

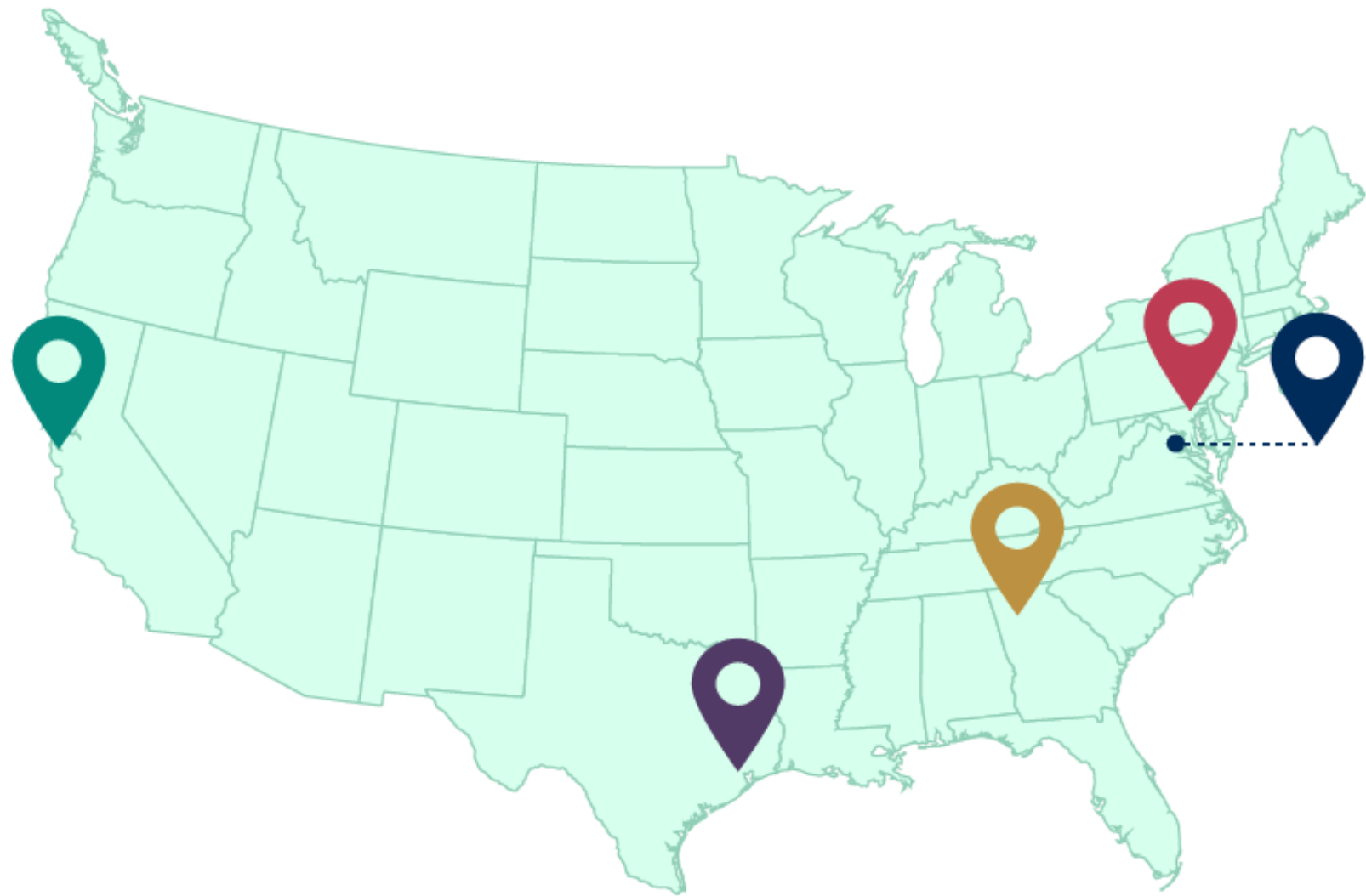
Victory in DC!

Progress and the Road Ahead to End Child Marriage

April 8, 2025 | 1:00 PM–2:00 PM EDT

Casey Swegman: Director of Public Policy
Alex Goyette: Public Policy Manager

Tahirih's Services



Legal Services

We represent immigrant women and girls who we believe have a legitimate claim to legal status under U.S. immigration law as survivors of gender-based violence.

Social Services

We connect our clients to shelter, health services, food pantries, and other services so they can gain greater control over their lives.

Forced Marriage Initiative

We provide confidential support to individuals with lawful status to the U.S. who are facing or who have faced a forced marriage in this country or abroad.

FORCED MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

Tahirih survey confirms that forced marriage is a problem in the U.S., with 3,000 known or suspected cases identified by survey respondents.



When

Established in 2011

Why

Service providers did not know how to respond

What

Research, national survey, coalition-building, direct services





What we do

- Spearhead campaigns to end child marriage in the U.S. in partnership with survivors and local service providers
- Develop resources and practical tools
- Draft recommendations for law and policy change
- Provide direct services nationally to individuals of all ages & backgrounds with status in the U.S.
- Chair the National Forced Marriage Working Group
- Co-Chair of Girls Not Brides U.S.A
- Forced Marriage defined in VAWA 2022 Reauthorization
- FMI funded by OVW to provide TTA

FORCED MARRIAGE INITIATIVE

To date, the FMI has provided direct support or technical assistance to over 1,000 individuals and have trained over 4,000 service providers.



Forced Marriage





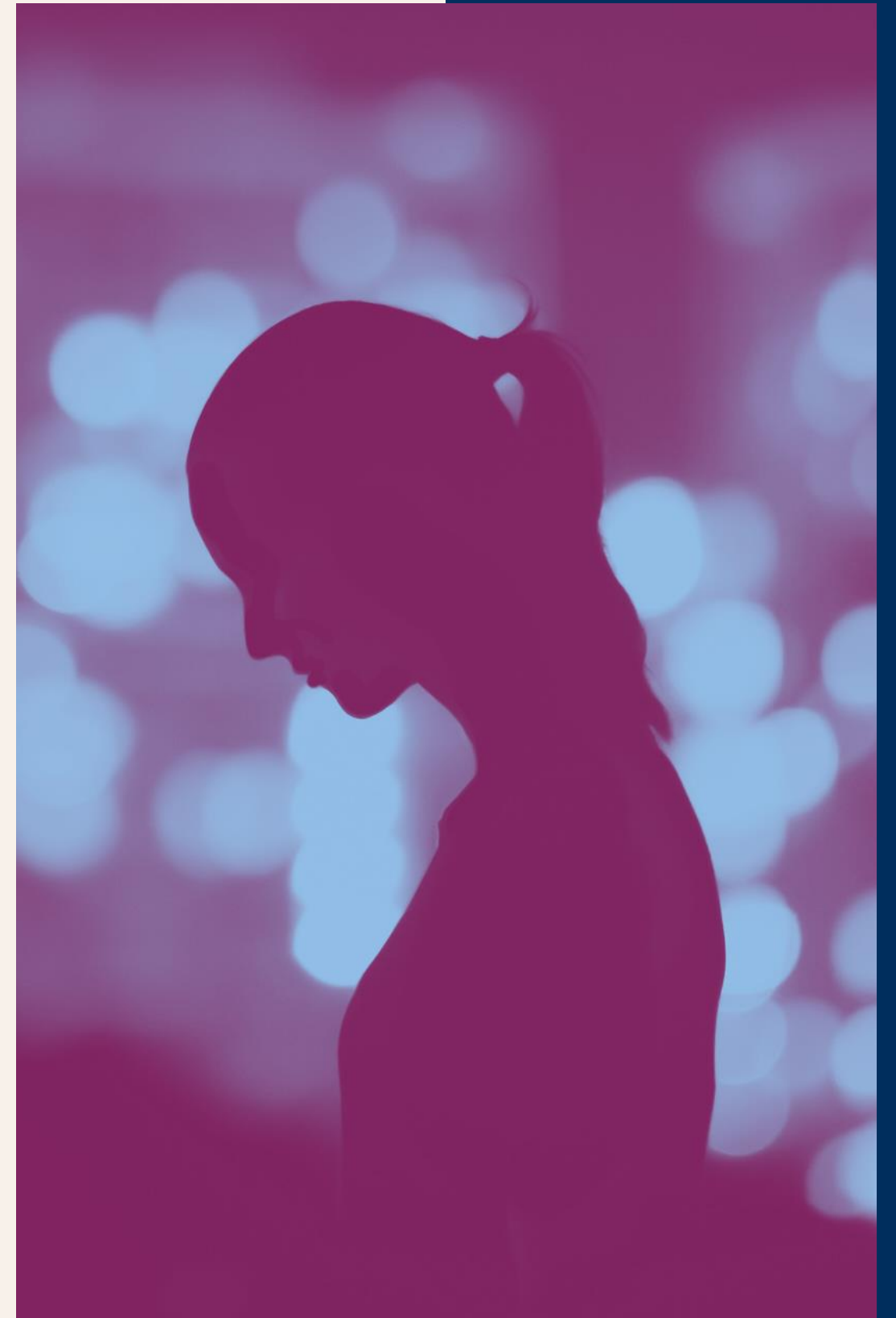
WHAT IS FORCED MARRIAGE?

Forced marriage IS:

A marriage where one or both people do not (or cannot) consent to the marriage, and typically involves elements of force, fraud, or coercion.

Forced marriage IS NOT:

Arranged marriage, in which families may take the lead, but the ultimate choice to marry remains with the individual.





FORCED MARRIAGE AT THE INTERSECTION

Forced marriage is often one part of a spectrum of other harms that a person who is forced to marry may face in their lifetime.

- Child Abuse
- Domestic and Family Violence
- Stalking
- Dating Violence
- Human Trafficking
- Rape and Sexual Assault
- Female Genital Cutting

“Advocates speak to many women who are facing domestic violence, abuse, and/or sexual assault in their marriage.

Only later does it emerge that the conditions upon which they may have been married were under duress... and ultimately against their will.” (Debjani Roy, 2011)





HIGHTENED RISK: AGE



Lack of knowledge of their rights



Law enforcement defers to parents



Typically living with perpetrators, increasing risk of repercussions for seeking support or services



Reliance on parents, family, and community for support



Inexperience navigating the world independently



Child Marriage in the United States





CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

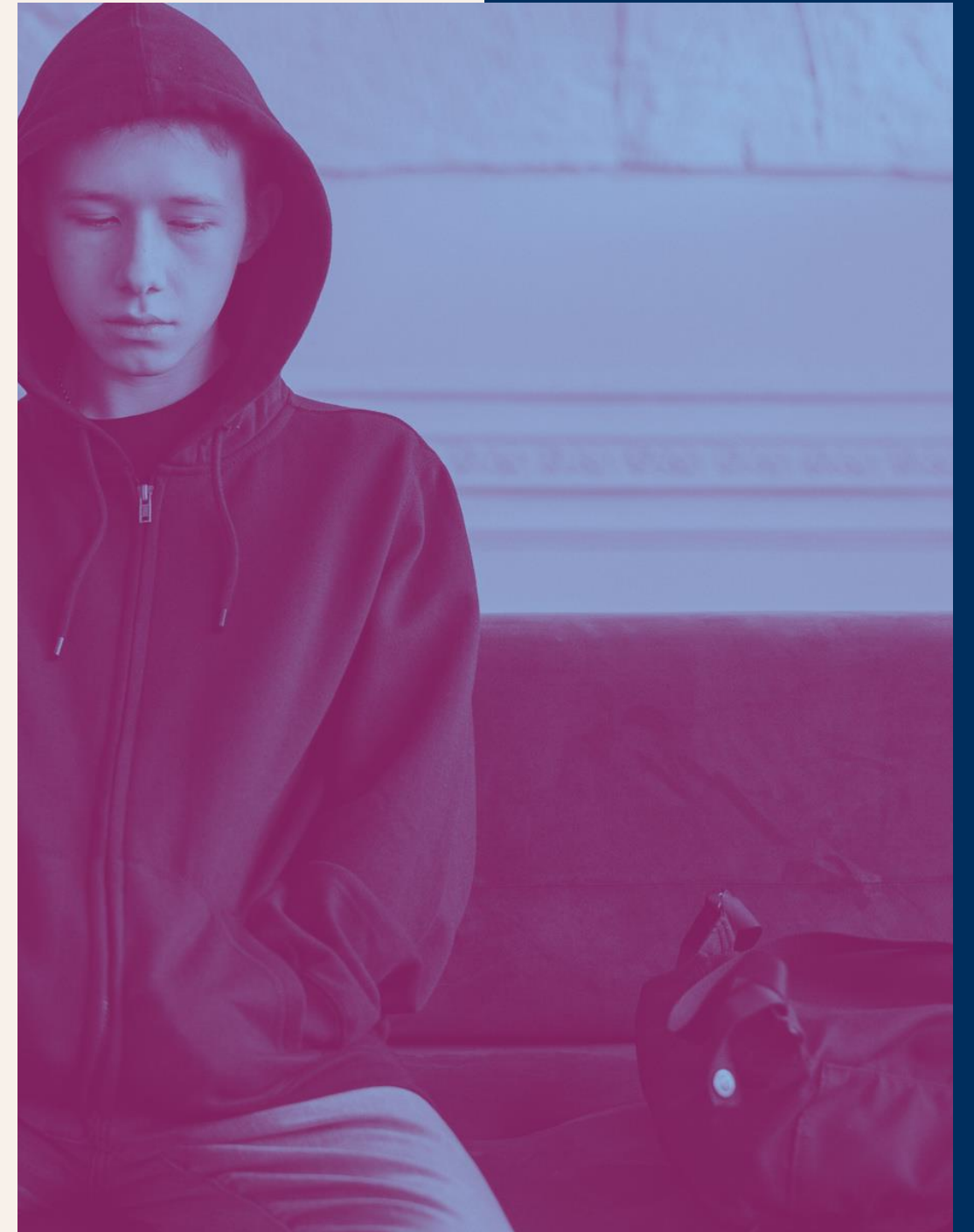
Over 300,000 minors married in the U.S. 2000-2018.

Most U.S. cases involve several concerning factors:

- Most cases involve girls marrying adult men
- Some of those adults were decades older
- Marriage ages lower than age of consent
- Parental consent exceptions enable parental coercion

“That little girl was me, and my perfect soccer mom did not look like an abuser. No one saw her for what she was, and no one helped me.”

Survivor story compilation





HARMS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

Health Impacts

Women who marry before age 19 have a 23% greater risk of developing a serious health condition.

Teen girls who marry tend to have more children, earlier, and more closely spaced.

Young women and girls aged 16-19 face intimate partner violence victimization rates almost 3x the national average.



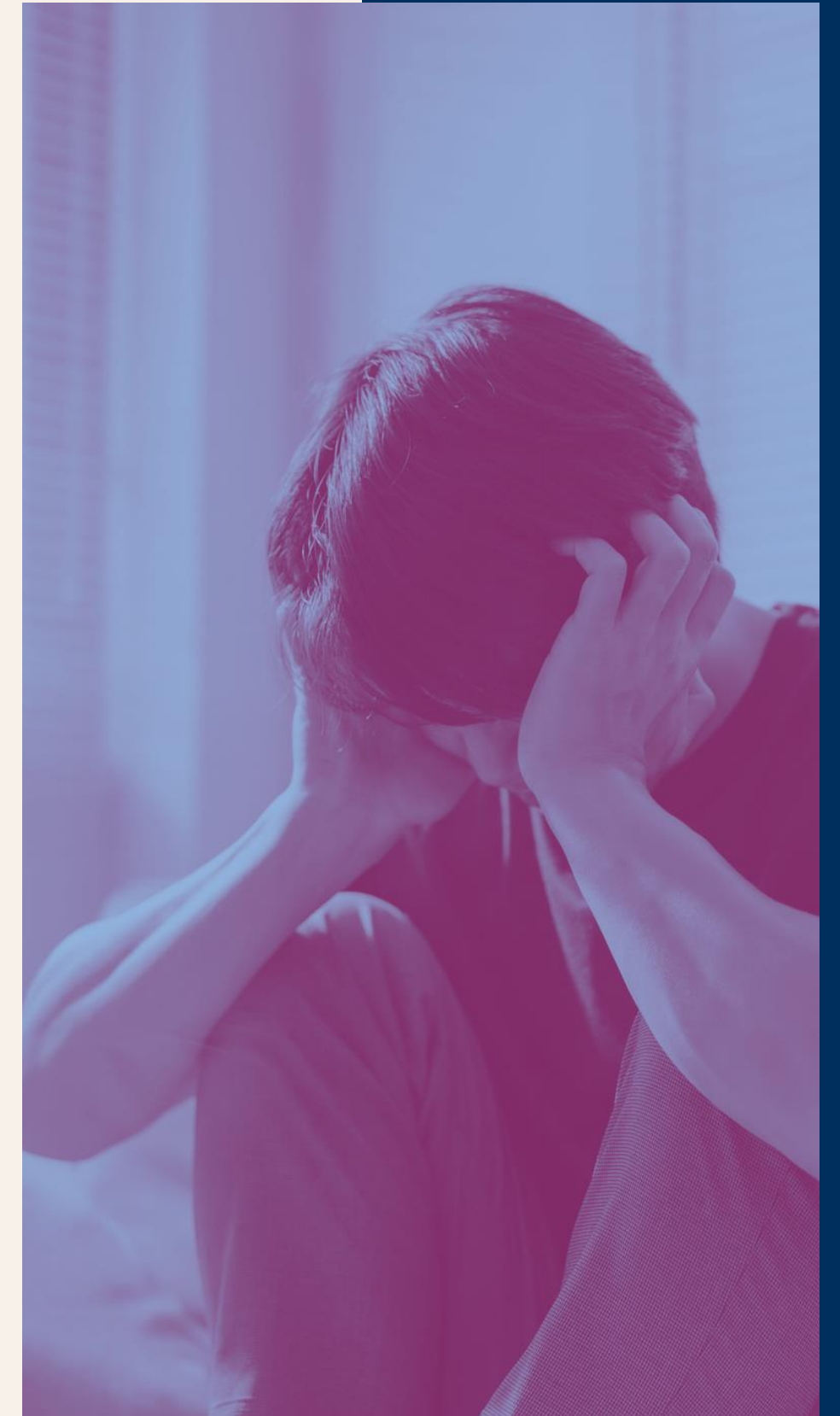


HARMS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

Mental Health Impacts

Women who marry underage present with more psychiatric disorders, including mood and anxiety disorders, and a nearly 3x greater prevalence of antisocial personality disorder.

Social isolation and feeling a lack of control over their lives can contribute to a "child bride's" poor mental health. In fact, agencies working with girls facing or trying to escape forced marriages report that nearly all have contemplated or attempted suicide.





HARMS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

Social Impacts

70-80% of child marriages end in divorce.

Nearly 1 in 4 child marriages end before the minor turns 18.

Married children face isolation from support networks such as school, friends, and family.

Impacts increase risk of other forms of harm and often result in cyclical and intergenerational harm.





HARMS OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE U.S.

Economic Impacts

Girls who marry underage are 31% more likely to live in future poverty.

Teen mothers who marry then divorce more than double their likelihood of poverty.

Girls who marry under age 19 are 50% more likely to drop out of high school, and 4x less likely to graduate college.





Ending Child Marriage





Child Marriage Laws

- * Timeline:
 - 2015: Every state + DC allowed child marriage
 - 2016: Tahirih's Virginia campaign
 - 2017: Report on statutes in all 50 states + DC
- * What we found:
 - Minimum ages...with exceptions
 - Parental consent enabled common perpetrators
 - Pregnancy exceptions
 - Little or no oversight for clerks
 - When judge was involved, often very limited role
- * Tahirih, partners, & survivor-advocates launched a national campaign to end child marriage.
 - Reforms in 35 states since 2015



FALLING THROUGH *the cracks*



HOW LAWS ALLOW CHILD MARRIAGE
TO HAPPEN IN TODAY'S AMERICA
AUGUST 2017



Child Marriage Entering 2025

Underage marriage illegal in 13 states:



Delaware



Pennsylvania



Rhode Island



Massachusetts



Minnesota



New York



Vermont



Virginia



Michigan



New Jersey



Connecticut



Washington



New Hampshire

Laws have broadly improved since 2015:

- Limiting marriage to legal adults: 0 → 5
- Age floors:
 - Seventeen: 2 → 10
 - Sixteen: 12 → 21
 - Below Sixteen: 9 → 2
 - No Minimum Age: 28 → 4



Tahirih.org/childmarriage



Child Marriage in DC





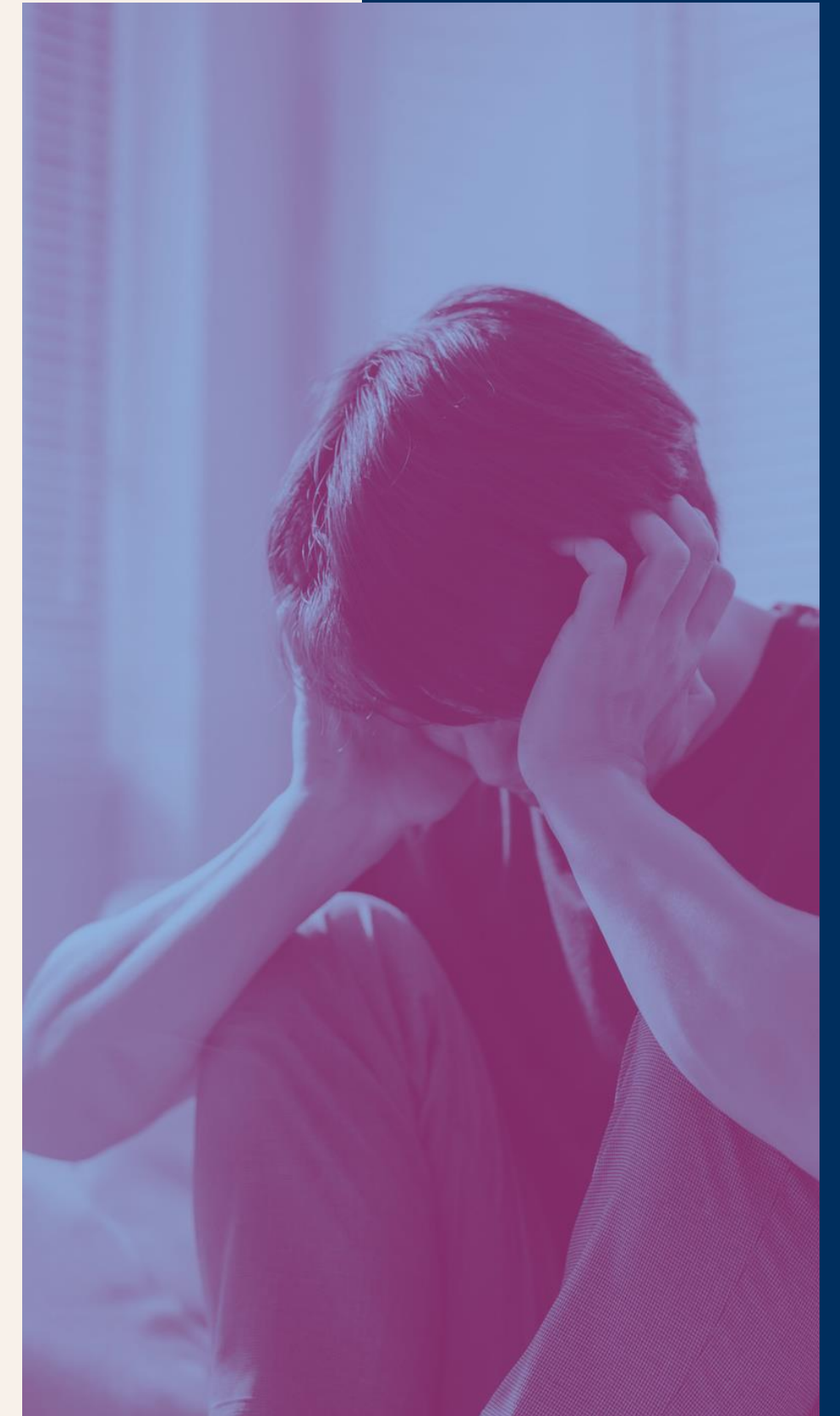
Child Marriage in DC

DC Law

- Age floor: 16
- Written consent of one parent
 - Consent of the child not addressed
- Clerk only – no judge, no oversight

DC Data: 2012-2022

- 41 children married
- Vast majority married an adult
- Included adults more than 2x the age of the child
- Upticks after nearby states passed reforms





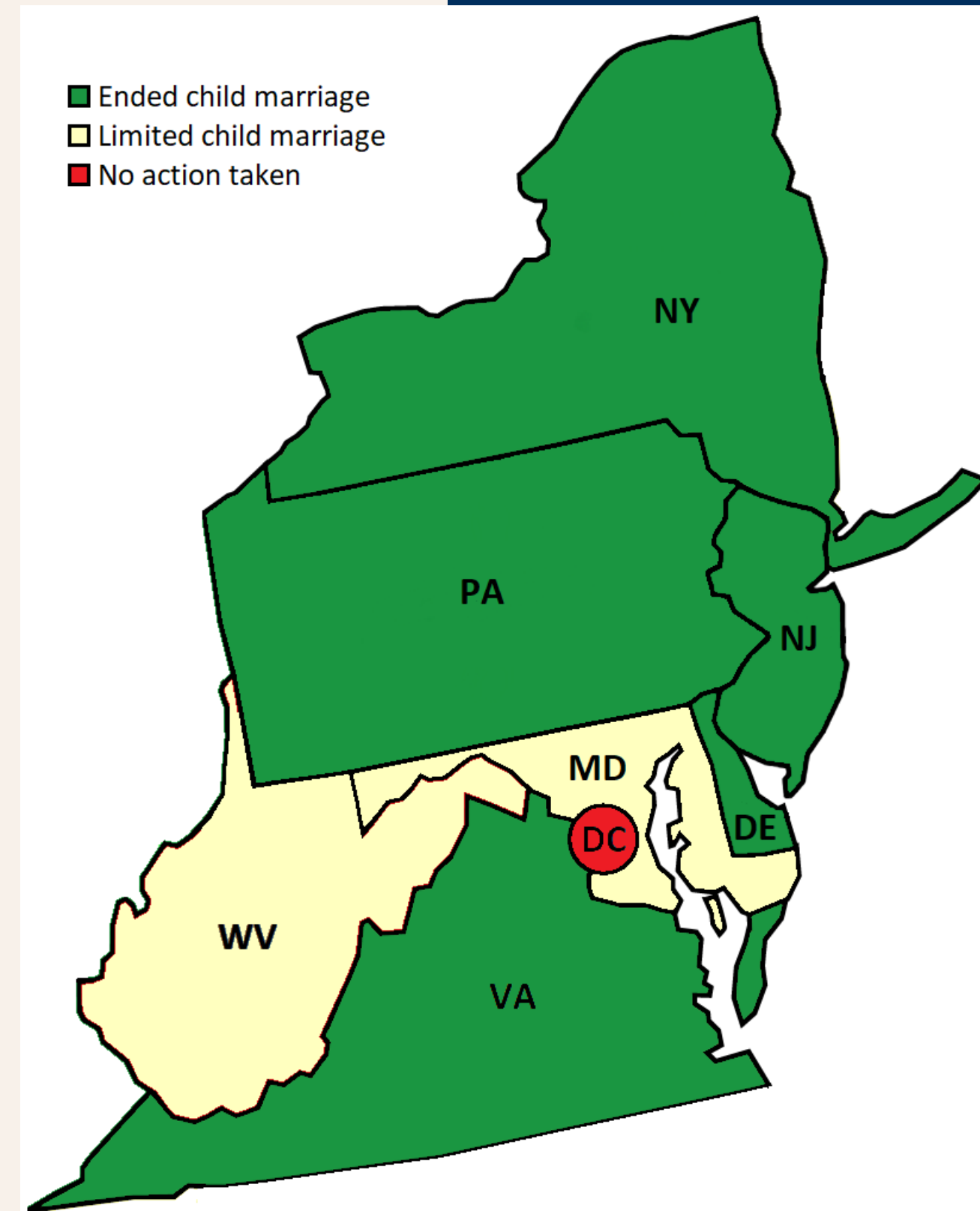
Regional Picture

Mid-Atlantic Leadership

- 2016: VA limits marriage to legal adults & launches national movement
- 2017: NY limits marriage to legal adults
- 2018-2024: DE, NJ, PA, NY, and VA all ban child marriage
- 2022-2023: MD and WV restrict child marriage
 - MD includes a residency requirement

Regional Risk

- Cross-border “policy shopping” observed already
 - VA → MD data
 - Delaware reform
 - DC uptick post-2022

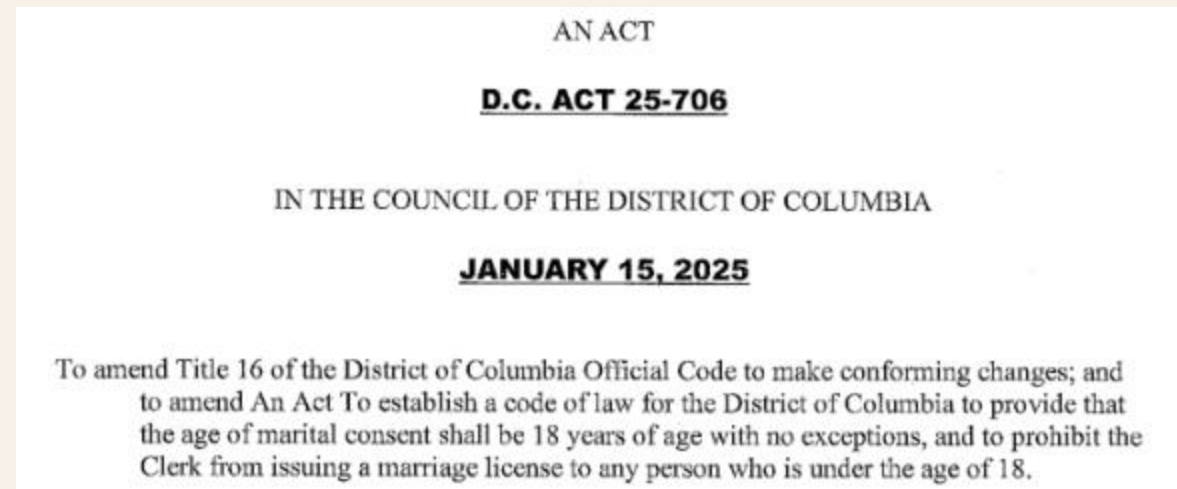




Public Campaign Timeline

- 9/16: BN 25-955 introduced
- 10/21: Public hearing
- 11/26: Committee vote
- 12/17 Council vote
- 1/15 Mayor signature
- 2/6-3/21 Congressional review

Child marriage banned: 3/21/2025

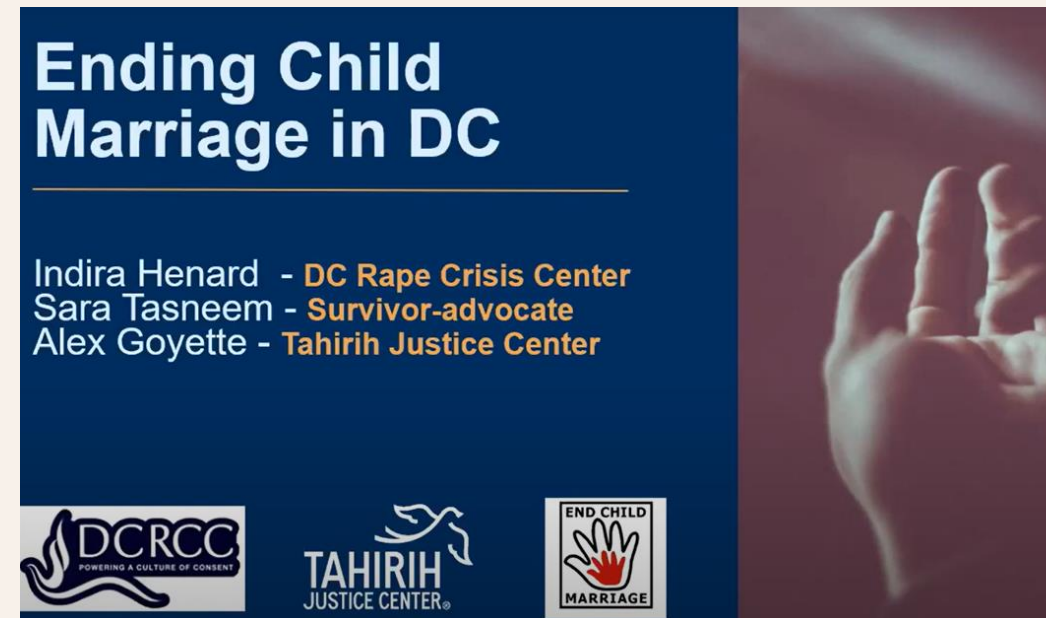


**DC Mayor Bowser
has signed the
Child Marriage
Prohibition
Amendment Act!**



Behind the Scenes: Prep

- 2019: Initial outreach
- 2022:
 - Gathered data
 - Identified local co-leads
 - Informed survivor-advocates
- 2023:
 - Launched campaign with webinar
 - Drafted legislation
 - Met potential sponsors
 - Expanded coalition
- 2024:
 - Bill finalized & introduced by Councilmember Pinto





Behind the Scenes: Campaign

- Entire time: media, social media, coalition meetings and updates
- January-June: coalition building
- July-September: co-sponsors; mayor's office
- 7/25-7/26: lobby days
- **9/16: BN 25-955 introduced**
 - Language fixes
- 9/17: report release
- 2 survivor trainings re: advocacy process
- Amendment suppression
- **10/21: Public hearing**
 - Follow-up with council
- **11/26: Committee vote**
 - Follow-up with council
- **12/17 Council vote**
 - Follow-up with Mayor's office
- **1/15 Mayor signature**
 - Meeting with Del. Holmes Norton
- 2/6-3/21 Congressional review



★ what is a public hearing?

- opportunity for the public (& 'experts') to weigh in on legislation creates
- official hearing record that can be referred to during markup opportunity
- for folks to show-up for things they care about!

★ how to participate in a hearing

- rules vary by committee; always check "registrar"
- live and written testimony are most common; video, voicemail and calls are also possible!

★ what happens next?

- moving out of committee organizing
-



Child marriage banned: 3/21/2025...or 3/27/25?



What's Next?





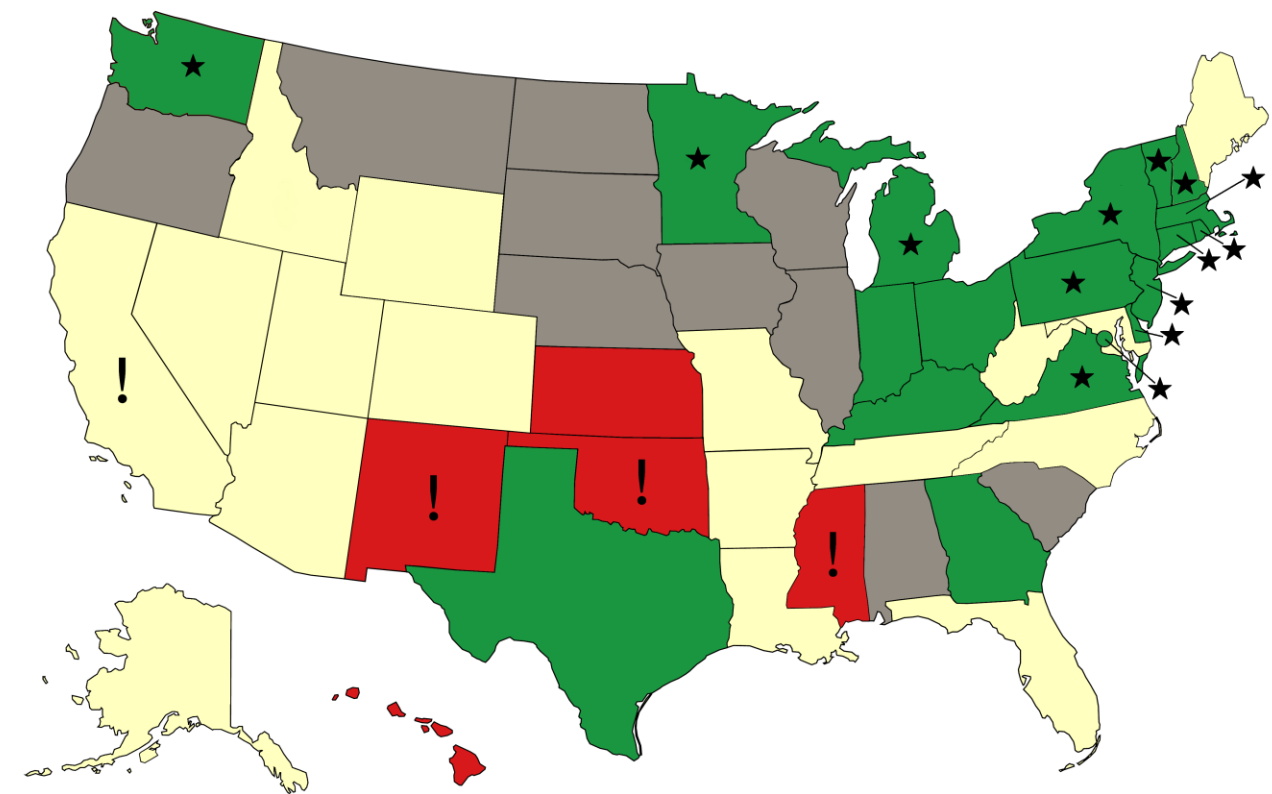
State Legislation

2025 Sessions Ongoing:

- 15 states introduced legislation
 - Limit passed: Utah
 - Promising bans : Missouri, Oregon
 - Done: South Dakota
 - Opposition: New Hampshire
 - Pending: Arizona, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia
- Tahirih is supporting, amending, and opposing all bills as needed

Future Sessions

- 37 states have not banned child marriage
- 3 states have never even introduced legislation
- Other issues:
 - Repealing spousal rape exceptions
 - Improving protection orders for people facing forced marriage
- Tahirih trains survivors & advocates, educates media, publishes reports, and engages lawmakers all year long





Federal Action Needed

- Some Progress:
 - Defined forced marriage in VAWA (2022)
 - Repealed spousal defense to sexual assault
- Immigration law:
 - No minimum ages set by statute for petitioner or beneficiary of spouse and fiancé visas.
 - UCSIS internal policy defers to state law where couple intends to live
- No prohibitions on child marriage on federal land or at federal facilities
- No incentives or support for states to make change

From 2007-2017, USCIS approved over 8,500 marriage-based visa petitions involving a minor.





Child Marriage Prevention Act

Comprehensive Approach to Ending Child Marriage

- Moral Message: Congress wants to see the end of child marriage in the US
 - National Commission to Combat Child Marriage
- Encourage, incentivize, and support state action
 - Increased funding for states that have banned child marriage
 - Grants for task forces to examine the issue in states that have not
 - Model state statute produced by Attorney General
- Close protection gaps in federal law
 - Ban child marriage at federal facilities & on federal land
 - Set minimum age requirements for US petitioners & foreign beneficiaries of spouse & fiancé visas



We are here to help!

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QUESTIONS?

