



March 28, 2025

Senator Anne Carney & Representative Amy Khun  
State House, Room 438  
100 State House Station  
Augusta, ME 04333  
Via Email: [JUD@legislature.maine.gov](mailto:JUD@legislature.maine.gov)

**Re: L.D. 1185, An Act to Prohibit Persons Under 18 Years of Age from Marrying - SUPPORT**

Dear Chair Carney, Chair Kuhn and Distinguished Committee Members,

On behalf of Equality Now, I urge lawmakers to address child marriage in the state of Maine 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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> Each year, 12 million girls globally are married before they become legal adults, most often to adult men many years their senior.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> 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>

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

**AFRICA**

1st Floor, Bishops Garden Towers, Bishops Road  
Mailing: PO Box 2018 - 00202, Nairobi, Kenya  
p. +254 20-2719-832 | f.: +254 20-2719-868  
[equalitynownairobi@equalitynow.org](mailto:equalitynownairobi@equalitynow.org)

**AMERICAS**

Church Street Station, PO Box 7160  
New York, NY 10008-7160, USA  
p. +1 212-586-0906  
[info@equalitynow.org](mailto:info@equalitynow.org)

**EUROPE**

c/o SEESAW  
84-86 Princess Street  
Manchester, M1 6NG, UK  
p. +44 (0)7445 699 3  
[ukinfo@equalitynow.org](mailto:ukinfo@equalitynow.org)

In the United States, nearly 300,000 children—primarily girls—were legally married between 2000 and 2018.<sup>4</sup> A majority of the girls married were older adolescents, but others were as young as 12 years old. **In Maine alone, approximately 1,174 minors were married between 2000 and 2023.**<sup>5</sup> Of these, records from the Maine Division of Public Health Systems show that 77% of children married between 2017 - 2023 were girls married to adult men.<sup>6</sup>

The devastating consequences of child marriage for women and girls are well documented,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Child marriage disrupts education and limits economic attainment, trapping girls in a cycle of poverty with little chance of becoming economically independent or secure.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> **This includes girls who live in Maine, where 17 year olds can marry a person of any age with the written consent of their parents or guardians or, in the absence of persons qualified to give consent, judicial approval.** While many policymakers believe consent requirements protect girls against manipulation, coercion,

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Reiss, *supra* note 3; Child Marriage in Maine, Unchained at Last, <https://www.unchainedatlast.org/child-marriage-in-maine/> (last visited Mar. 27, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*; Based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage certificate data retrieved from the Illinois Department of Health.

<sup>7</sup> 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](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>.

<sup>8</sup> 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>.

<sup>9</sup> 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/>.

<sup>10</sup> Steinhaus & Thompson, *supra* at note 3.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

<sup>12</sup> 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>.

poor decisions, or other harms, survivors of child marriage tell us otherwise.<sup>13</sup> In fact, 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 Maine currently imposes no protections for children facing marriage beyond their parent’s “written consent.” There are no requirements for background checks, judicial safeguards, or consultations with the minors themselves.

While Maine made significant legislative progress to address child marriage in 2020 and 2023, increasing the minimum age of to 16-years-old and subsequently to 17-years-old, these reforms did not go far enough. 79% of minors married in Maine prior to the 2023 law change were aged 17, thus the new law only protects 21% of the at-risk population by historical standards.<sup>14</sup> To protect all children, the minimum age for 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.”<sup>15</sup>

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 L.D. 1185, which would set the legal age of marriage in Maine at 18, without exceptions, consistent with international human rights law the 13 other states that have already set this standard. We urge the Committee to take action to end this extremely harmful practice in the state and respectfully request your Aye vote.

Sincerely,



Anastasia Law  
Program Officer for North America  
Equality Now

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<sup>13</sup> 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/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Child Marriage in Maine*, *supra* note 5. Based on Unchained’s analysis of marriage certificate data retrieved from the Illinois Department of Health

<sup>15</sup> Steinhaus and Thompson, *supra* at note 3, at 3.