California finally passes law banning child marriage

Child marriage survivors and campaigners celebrate California's new law setting 18 as the minimum age of marriage without exception.



Photo credit: Unchained At Last, Beth Heiserman, Zonta Club of West Los Angeles Chain, Sacramento, California, 2022

SACRAMENTO, CA, UNITED STATES, September 30, 2026 / EINPresswire.com/ -- California has finally banned child marriage. After nearly a decade of campaigning by Unchained At Last along with survivors, grassroots organizations, and human rights organizations such as Equality Now, lawmakers have passed Bill AB-1267, establishing 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage without exception. The law closes a longstanding loophole that allowed children of any age to marry with parental consent and judicial approval.

> A child marriage ban in California means that no child has to grow up and realize the law failed to protect them the way it failed to protect me."
>
> *Courtney Stodden, child marriage survivor and activist*

The victory is a milestone for girls' rights and for advocates who watched reform efforts repeatedly falter for almost a decade.

Sara Tasneem, a child marriage survivor who campaigned for the change, explained, "Seeing this legislation finally cross the finish line after nine years of advocacy will bring tears of both joy and pain. Reliving our trauma year after year has been exhausting, but survivor advocates have poured their hearts and souls into this fight to ensure the next generation is protected from the harms of child marriage.

"This historic milestone is a testament to the relentless, collaborative efforts of everyone who

refused to give up on protecting children," said Tasneem.

CALIFORNIA WAS ONE OF ONLY THREE U.S. STATES WITH NO MINIMUM MARRIAGE AGE

Until now, California law allowed a child of any age to marry with the written consent of just one parent, even a non-custodial parent, and judicial approval. This absence of a minimum marriage age left the state far behind national and international standards. Only Mississippi and New Mexico share this unfortunate distinction in the U.S., while just 2% of high-income countries and 4% of low-income countries globally have no legislated minimum age.



Photo credit: Unchained At Last

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Limited legal rights of minors in California leave them unable to protect themselves from forced marriage. They cannot leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring independent legal action. Marriage-based emancipation comes too late, changing a child's legal status only after marriage and still without conferring full adult rights.

California's law also created risks beyond the state. Because federal spousal and fiancé visa requirements defer to the marriage age of the couple's intended state of residence, a California visa could be approved for a child of any age. This opened a pathway for trafficking disguised as marriage, letting U.S. citizen adults bring foreign child spouses into California, and non-U.S. citizen adults to marry California minors to gain legal status.

The vast majority of child marriages involve girls wed to adult men. Unchained At Last, a survivor-led nonprofit organization dedicated to ending forced and child marriage across the U.S., estimates that in California, roughly 34,875 girls were married between 2000 and 2021.

HOW CHILD MARRIAGE HARMS GIRLS

Child marriage is a grave human rights violation with consequences reaching far beyond the wedding day. Girls married before 18 face far greater risks of physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse, early and unwanted pregnancies they may not control, and poor mental and physical health.

Child brides are more likely to drop out of school, curtailing their educational, employment and economic opportunities and deepening dependence on their spouses. These disadvantages can persist into adulthood, with survivors tending to earn less and experience greater economic insecurity and higher rates of poverty than those who marry as adults.

In 2023, the United Nations Human Rights Committee specifically called on the U.S. to prohibit marriage under 18. California's new law represents an important step toward that obligation.

WHY DID IT TAKE CALIFORNIA SO LONG TO BAN CHILD MARRIAGE?

In 2017, when then-State Senator Jerry Hill introduced the first bill to ban child marriage, advocates expected California to lead. Instead came a years-long process of repeated bills, committee defeats, and amendments, alongside disagreements among women's and girls' rights organizations.

Legislation was substantially amended in 2018, leaving a loophole that let the practice continue. Subsequent attempts, including one in the 2023-24 session, also failed to secure a ban.

At various points, reproductive rights and civil liberties organizations raised concerns that an absolute marriage ban could limit young people's decisions about abortion and medical care. Advocates for a minimum age of 18 argued that, as the U.S. and California supreme courts have noted, abortion (and, by the same logic, medical care) is time-sensitive, while marriage is not: A girl cannot wait until 18 for an abortion, but she can wait to marry.

The debate exposed a familiar tension within the human rights movement: How can organisations upholding the rights of women and girls keep different priorities from becoming competing causes?

HOW WAS A CHILD MARRIAGE BAN IN CALIFORNIA FINALLY SECURED?

The campaign that secured the ban was built through years of advocacy, learning, and coalition-building.

Unchained At Last convened the California Coalition to End Child Marriage, bringing together roughly 30 members: survivors, local and national organizations, and high-profile advocates such as Chelsea Clinton. Several have been involved since the original 2017 effort.

Advocates, led by Unchained At Last, developed legislative materials, raised public awareness,

and worked directly with legislators to build understanding of the need for an absolute minimum age.

They also drew on lessons from campaigns nationwide, where Unchained At Last's advocacy moved 17 states to establish 18 as the minimum legal age since the first California bill was introduced.

Fraidy Reiss, founder and executive director of Unchained At Last, reflected, "I admit, I was starting to think California would be the last state in the union to ban child marriage. But every setback over the last nine years taught us something, strengthened the coalition and made us better advocates. We refused to give up because we knew that millions of girls in the Golden State were relying on us."

Survivors were central, bringing firsthand experience to lawmakers and the public and demonstrating why measures like requiring a judge's approval before allowing a child marriage are not enough.

"A child marriage ban in California means that no child has to grow up and realize the law failed to protect them the way it failed to protect me," shared survivor activist Courtney Stodden.

"I've spent years turning one painful chapter of my life into purpose, and seeing California finally put children before loopholes would be proof that survivors' voices can help change the future," said Stodden.

"Because of what was done to me as a child, I carry pain and abandonment that defies explanation," said Christina Sutton, a child marriage survivor and advocate. "By passing AB-1267, California has finally vindicated child marriage survivors like me. Every day I work to be the voice I never had, protecting children from abuse. This is a win, but more work remains."

WHAT WILL CALIFORNIA'S CHILD MARRIAGE BAN MEAN FOR THE NATION?

The new law brings California in line with international human rights law, which obliges States to prevent and protect children from abuse.

As the most populous state, California's ban sends a strong message to the remaining 32 states where children can still legally marry.

Unchained At Last found that between 2000 and 2021, 86% of all children married in the U.S. were girls, with most wed to adult men. At least 66,415 of these marriages involved a child either too young to legally consent to sex or an age gap large enough that sexual intercourse would be considered statutory rape under state law.

Before the ban, 19 states, including California, had an explicit legal exception or defense to

statutory rape laws in instances of marriage, effectively shielding adults from prosecution for engaging in otherwise criminal sexual activity with children. California's new law voids this exception, except for children in existing marriages.

The U.S. has no federal minimum marriage age, leaving states to set their own.

California's new law shows even longstanding legal loopholes can be closed when advocates work together.

"California took nearly a decade to get here, but we know legal change requires perseverance," said Anastasia Law, Legal Advisor with Equality Now. "This victory belongs to every survivor and advocate who refused to accept that protecting children from marriage could not be made a legal priority."

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ABOUT: Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming 140 discriminatory laws globally, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities and nations, both now and for generations to come.

Working with partners at national, regional and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all. For more information about child marriage in the United States, please review our factsheet and reporting toolkit. For more details, go to www.equalitynow.org

About: Unchained At Last is a survivor-led nonprofit organization dedicated to ending forced and child marriage in the United States through direct services and systems change.

Unchained provides crucial legal and social services, always for free, to help people in the U.S. to escape arranged/forced marriages and rebuild their lives. At the same time, Unchained pushes for social, policy and legal change; the organization started and now leads a growing national movement to eliminate child marriage in every U.S. state and at the federal level. For more details, go to www.unchainedatlast.org

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