

New Hampshire bill seeks exemption to law banning child marriage

If passed into law, New Hampshire's Bill H.B. 433 would allow an adult of any age who is on active duty in the military to legally marry a 17-year-old.

NEW YORK, NY, UNITED STATES, March 25, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Less than three months after New Hampshire became the latest U.S. state to officially ban marriage under 18 without exception, New Hampshire's House passed a [new bill that would allow 17-year-olds to marry](#) if they or their partner are on active duty in the military. Voted through on March 20, by 193-178, Bill H.B. 433 will now go to the State's Senate for a vote.



Photo credit: Equality Now

If the bill passes, protection against child marriage will be weakened in New Hampshire, becoming another example of how the legal rights of women and girls are increasingly being rolled back in many parts of the world.

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Anastasia Law, Equality Now

CHILD MARRIAGE REMAINS A WIDESPREAD ISSUE IN THE U.S.

Child marriage is defined as a marriage or union where one party is under 18. Despite being a violation of international human rights law, this harmful practice remains legal in 37 U.S. states.

From 2000 to 2018, around [300,000 girls were married in the U.S.](#), mostly involving girls who were wed to adult men. In New Hampshire, at least 215 minors were married during this period.

In June 2024, New Hampshire signed a law prohibiting anyone under the age of 18 from

obtaining a marriage license, with no exceptions allowed. This law went into effect in January 2025, following years of dedicated campaigning by child marriage survivors and civil society organizations such as Unchained At Last, a survivor-led nonprofit dedicated to ending child marriage in the U.S.

Supporters of New Hampshire's new minimum age of marriage bill argue that a military exception ensures access to military benefits. However, a number of military benefits, including life insurance and death benefits, can be designated without marriage.

Opponents of the bill highlight that access to military benefits such as health insurance and housing—which are only available through marriage—should not come at the expense of heightened risks accompanying child marriage. These include domestic violence, sexual abuse, health complications associated with early pregnancies, and loss of education and curtailed economic opportunities that lead to financial dependence and vulnerability.

By requiring just one parental signature to authorize the marriage, H.B. 433 lacks basic safeguards and opens the door for an adult service member of any age to legally marry a 17-year-old civilian. This is precisely the type of dynamic that New Hampshire's existing law is meant to protect against.

No U.S. state currently has an exception allowing for child marriage in a military context. If passed, H.B. 433 would set a dangerous precedent, potentially encouraging other states that have established 18 as the minimum marriage age to introduce similar exemptions.

BACKSLIDING ON LEGAL RIGHTS AND PROTECTIONS

Across the world, governments are increasingly making exceptions to human rights standards in the name of religious, institutional, or political interests.

In January 2025, Iraq passed a regressive amendment to its personal status laws governing family matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The amendment allowed different legal standards to be applied to different religious denominations and permitted the minimum marriage age to be lowered to under 18 years old. Following strong opposition from women's rights organizations and other advocates, implementation of the controversial bill was suspended. However, child marriage remains legal in many countries worldwide.

While New Hampshire and Iraq are located in different parts of the world, there are clear parallels. Recent legal shifts reflect a broader global trend: the rollback of hard-won protections under the pretense of institutional interests.

THE U.S. HAS INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

In December 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Committee, under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, [urged the U.S. to prohibit marriage under the age of 18](#) without exception. Carve-outs, like that in H.B. 433, not only undermine that goal but actively contradict human rights commitments. Allowing exceptions signals a dangerous precedent that certain people or institutions are above the law when it comes to protecting the rights of children.

Thirty years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the U.S. was one of 189 countries from around the world that pledged to take action to achieve gender equality. This cannot be achieved as long as children can legally marry adults.

This commitment was reaffirmed through Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, which calls to end child marriage by 2030. H.B. 433 represents a step backward not just for New Hampshire, but also for the U.S.'s international commitments.

LEGAL RIGHTS MUST BE DEFENDED

Where women's and girls' rights begin to be eroded, the removal of one right is often followed by the loss of others – from reproductive autonomy and access to education to economic empowerment. Regression is rarely an isolated incident.

The good news is that backsliding is not inevitable. Since 2020, 13 U.S. states have voted to raise the minimum age of marriage to 18 without exception. And in March 2025, the Government of Kuwait published an official decree raising the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18. These advances prove that progress is possible.

“The New Hampshire Senate must uphold the rights of all girls and reject Bill H.B. 433. In the face of growing global backlash against women and girls' rights, the State cannot afford to make exceptions that place children at risk,” explains Equality Now's Anastasia Law.

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Equality Now is an international human rights organization dedicated to protecting and promoting the rights of all women and girls worldwide. Its work is organized around four main program areas: Achieving Legal Equality, Ending Sexual Violence, Ending Harmful Practices, and Ending Sexual Exploitation, with a cross-cutting focus on the unique challenges facing adolescent girls.

Equality Now combines grassroots activism with legal advocacy at the international, regional, and national levels to achieve systemic change, and collaborates with local partners to ensure

governments enact and enforce laws and policies that uphold women's and girls' rights.

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