and childbirth without their consent.

International law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which the United States has ratified, requires the consent of both parties to the marriage. The United Nations Human Rights Committee thereby recommended the United States in December 2023 to “adopt measures at all levels in order to prohibit marriage under the age of 18.”¹¹

According to a recent UN Women report, as of 2019, girls in 93 countries were legally allowed to marry before the age of 18 with parental consent.¹² **This includes girls who live in Oregon, where 17 year olds can marry a person of any age with the consent of a parent or guardian.** While many policymakers believe consent requirements protect girls against manipulation, coercion, poor decisions, or other harms, survivors of child marriage tell us otherwise.¹³ In fact,

⁴ Fraidy Reiss, *Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications*, J. Adolescent Health (Dec. 2021), [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00341-4/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00341-4/fulltext); see also, Steinhaus & Thompson, (2020). *No Exceptions: A Synthesis of Evidence on the Prevalence and Impact of Child and Early Marriage in the United States and How This Compares to Existing Global Evidence*, International Center for Research on Women.

⁵ Reiss, *supra* note 3; Child Marriage in Oregon, Unchained at Last, <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-oregon/> (last visited Feb. 17, 2025).

⁶ *Id.*; Based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage certificate data retrieved from the Oregon Center for Health Statistics.

⁷ See, Banyan Global, & International Center for Research on Women, *Child, early, and forced marriage resource guide* (2015), https://2017-2020.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USAID_CEFM_Resource-Guide.PDF; see also, Rachel Kidman, *Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries*, Int’l J. Epidemiology (2017), <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/46/2/662/2417355>.

⁸ See, Steinhaus & Thompson, *supra* note 3; Aditi Wahi et al., *The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States*, Soc. Work Pub. Health (2019), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30747055>.

⁹ See, e.g., G. B. Dahl, *Early Teen Marriage and Future Poverty*, Demography, 47(3), 689–718 (2010), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3000061/>.

¹⁰ Steinhaus & Thompson, *supra* at note 3.

¹¹ UN Human Rights Committee, *Concluding Observations on the Fifth Periodic Report of the United States of America*, CCPR/C/USA/CO/5 (Dec. 7, 2023).

¹² UN Women et al., *Legislating and Enforcing the Minimum Age of Marriage* (2023), <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/legislating-and-enforcing-the-minimum-age-of-marriage-a-comparative-study-of-experiences-and-lessons-learned-en.pdf>.

¹³ See, e.g., Tahirih Justice, *Survivor Story Compilation* (2019), <https://www.tahirih.org/pubs/child-marriage-in-the-u-s-survivor-story-compilation>; Unchained at Last, *Survivor Stories*, <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/forced-and-child-marriage-survivor-stories/>.

in many cases, it is a parent or parents who are pressuring the child to marry—whether for cultural or economic reasons, to “legitimize” a teen pregnancy, or to cover up sexual abuse.

As you may be aware, the law in the state of Oregon currently imposes no protections for children facing marriage beyond one parent’s “written consent.”¹⁴ There are no requirements for judicial safeguards, background checks, or consultations with the minors themselves.

Also concerning is the current legal exception to statutory rape where the perpetrator is married to the minor. Sex with a 17 year old is a misdemeanor if the perpetrator is three or more years older, unless the two parties are married.¹⁵ Thus, a 17 year old could legally marry a person decades older with parental consent, while sexual acts with that same person would be considered a sex crime. **This is a significant problem, evidenced by the fact that more than 1,272 of the total child marriages in the state between 2000 - 2014 had a spousal age difference that should have constituted a sex crime.**¹⁶ To rectify this harmful inconsistency and ensure that all minors are protected from statutory rape, the minimum age of marriage must be raised to 18 without exception.

Even “voluntary” marriages involving minors risk significant harm to girls, given the child’s level of emotional, mental, and physical development, and the power differential inherent in most child marriages. As reported by the International Center on Research on Women in 2020, “the U.S. is not unique—there is no evidence to support the claim that child marriage in the U.S. is protective for girls [because of parental or judicial consent requirements] or that it results in better outcomes for these new families. Instead, the evidence shows that remaining unmarried, even in the case of pregnancy, has better outcomes for teen mothers and their children.”¹⁷

Regardless of where in the world she lives, child marriage deprives a girl of a future in which she can reach her full potential and furthers a dangerous cycle of poverty, oppression, and harm.

Equality Now strongly supports S.B. 548, which would set the legal age of marriage in Oregon at 18, without exceptions, consistent with international human rights law and standards. We commend the Oregon Senate for passing S.B. 548 with bi-partisan support, and further urge this Committee to take action to end this extremely harmful practice in the State.

Sincerely,



Anastasia Law
Equality Now

¹⁴ Oregon Revised Statutes §§ 106.010, 106.060.

¹⁵ *Id.*, §§ 163.315(1)(a), 163.445, 163.345(1),(3).

¹⁶ Alissa Koski, et. al., Child Marriage or Statutory Rape?, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (Mar., 2022), [https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X\(21\)00552-8/fulltext](https://www.jahonline.org/article/S1054-139X(21)00552-8/fulltext).

¹⁷ Steinhaus & Thompson, *supra* at note 3, at 3.