

**Senate State, Veterans, & Military Affairs**

**02/17/2026 02:00 PM**

**SB26-048 Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval**

**Typed Text of Testimony Submitted**

<b>Name, Position, Representing</b>	<b>Typed Text of Testimony</b>
Brittany Wright  For  themselves	Chair, Vice Chair, and Council members, what a privilege it is to participate in the systems that allow every Americans voice to be heard. My name is Brittany, in 2013 after being recovered by the police I was forced to marry an adult man at the age of 17 right here in Colorado. But I'm not here to give you a sob story. In fact, If you would indulge me by answering a question with a raising of your hand if you are willing and able, if you have been or are married did you date your spouse before you married them? Thank you for your honesty. So, when is it ok for adults to date children? Is it ok at 16 when he took me across state lines into Utah without the consent of my guardians, which is a class 4 felony in the state of Colorado. Is it ok at 15 when he sent 100 messages urging me to show him my body, usually resulting in exploitation charges? Is it ok at 14, when he came in to use the bathroom while I was showering and molested me, a class 4 felony? Is it ok at 13, when he groped me on the couch during video game time, told me how beautiful I was. The question today isn't whether or not children should have the 'right' to marry. The question is whether or not you will continue allowing the grooming of Colorado's children. I am happily remarried now, almost 9 years, funny how that works out when itâ€™s your own choice. And we have a wonderful daughter, born here in Colorado. As her mother, I demand that you honor her safety and as a survivor, please, honor the little girl that I once was. Thank you.
Ranelle Randles  For  themselves	Dear Chair Wallace, Vice-Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members,

	<p>I am submitting this testimony to encourage you to pass this bill out of the committee and request that you further support and actively engage in moving this bill through the Senate and ultimate passage into law.</p> <p>Child marriage destroys nearly every aspect of American children’s lives, including their health, education and economic opportunities. It even undermines their physical safety: Individuals in the U.S. who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies. And the impacts of underage marriage are even more severe for teen mothers. Teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single – and marriage before age 18 has a 70-80% divorce rate. Child marriage is recognized globally as a harmful practice that disempowers women and girls in particular and hinders gender equality. The U.S. State Department has called child marriage a human rights abuse.</p>
<p>Sharon Goodman For themselves</p>	<p>Dear Chair Wallace, Vice-Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members,</p> <p>I submit this testimony to encourage you to pass this bill out of the committee and request that you further support and actively engage in moving this bill through the Senate and ultimate passage into law.</p> <p>Girls in the U.S. who marry before age 19 are 50% more likely than unmarried girls to drop out of high school and 4 times less likely to complete college.</p> <p>Thank you for considering my testimony when considering your vote,</p> <p>Sincerely,</p>

	<p>Sharon Goodman</p> <p>2879 Hartwick Circle</p> <p>Longmont, CO 80503</p>
<p>Tammi McMahan</p> <p>For themselves</p>	<p>My name is Tammi, and I am here today as a survivor of child marriage and as an advocate for laws that protect children.</p> <p>I want to be very clear about what this bill does and what it does not do.</p> <p>SB 048 does not take away the right of adults to marry.</p> <p>What it does is recognize a legal and constitutional truth:</p> <p>Children do not have the capacity to enter binding civil contracts. In every other area of law, we acknowledge this.</p> <p>A minor cannot:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>sign a lease</li> <li>hire an attorney</li> <li>file most legal actions on their own</li> <li>enter into contracts</li> </ul> <p>Yet in states that allow child marriage, a child can be placed into one of the most serious and life-altering legal contracts that exists.</p> <p>That is not a fundamental right.</p> <p>That is a legal contradiction.</p> <p>I was married as a child.</p> <p>What was called "legal" in my case did not mean it was safe.</p> <p>It did not mean I had the power to refuse.</p> <p>It did not mean I had the ability to leave.</p> <p>And that is the reality for minors in marriage:</p>

	<p>You cannot have free and full consent when one party is legally a child.</p> <p>This is why child marriage is recognized globally as a human-rights violation.</p> <p>It impacts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>education</li><li>health</li><li>economic stability</li><li>lifetime safety</li></ul> <p>And it disproportionately impacts girls.</p> <p>Some will argue that judges should decide on a case-by-case basis.</p> <p>But constitutional rights do not depend on which judge you get.</p> <p>We use bright-line age requirements for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>voting</li><li>contracts</li><li>jury service</li><li>medical consent</li></ul> <p>because capacity is not something that can be reliably measured in a pressured courtroom especially when a young person may be facing family, community, or pregnancy related coercion.</p> <p>Others will argue about parental rights.</p> <p>But parental rights have never included the power to place a child into a binding legal relationship with another person.</p> <p>The state steps in to protect children in cases of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>child labor</li><li>abuse</li><li>school attendance</li></ul> <p>This is no different.</p>
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	<p>If a young person is not old enough to file for divorce independently, then they are not old enough to be married.</p> <p>That is a matter of due process, equal protection, and basic consistency in our legal system.</p> <p>The United States speaks out against child marriage around the world.</p> <p>Passing SB 048 allows Colorado to stand on the right side of both constitutional law and human rights here at home.</p> <p>This bill does one simple, powerful thing:</p> <p>It guarantees that every person who enters marriage in this state does so as a legal adult with the full ability to choose it, to consent to it.</p>
<p>Akaila Powell Against National Coalition to End Child Marriage</p>	<p>Testimony in Support of SB048</p> <p>Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans &amp; Military Affairs Committee   February 17, 2026</p> <p>Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members:</p> <p>My name is Akaila Powell, and I am submitting testimony in support of SB048 to remove the exception that allows child marriage in Colorado.</p> <p>Child marriage puts young people at risk of abuse, interrupted education, poverty, and long-term harm to their health and well-being. Minors cannot fully protect their own legal rights, and marriage creates serious legal and power imbalances that they are not equipped to navigate.</p> <p>Marriage should always be a decision made by consenting adults with full legal autonomy. Ending child marriage is a necessary step to protect young people and uphold their safety, dignity, and future opportunities.</p> <p>I respectfully urge you to vote YES on SB048.</p> <p>Thank you for your time and consideration.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p>

	<p>Akaila Powell Phoenix, AZ</p>
<p>Sheila King For themselves</p>	<p>Sheila Hanley King 4251 Vinca Court Boulder, CO 80304 303-775-4799 sking4251@gmail.com</p> <p>February 16, 2026</p> <p>Testimony in Support of SB048</p> <p>Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans &amp; Military Affairs Committee   February 17, 2026</p> <p>Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members</p> <p>I am submitting this testimony to encourage you to pass this bill out of the committee and request that you further support and actively engage in moving this bill through the Senate and ultimate passage into law.</p> <p>While child marriage is often a form of child abuse or trafficking it also it also effectively destroys many aspects of a child’s life from health to education to economic opportunities. It undermines their physical safety: Individuals in the U.S. who were married before age 18 report high rates of physical, sexual, financial or emotional abuse during their marriage as well as unwanted or unplanned pregnancies.</p> <p>It is a generational problem where child marriage becomes an established practice within a family or communities. A dear friend</p>

	<p>of mine who was married at 16 had a mother and a grandmother who were married before the age of 18, all were divorced early and struggled to support their families as single parents and had little or no access to educational opportunities. My friend’s grandmother lived with her husband and his family and was sexually assaulted by her father-in-law until she was able to leave his home after she turned 18.</p> <p>Children married before they reach the age of 18 face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to escape a forced marriage, get help from an advocate, enter a domestic violence shelter or retain an attorney. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights categorizes all child marriage as forced marriage. The U.S. State Department has called child marriage a human rights abuse.</p> <p>It is time that Colorado becomes the 17th state to ban child marriage and ask you to make this a reality by passing this bill out of committee. Thank you.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>Sheila Hanley King</p>
<p>Bridget Masters For themselves</p>	<p>Testimony in Support of SB048</p> <p>Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans &amp; Military Affairs Committee   February 17, 2026</p> <p>Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:</p> <p>I urge the state legislature to pass SB048 and eliminate child marriage.</p>

	<p>The devastation of child marriage is the reason I am writing today. My mother ran away with her boyfriend to a state that allowed her to marry at the age of 14 in 1951, he was age 20 at the time. My mother became pregnant shortly after and gave birth to her 3rd child one week before her 18th birthday. After being married for 5 years and living in devastating circumstances of domestic abuse and severe poverty, her husband was imprisoned as a habitual criminal. It was then she was able to divorce without fear of harm to herself or her children. Now 19 years old with 3 children living on welfare and not much hope for the future, she married my father, to have someone to support them. I was born; he adopted her children and moved the family to another town. He then began molesting my sister, the eldest of the children, when she was 12 years old which evolved to rape. This was discovered when my sister attempted suicide at the age of 15. Now in a town without anyone she knew and still had no means of supporting herself and now 4 children she stayed with my father. My sister became a drug addict and alcoholic, my brothers got into trouble and were sent off to the Navy and Job Corps. The youngest of my brothers died in a car accident at the age of 16 while drinking and driving. My other brother died from alcoholism at the age of 57. My mother became a shell of a person, ashamed by the choices she made, had to make, blaming herself for the devastation. I grew up in a lower-class white neighborhood and to the outside world we were just like any other family working to get by. The reality is, I grew up in a household of turmoil and chaos. Was my mother just from a bad family to start with? She had a brother and sister who became educated, married at a much later age and lived financially and emotionally better lives. They lived well into their 90s, my mother died at the age of 64. There is a difference between a 14- and 16-year-old but truly they are both still children and do not possess the maturity to be married and potentially having children. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage. To possibly repeat my mother's story.</p>
<p>Ingrid Moore For</p>	<p>I am strongly in favor of this bill. PLEASE VOTE YES TO APPROVE.</p>



themselves	The current law does not adequately protect a young person from being psychological manipulation or otherwise influenced into marriage at too early an age. People younger than 18 do not have the judgement or experience to make such a life decision.
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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB048**  
**Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee**  
**February 17, 2026**

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Global Girls Worldwide Women adamantly supports and urges the passing of SB048, an act relating to eliminating a loophole allowing marriage of a child under the age of 18.

The marriage age law that allows children to marry must be replaced in order to protect minors, usually girls, from being coerced or forced to marry by a parent or parents who simply sign a form. These marriages are almost always to adult men, who are avoiding criminal prosecution under statutory rape laws.

Girls who are married as minors experience limited access to or the end of: their education, health care, economic opportunity, and legal rights. The limbo of no longer being able to access the protections in place for children, while at the same time not recognized as an adult leaves the minor barren of rights, protection, and opportunity. Marriage before age 18 has been recognized worldwide as a human rights violation.

Under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Target 5, 193 countries including the United States, have promised to end child marriage by 2030. UNICEF predicts efforts will need to move at 17 times the current rate to reach that goal. States and territories across the United States are passing 18 No Exceptions legislation and Colorado risks becoming a destination state for child marriage.

Legislation banning child marriage ends a human rights abuse and is without cost. GGWW urges those who represent Colorado to vote Yes on SB048, making the law 18 No Exceptions.

GGWW works toward gender equity by providing resources for girls and women, supporting allies, raising awareness and calling for reform. We believe individuals and local movements to heads of nations are essential in securing equity and safety.

Thank you for your consideration of this very important bill to end a human rights violation.

Kelly Vaughan  
CEO, *Founder*  
GGWW

Hi, I'm Stephanie. I'm a survivor of child marriage in the US. A month after my 16th birthday, and 16 weeks pregnant, I was forced to marry a 19-year-old man in 2001. I had just lost my father to brain cancer. I was a grieving teenager in a strict, cult-like religious environment. My mother was overwhelmed and did not want the responsibility of caring for a child who was struggling. Marriage became a solution—not for me, but for her. It removed the burden from her life and transferred it to someone else. Religious shame played a role, and so did convenience. I was something to be handled, not protected. I didn't feel like I had a choice. I felt like a problem that needed to be solved. The court approved my marriage based on a psychologist's letter stating that I was prepared for marriage. That psychologist had met me once, and that meeting was about my father's death. He never spoke to me about marriage. He never evaluated whether I understood it. He never asked whether I wanted it. My mother pressured him to write the letter anyway. Once the marriage was approved, everything changed. I was still a minor, so my husband became my legal guardian. Many adults throughout my experience, due to the fact that they did not have any training or knowledge to deal with the situation either. Without family support or childcare, I could not attend school. Navigating and securing a job was difficult due to my age as well.

At 16, I had already faced the hardship of becoming a teen mother, becoming a wife only added to this hardship.

When the abuse began in my marriage, and I tried to get help, I couldn't easily access domestic violence shelters. Most shelters won't take in a minor. The options given to me were to put my son and me in foster care, but we would not be able to stay together. The violence escalated. I had to wait until I turned 18 to end the marriage. However, leaving the marriage did not erase the harm that had already been done. What followed was years of rebuilding. Being forced into marriage so young shaped every part of my life afterward: Pushing through poverty, little education, my sense of safety. I worked hard to become whole. Child marriage made my life harder than it ever needed to be. It removed my choices at the exact moment I needed protection most. I'm sharing my story so Colorado can draw a clear line—one that says children are not burdens to be transferred, and marriage begins only when someone is old enough to truly choose it. Thank you



**Testimony in Support of SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage  
Presented to Colorado Senate Committee on State, Military and Veterans' Affairs | February  
17, 2026**

Dear Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members:

As a high school senior and Co-President of the Zonta PantherZ Club of Boulder High School, we are working to build a better world for women and girls. Our Zonta District 3, comprised of various clubs across Colorado, supports ending child marriage in Colorado, which is a non-partisan issue. Marriage is a serious legal contract, and we believe that it should be reserved for those who have reached the age of majority and have full access to all rights bestowed upon them at the age of majority.

We cannot imagine being married or any of our schoolmates or friends being married either. It is laughable to us.

Thank you for holding a hearing on Senate Bill26-048. Child marriage is an urgent problem in Colorado where 16- and 17-year-olds may marry with judicial approval. We urge you to vote for this bill to pass out of Committee and to support it through to passage by both chambers of the legislature.

### **LEGAL TRAP**

Marriage before age 18 creates a horrific legal trap. Even highly mature teens can easily be forced, or coerced into marrying and or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18 and attain the rights of adulthood:

- Minors cannot easily escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them, because a minor who leaves home can be classified as a youth in crisis, an at-risk youth or a child in need of services.
- **Where would minors go even if they could escape?** We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential: They must notify the parents within 72 hours that the minor is there, or else notify the state Department of Children, Youth, and Families.
- Minors cannot easily retain an attorney to help them with their complex legal needs, because most contracts with children, including retainer agreements, are voidable. In our experience, lawyers are reluctant to take on minors as clients based on a voidable retainer agreement.
- Minors are not allowed to bring a legal action in their own name. A minor aged 15 or younger cannot seek a protective order if their spouse turns abusive. Perhaps most shockingly, a minor who marries another minor is not even allowed to file independently for divorce.

### **Alarming Statistics in Colorado State**

- 5,519 minors aged 15 to 17 were married in Washington between 2000 and 2018.
- 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.
- Between 2000 and 2014, at least 35 and possibly as many as 48 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime outside of marriage.
- *All this is based on Unchained's analysis of data from the Washington Department of Health)*

### **Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage**

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood, creates a legal trap and complications. Married Minors in Washington State are not emancipated. Minors before age 18 typically may not leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, seek a personal protection order, or even independently seek a marriage annulment. Additional seeking of emancipation brings only limited rights that arrive too late, after the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.
- Child marriage destroys girls' health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.
- The U.S. State Department considers child marriage, marriage before 18, child abuse and a human rights violation.
- Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of divorcing – and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single.

### **Simple Legislative Solution**

**Please pass SB26-048** to protect my peers from the dangers of child marriage and eliminate the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage in Colorado. States and territories across the U.S., and countries around the world, are passing the same legislation to end this child abuse and human rights abuse. Learn more about the devastating consequences of child marriage here: [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org) or [www.stopchildmarriages.org](http://www.stopchildmarriages.org)

Sincerely,

Casey Giron  
Co-President, Zonta PantherZ Club

## Testimony in Support of SB048

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February 17, 2026

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Good afternoon. My name is Brandi Dredge. I live in St. Joseph, Missouri. I am an author who wrote a book about my experience as a teen mom, a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor. I testify today alongside my fellow members of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage as a Survivor Ally.

When I was sixteen, I met a twenty-four-year-old man, who lived with some boys in my high school, and with stars in my teenage eyes, I believed he hung the moon. Four months later, I was pregnant, and a year after that, I was begging my mom to give parental consent for me and my boyfriend to get married after the attorney representing him on criminal theft charges suggested we do so before the sentencing. Since my boyfriend was a persistent and prior felon, the attorney wanted to use the marriage in the arguments for leniency on his sentence to show the judge he was a changed man, a family man with a new wife and baby. In 1997, at seventeen, I became his bride; he was twenty-five, and his prison sentence was suspended.

Over the next nine years, the statistics surrounding child marriage, such as the high likelihood of poverty, lack of further education, and enduring many forms of abuse, would ring true in my marriage in addition to the fact that I had married a child sexual predator, which was something I struggled to see even after the sheriff leading the sex crime investigation said the only difference between me and the other girls he had abused was that he married me and I had evidence of the crime, our son's DNA. In 2007, we got divorced, and he was convicted of two counts of statutory rape. One of those counts of statutory rape is for the crime he committed against me.

It has taken me a lot of years to finally see, accept, and say I am a child marriage, domestic violence, and sex crime survivor. I lost my childhood, and along the way, I lost myself. I rationalized many bad things under the guise of marriage; I couldn't see them as clearly as the sheriff, the prosecutor, and the judge could, which is why I testify today. To help others see what I couldn't.

In 2025, Missouri became the 16<sup>th</sup> state to end child marriage and prior to that much like your state they had taken steps in the right direction to change the marriage laws to protect minors and if the changes they made would have been enacted in 1997, it would have protected me and stopped my mom from making a decision that at the time she believed was the right thing for my son and me. It would have protected me from being manipulated into a marriage that wasn't for my best interest but for his, and it might have protected the 14-year-old girl he had victimized less than a year after we were married.

Hindsight is a powerful tool; it enables us to reflect on the past and make more informed decisions for ourselves and others in the future. With hindsight, I can see I was vulnerable. Manipulated. Groomed. I can see how the long-term effects of abuse have played out in my life and my children's. I can see how old mindsets and generational trauma distort our decision-

making and feed the cycles of abuse and poverty. I can see the guilt my mother carries as the one who signed for the marriage. We can all look back at that starry-eyed teen and say that it wasn't the right thing, and I am sorry no one protected you, but, hindsight isn't what the sixteen and seventeen-year-olds who maybe in similar situations today have. They only have now, the present, and you, the lawmakers, the adults in this room, who can clearly see the alarming statistics, how the risks far outweigh any benefits who have the power to do the right thing and pass this bill to end this human rights abuse and protect them from being entered into a marriage contract before they have all their legal rights of adulthood.

Thank you for your time.

Brandi Dredge



**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 048: ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN COLORADO  
PRESENTED TO THE SENATE STATE, VETERANS & MILITARY AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
FEBRUARY 17, 2026**

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Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of SB 048. AHA Foundation thanks Prime Sponsors Hinrichsen, Marchman and Joseph for sponsoring this bill, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation.

While the current marriage age in Colorado is 18, an alarming loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old. This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval. SB 048 eliminates this dangerous loophole, and once and for all reserves marriage, a serious legal contract, for those who have reached the legal age of majority.

Minors, having not yet reached the age of majority, can easily be forced into marriage or trapped in an abusive marriage in which they are forced to stay. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into an unwanted marriage. In fact, not one minor that we or our allies has worked with ever alerted the court they were being forced to marry when there was a judicial review process, out of fear of the consequences. Because they have not yet reached the legal age of majority, minors face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or file a legal action such as a divorce.

AHA Foundation has worked with victims, including minors, facing forced marriage from across the U.S., and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. The individual stories we have seen are also supported by the data. Between 2000 and 2023, an estimated 5,519 children were married in Colorado.<sup>1</sup> Around 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.<sup>2</sup> Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.<sup>3</sup> Between 2000 and 2021 Colorado had the 16th highest average rate of child marriage among the 44 U.S. states with available data.<sup>4</sup>

Child marriage severely limits opportunities in health, education and economic freedom. It also increases risk of domestic violence. Given these harms, one case of child marriage is one too many. If mechanisms are in place that allow for thousands of cases to slip through the cracks, the common sense solution is to enact the necessary law to close these gaps.

Colorado should not participate in child marriage or make it legally possible to force minors to marry, including to their rapists. Those at risk must be protected by a legal framework that guarantees their human rights. The solution is simple: eliminate the dangerous loophole in the marriage laws that places the children of Colorado at risk of exploitation and abuse and vote YES on SB 048.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on marriage-license data the nonprofit Unchained At Last retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>2</sup> Id.

<sup>3</sup> Based on Unchained's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>4</sup> Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data.



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## **About AHA Foundation**

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded by women’s rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions, beliefs and backgrounds who are facing honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive.

Since 2010, the Foundation's programs include: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S., 3) outreach and education to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services. AHA Foundation has trained over 3,400 frontline service providers on responding to cases of gender based violence, honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America’s first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.



## Testimony in Support of SB048

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee

February 17, 2026

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Protect Our Defenders is the pre-eminent national human rights organization dedicated to ending sexual violence, victim retaliation, misogyny, sexual prejudice, and racism in the military and combating a culture that has allowed it to persist. We honor, support, and give voice to survivors of military sexual violence. We seek reform to ensure all service members are provided a safe and respectful work environment free from misogyny and racism, and have access to a fair, impartially administered system of justice.

In order to fulfill our mission, we provide pro bono legal services to survivors of military sexual assault, advocate for military sexual assault reform, and publish and proliferate ground-breaking reports that expose the crises of sexual assault and racial discrimination in the military. Since our founding in 2011, we have assisted a number of child victims of military sexual assault and their families, who are left devastated following incidents that no child should ever have to endure. In FY 2020 alone, the DoD's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO) reported that there were 209 unique victims of child sexual abuse, 92.3% of which were female, and 7.7% were male.<sup>1</sup>

When it came to our attention that some lawmakers have resisted ending child marriage so that an active duty servicemember might be able to marry a child for the child to be able to benefit from spousal death benefits, we were left deeply shaken. The military has a crisis on its hands in the form of sexual assault, which has been acknowledged by the Secretary of Defense<sup>2</sup>, military

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Defense Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military, Fiscal Year 2020, Appendix H: Child Sexual Abuse; [https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/Appendix\\_H\\_Child\\_Sexual\\_Abuse\\_FY2020.pdf](https://www.sapr.mil/sites/default/files/Appendix_H_Child_Sexual_Abuse_FY2020.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "SECDEF backs change in military sex assault prosecution," Military Times, June 22, 2021; <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2021/06/22/secdef-backs-change-in-military-sex-assaultprosecution/>

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leaders such as General Mark Milley<sup>3</sup>, and the Commander in Chief, President Joe Biden<sup>4</sup>. Allowing for the perpetuation of child marriage under the guise that children stand to benefit is a fallacy. Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, servicemembers have the ability to designate a recipient for their death benefits, and that recipient is NOT limited only to spouses, thus enabling a servicemember to designate their benefits to whomever he or she desires.

We fear that continuing to proliferate the narrative that a servicemember should be allowed to marry children to ensure that child receives spousal benefits will enable those to wish to prey on children to do so under the guise of a legal union. This is very dangerous in any profession and in any setting, but especially within the U.S. military, which is already contending with a sexual assault crisis it cannot control.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Very Respectfully,



Col Don Christensen, USAF (Ret)  
President, Protect Our Defenders

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<sup>3</sup> Missy Ryan and Dan Lamothe, “‘We haven’t moved the needle’ on sexual assault in the military, general says,” The Washington Post, May 6, 2021; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-sexualassault/2021/05/06/a8f51a7c-ae98-11eb-8109-f8ba1ea2eeab\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/military-sexualassault/2021/05/06/a8f51a7c-ae98-11eb-8109-f8ba1ea2eeab_story.html)

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Solender, “Joe Biden Says He Would Take A Hard Line on Military Sexual Assault,” Forbes, April 29, 2020; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewsolender/2020/04/29/joe-biden-says-he-would-take-a-hard-line-onmilitary-sexual-assault/?sh=ec2ef7678629>

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Testimony in Support of SB048

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February 17, 2026

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN), a not-for-profit organization advocating for servicewomen, past, present, and future. We urge you to close the loophole that allows a military exception to the marriage age in Alaska. We urge you to end all marriage before 18, without an exception for servicemembers or any other exceptions. We do not believe that marriage is acceptable under the age of 18 for any reason, including service to our nation. We understand that often the purpose of marriage for servicemembers under the age of 18 is to ensure that if a service member were to lose their life overseas, their spouse would receive full benefits for their service to our nation.

Under the Survivor Benefit Plan, service members can designate a significant other to receive benefits if the service member passes away; the Plan does not require the individuals to be married. Additionally, servicemember' military benefits extend to their children, regardless of the servicemembers' marital status so long as the child is properly recognized as a dependent. Death gratuity is also offered for service members who die while on active duty or while serving in certain reserve statuses. The death gratuity is the same regardless of the cause of death.

The longstanding purpose of the death gratuity has been to provide an immediate cash payment to assist survivors of deceased members of the Armed forces to meet their financial needs during the period immediately following a member's death and before other survivor benefits, if any, become available.

SWAN believes that using marriage for servicemembers leaving to war as a motive to keep marriage before 18 legal in this country is a misinformed stance. Servicemembers who choose to serve our country can select their beneficiaries; therefore, the requirement for marriage is needless.

A secondary consideration is the military health and housing benefits afforded to spouses. Military health and housing benefits through a spouse are not a solution for underage marriage. A child's economic dependency should not justify marriage before 18 years old. Underage marriage can create a long-term level of dependence that increases a spouse's chance of experiencing domestic violence.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to reach out to our organization for additional information. We appreciate your continued support of our nation's service members and veterans.



**Testimony in Support of SB048  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February 17, 2026**

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Unchained At Last is a survivor-led nonprofit working to end forced and child marriage in Colorado and across the United States through direct services and systems change. We at Unchained, and our many allies in the Colorado Coalition to End Child Marriage that we convene, urge the state legislature to pass SB048 and eliminate the archaic, harmful practice of child marriage.

Child marriage is a serious problem in Colorado. The marriage age is 18,<sup>1</sup> but an alarming legal loophole allows juvenile courts to approve the marriage of a 16- or 17-year-old.<sup>2</sup> This became law in 2019; previously, parents could marry off children of *any* age with judicial approval.<sup>3</sup> The 2019 law change was a good first step, but more steps are needed.

### **Continued Dangers in the Current Law**

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own child to marry, even with the safeguards added in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law (not surprising, since 98% of the minors who married here before 2019 were aged 16 or 17<sup>5</sup>). Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.<sup>6</sup>
- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older<sup>7</sup> – unless the perpetrator is married to the teen.<sup>8</sup>
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage,<sup>9</sup> which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them.<sup>10</sup> This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence.<sup>11</sup> It also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

### **Devastating Consequences of Child Marriage**

- Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood,<sup>13</sup> creates a nightmarish legal trap. Minors before age 18 cannot easily leave home,<sup>14</sup> enter a shelter,<sup>15</sup> retain an attorney<sup>16</sup> or independently bring a legal action.<sup>17</sup> (Marriage emancipates minors, but that brings only limited rights.<sup>18</sup> Further, those limited rights arrive too late, only *after* the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage.)
- Child marriage destroys American girls’ health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.<sup>19</sup> The U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse.”<sup>20</sup>
- Those who marry before age 18 have a 70% to 80% chance of divorcing,<sup>21</sup> which brings additional instability and hardship.

### **Alarming Statistics**

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.<sup>22</sup>
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.93 years older.<sup>23</sup>
- Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.<sup>24</sup>
- In fact, Colorado’s average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado’s average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.<sup>25</sup>

### **Simple Legislative Solution**

- SB048 would keep the marriage age at 18 but eliminate the loophole that allows marriage before that age. It is simple, commonsense legislation that harms no one, costs nothing and ends a human rights abuse.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.<sup>26</sup> More information is at [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) § 14-2-106(1)(a)(I).

<sup>2</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108.

<sup>3</sup> HB19-1316 was signed into law on 31 May 2019 and went into effect on 2 August 2019. See: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb19-1316>.

<sup>4</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108(2). The safeguards include: (1) The court must appoint a guardian ad litem for the underage party, and the guardian ad litem must file a report advising whether the marriage is in the underage party's "best interests." However, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a "human rights abuse" (See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>). How can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest? (2) The court must "consider" the following: (a) The wishes of the underage party. However, this puts the onus on traumatized teens to find a safe way to communicate to the court that they are being forced to marry; (b) The view of the parents or legal guardians. However, the fact that parents or guardians "consent" to a marriage in no way means the marriage is consensual; (c) The ability of the underage party to assume the responsibilities of marriage. However, the statute does not specify what the "responsibilities of marriage" are; (d) The circumstances surrounding the marriage. However, when parents are pushing a marriage on their teenage child, and the teenager is too scared to disclose that information, the court has no way to know the actual circumstances surrounding the marriage; (e) The ability of the underage party to manage their financial and other affairs. However, requiring a court to "consider" this is a low bar that does not ensure only self-sufficient minors are entered into marriage. (3) The court must determine that the marriage would serve the minor's "best interests" (and pregnancy is not enough to establish this). However, again, how can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor's best interest?

<sup>5</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> C.R.S. § 18-3-402(1)(e).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*: The perpetrator commits sexual assault only if they are "not the spouse of the victim."

<sup>9</sup> *In re Marriage of Fetters*, 584 P.2d 104, 106 (Colo. Ct. App. 1978).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bornstein, *The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces*, *American Psychologist* (September 2006), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16953747>.

<sup>12</sup> Federal law (8 U.S. Code § 1101) does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside (see: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019), [https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURL-gpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURL-gpo115058.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL-gpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURL-gpo115058.pdf)). Thus Colorado's current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to citizenship. Colorado's laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their spouse.

<sup>13</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101: The age of adulthood is 18. (Note that Colorado statute refers to anyone under age 21 as a "minor," per C.R.S. § 2-4-401(6). However, that designation does not supersede other statutes, such as § 13-22-101. In this memo, "minor" refers to persons under age 18.)

<sup>14</sup> C.R.S. § 26-5.7-104: Law enforcement may take a minor into custody if the minor's parent reports them as a runaway.

<sup>15</sup> We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential; they must notify the parent within 24 hours (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-106(2)). Also, youth shelter stays are limited to 21 days, and youth shelters must strive to reunite the youth with their family within that time (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-105(2)).

<sup>16</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(a): Persons must be age 18 or older to enter into any legal contractual obligation and be legally bound thereby. See also: *Doenges-Long Motors v. Gillen*, 328 P.2d 1077, 1080 (Colo. 1958). See also: *Nicholas v. People*, 973 P.2d 1213, 1219 (Colo. 1999), citing *Jones v. Dressel*, 623 P.2d 370, 373 (Colo. 1981).

<sup>17</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(c): Persons under age 18 may bring a legal action only through a guardian ad litem or other third party.

<sup>18</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-109.3 lists the specific, limited rights a minor receives upon marriage.

<sup>19</sup> Fraidy Reiss, *Why Can 12-Year-Olds Still Get Married in the United States*, *Washington Post* (10 February 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/why-does-the-united-states-still-let-12-year-old-girls-get-married>.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al., *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>.

<sup>22</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

<sup>24</sup> Based on Unchained's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>25</sup> Based on Unchained's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note that the calculations were based on the state that issued each marriage license (not the state of residence) and the issuing state's population.

<sup>26</sup> C.R.S. §§ 14-2-105; 14-2-106; 14-2-107: Colorado does not impose a residency requirement for marriage.

Testimony in Support of SB048  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee  
February 17, 2026

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

We are a bipartisan group of state legislators who have partnered with the nonprofit group Unchained At Last to end child marriage in our states, territories and district. We respectfully urge you, our fellow lawmakers, to do the same. End this archaic, sexist practice that destroys girls' lives – even if you get the pushback we got at first.

Marriage before age 18 creates a nightmarish legal trap, even for the most mature 17-year-olds. Minors face overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a confidential shelter, retain an attorney or bring a legal action.

Further, marriage before 18 is recognized as a human rights abuse.<sup>1</sup> It destroys nearly every aspect of American girls' lives, including their health, education economic opportunities<sup>2</sup> and even their physical safety.<sup>3</sup>

You probably will get pushback when you try to pass the simple, commonsense legislation we introduced in our states, which eliminated the dangerous loopholes that allowed marriage before age 18. Do not compromise. Do not replace one loophole with another; insist on a marriage age of 18, without exceptions. There is no room for negotiation when you are ending a human rights abuse.

You will hear, as we did at first, from legislators and others whose grandmothers married at 14. Remind them that the world has changed since grandma was a kid.

You will hear arguments about young love. Respond by asking what harm comes to a young couple if they wait a matter of months to marry. Minors must wait until 18 to enter almost any other contract, regardless of how passionately they feel about it.

But what if a girl is pregnant, some will ask you. Let them know we would be harming, not helping, if we married off pregnant girls. Teen mothers in the U.S. who marry are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single.<sup>4</sup>

A teen mother who wants to co-parent with the father of the baby can easily do so outside of marriage. He can simply establish paternity, and his insurance and other benefits would cover the baby. We no longer have illegitimacy laws that punish babies born “out of wedlock.”

Do not be swayed by the religious argument. We do not know of any religion that requires child marriage; actually, every major religion has supported legislation to end child marriage. Besides,

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al., *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Fraidy Reiss, *Child Marriage in the United States: Prevalence and Implications*, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (December 2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1054139X21003414>.

<sup>3</sup> Aditi Wahi et al, *The Lived Experience of Child Marriage in the United States*, *Social Work Public Health* (12 February 2019), <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30747055>.

<sup>4</sup> Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository (2012), <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2467&context=facpubs>.



the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld laws that incidentally forbid an act required by religion, if the laws do not target religious practice.<sup>5</sup>

No, ending child marriage does not impact reproductive rights. The U.S. Supreme Court has established that states should treat minors' abortion differently from minors' marriage, because the former is time sensitive while the latter is not.<sup>6</sup>

And no, do not agree to a loophole that allows emancipated minors to be subjected to a human rights abuse. Emancipation is for teens who cannot be reunited with their parents; it gives them some rights of adulthood so they can fend for themselves. Teens do not need marriage to fend for themselves.

Teens do not need marriage, period. If they are in an abusive home or cannot get health insurance from their parents, they deserve resources that do not require them to enter a contractual sexual relationship.

Under United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.3, the U.S. joined 192 other countries in promising to end child marriage by year 2030.<sup>7</sup> We have achieved that goal in 16 states, two territories and one district so far, despite initial resistance from our colleagues.

Now we call on you, our fellow lawmakers, to join us. Every child in the U.S. is relying on us to keep our promise to the world and end all marriage before 18. No exceptions. No compromises.

*Delaware Rep. Kim Williams*  
*Delaware Fmr Sen. Anthony Delcollo*  
*New Jersey Sen. Nellie Pou*  
*New Jersey Asm. Nancy Munoz*  
*Pennsylvania Rep. Perry Warren*  
*Pennsylvania Rep. Jesse Topper*  
*Pennsylvania Fmr Sen. John Sabatina*  
*Minnesota Sen. Sandra Pappas*  
*Minnesota Fmr Rep. Kaohly Her*  
*Rhode Island Rep. Julie Casimiro*  
*Rhode Island Sen. John Burke*  
*New York Sen. Julia Salazar*  
*New York Asm. Phil Ramos*  
*Massachusetts Fmr Rep. Kay Khan*  
*Massachusetts Fmr Sen. Harriette Chandler*  
*Vermont Rep. Carol Ode*  
*Connecticut Rep. Jillian Gilchrest*  
*Michigan Rep. Kara Hope*  
*Michigan Sen. Sarah Anthony*  
*Washington Rep. Monica Stonier*  
*Washington Sen. Derek Stanford*  
*Virginia Del. Karen Keys-Gamarra*  
*New Hampshire Sen. Debra Altschiller*

*New Hampshire Rep. Cassandra Levesque*  
*Maine Rep. Laura Supica*  
*Oregon Sen. Janeen Sollman*  
*Oregon Sen. David Brock Smith*  
*DC Councilmember Brooke Pinto*  
*Missouri Sen. Tracy McCreery*  
*Missouri Rep. Renee Reuter*  
*US Virgin Islands Fmr Sen. Javan James*

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<sup>5</sup> 494 U.S. 872, *Employment Division, Department of Human Resources of Oregon v. Smith* (No. 88-1213).

<sup>6</sup> 443 U.S. 622 (1979), *Bellotti v. Baird* (No. 78-329).

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Sustainable Development* (2015), <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>.

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB048

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee

February 17, 2026

TO: Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members

It is simple common sense that children should not be married. We don't allow those under 18 to vote, drink, enter into contracts, carry weapons, etc. Although Colorado has made strides to curb child marriage, we continue to allow exceptions that result in difficult legal traps and subject primarily girls to an increased risk of violence.

Child marriage offers a would-be rapist or trafficker a method of avoiding legal consequences. Ample evidence exists to demonstrate the negative effects on girls' education, health and economic opportunities. The State Department considers marriage before age 18 to be a human rights abuse.

Having worked with girls and women in a variety of settings, I can attest to the difficulties that result from early marriage often accompanied by early parenthood.

SB048 is simple, common-sense legislation that would end a human rights abuse and cost citizens nothing to implement. I urge you to support this bill.

## Support for SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage in Colorado

Dear Committee,

I am reaching out to urge your support for SB26-048, known as the Child Marriage Bill, which seeks to eliminate all exceptions to child marriage in Colorado. The harm caused to children by such marriages is significant, and the passage of this bill is necessary to regulate and prevent these detrimental practices.

Child marriage, defined as any formal or informal union involving an individual under the age of 18, remains legal in most of the US. Between 2000 and 2023, more than 314,000 minors were legally married, with some as young as 10 years old. In Colorado, there were at least 5,519 such marriages during this time. Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado. These children are often trafficked abroad or exploited as sex slaves and are denied legal recourse due to their age.

Unlike adults, minors lack full legal capacity, which results in severe consequences for those who are married as children. Specifically, married minors often face barriers such as:

- Inability to file for divorce or obtain protective orders independently against abusive spouses or parents as minors generally cannot initiate legal action.
- Inability to hire attorneys since contracts with minors, including retainer agreements, are typically considered voidable under state law.
- Limited access to domestic violence shelters, which routinely turn away unaccompanied minors.
- Limited access to youth shelters, which are usually not confidential and cannot house youth for extended periods.
- Difficulty accessing Child Protective Services (CPS), which may decline to serve married minors, considering them outside their jurisdiction.
- Restricted support from advocates, who may face criminal charges for assisting minors in leaving home without parental consent.
- Limited ability to leave home, as married minors may be considered runaways under state law.

The current legal system treats married minors as both children and adults, leading to troubling gaps in protections intended to shield children from violence and perpetuating power imbalances inherent in child marriages.

I urge you to make Colorado the next state to ban child marriage. SB26-048 directly addresses the report's primary recommendation by prohibiting marriage under the age of 18. If passed, Colorado would become the 17th state to ban marriage for those under 18 simply by removing the existing exception from the statute.

Thank you for voting to advance SB26-048 out of committee and for supporting the passage of this bill to protect children in Colorado.

Sincerely,  
Jan Cheney  
1029 Treece St.

Louisville, CO 80027

## Support for SB26-048: Ending Child Marriage in Colorado

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Sincerely,  
Jan Cheney  
1029 Treece St.  
Louisville, CO 80027

## Testimony in Support of SB26-048

### Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February  
17, 2026

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

My name is Brigitte Combs, and I am a survivor of child marriage. I am writing to you to urge you to vote in support of SB26-048, Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval, as introduced.

I was 15 years old and 7 months pregnant when I stood in front of a judge being married to a 38-year-old. My parents signed the “permission slip”, as and the judge agreed it was in “in the child’s best interest”. The truth is, it would not have mattered whether I was 15 or 17, or if he was 21 or 38, or if I had spoken to the judge beforehand, waited a period of time, or anything else, because my parents would have done, or had me do, whatever was necessary to get me married, including getting me emancipated, and I would not have gone against it. It did not matter whether I wanted to or not, and even if I had, I don’t care how mature I may have been, how could I have possibly had a full grasp of the commitment I was about to make? I could not legally consent to or sign any kind of contract on my own, yet I was about to be entered into what is intended to be a lifelong contract.

Not all marriage contracts being entered into FOR a minor involve young and in love teenagers or are in families that are supportive and nurturing that may actually be able to help make such a marriage succeed. It may not be obvious, but many are coerced or forced, legalizing what would otherwise be statutory rape, or are in the name of religion, shame over pregnancy, for immigration purposes, or even child trafficking. A young person in this situation is highly unlikely to tell a judge they do not want this. I couldn’t. I mean can you imagine this power dynamic?

This bill should have no political “side”, it should be about basic protection. It costs nothing and is a simple ask - 18 no exceptions. Let's get rid of the ridiculous loopholes and not create new ones as they are nothing more than get-out-of-jail free cards that protect people who would otherwise be considered sex offenders and absolves parents of any responsibility.

Even emancipation does not provide full rights as many think. One still cannot vote under 18, no exception, many financial institutions and other vital services have their own minimum age restrictions, usually being 18, or may refuse to engage with a minor due to the liability risks. What is a young girl, who is completely dependent on an absent or abusive partner and without a supportive parent going to do? Now imagine having a baby or two, trapped. This is a nightmare most people are not aware of, I am fully aware because I have lived experience.

I survived this complicated nightmare, but not without great cost to my physical, mental, and spiritual health. At 17, I had 2 children. At 18 I left that marriage, but I would go on to experience homelessness, exploitation, further abuse, and great difficulties that would take many pages to describe. I was robbed of a childhood, of an education, dreams, peace, and basic protection. And I am just one of many who have suffered this fate. Eventually. I found myself a single mother of 6 children in a battle to survive. We did, but it was not easy. The struggles we went through were immense and we did not come through this unscathed. My children are now grown but the effects are everlasting, not just for me but for them also.

I was a vulnerable young girl, feeling ashamed, in fear of my parents, and in absolute fear of God. No one would have been able to tell. When I was the one standing there in that courtroom, I couldn't speak up, but I can speak now and will fight tooth and nail for others who are not able to speak.

The man I was married to was living in Colorado, and along with my marriage came a stepson who was born in Boulder. He was only 4 years younger than me. While my marriage occurred in Texas the outcome would have been the same no matter the state. I stand in support alongside my fellow survivors who are testifying today, and all survivors and advocates fighting to put an end to child marriage, once and for all.

I strongly urge you, please VOTE YES on SB26-048 as introduced, to end ALL child marriage in Colorado by setting the legal marriage age at 18 with no exceptions. Thank you.

Respectfully,

Brigitte Combs

7163 Ayersby Dr

Mechanicsville, VA 23111

**Testimony in Support of SB048**  
**Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February 17, 2026**

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

My name is Christina Sutton and I am a survivor of child marriage. I urge you to pass SB048 to protect children in Colorado from the harms of child marriage.

At 16 years old I was introduced to a 21 year old man who, within 24 hours, coerced me into sex and was referring to me as his girlfriend. I remember telling someone “He won’t let me break up with him” which clearly shows the level of control that was already present. A few months later, at the age of 17, I was pregnant and married.

These so-called “relationships” often do not start on a healthy foundation. Many minors that end up in marriages are already vulnerable. In my case, the abuse escalated after my abuser was given greater legal control.

Once married, I was removed from my community and taken to live in a remote area. My husband was already well-established in his military career. I had not graduated from high school and he would not allow me to continue my education. When my car died it was not replaced and without transportation the few friends I had managed to maintain quickly faded.

I had *no education, no income, no transportation, no resources and no support system*. I was isolated both literally and figuratively. He was emotionally and psychologically abusive, sexually abusive, and controlling. By the time I was 20—not yet old enough to buy alcohol—I had two children with a man I did not want to be married to in the first place.

So why didn’t I file for divorce?

Because just as I could not meaningfully consent to my marriage and had been bound to it by my parents, I also could not retain an attorney on my own to file for a divorce until I was 18. I needed permission from either my abusive husband or my neglectful parents—the very people that had signed me into that marriage. By the time I was 18 the situation was so severe I did not know how to get out of it, especially with an infant.

Eventually I did find the strength to leave him. It took years for me to rebuild my life and gain full custody of my children. I walked away with \$0 in assets just to make it happen.

My story is not unique. There are thousands of survivors like me. Had the legal marriage age been 18 many of us could have been spared the legal nightmare of a child marriage. You have the power today to stop it in Colorado and I beg you to do so by passing SB048.

Thank you for your time.



**Testimony in Support of SB048  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee |  
February 17, 2026**

Dear Chair Wallace, Vice-Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members,

I am submitting this testimony to encourage you to pass SB048, the bill to ban child marriage in Colorado, out of the committee and request that you further support and actively engage in moving this bill through the Senate and to ultimate passage into law.

Over the past 20 years, I have mentored middle and high-school-aged girls, including girls who married prior to the age of 16. The challenges that they faced, once bound to a marriage, were unrelenting. This included physical, sexual, financial, and emotional abuse, as well as unwanted and unplanned pregnancies. Most of the hardships that these girls struggle to overcome were far beyond their emotional and physical maturity as well as life experience, leaving them (and in some cases their children) extremely vulnerable.

Teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single, and marriage before age 18 has a 70-80% divorce rate. I saw this first-hand. Helping an 18-year-old wife navigate a divorce proceeding from her imprisoned husband was heartbreaking. She was left to address the legal and financial burdens of the divorce process while also completing high school and earning an income to support her children. Fortunately, her mother helped her to defray many of her costs, working three jobs and being determined not to see her daughter leave high school. This is not the case for many children forced into marriage. We know that Girls in the U.S. who marry before age 19 are 50 percent more likely than unmarried girls to drop out of high school and four times less likely to complete college (Dahl, 2010).

Thank you for seriously considering my testimony. I hope that you will take these points into account when considering your vote to protect our Colorado children. Our state needs to provide clear and strong guidance in the fight against the tragedy of child marriage, which the U.S. State Department has called a human rights abuse.

Sincerely,  
Pamela Malzbender  
4458 Hogan Court  
Longmont, CO 80503



February 16, 2026

Testimony in Support of SB048

Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan, and Members of the Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee:

I, as co-founder and leader of the BadAss Collective, and in my individual capacity as a proud Colorado native, write in strong support of SB048 and respectfully urge you to close the remaining loophole that permits marriage under the age of 18 in Colorado.

As the materials submitted to this Committee reflect, Colorado law currently sets the marriage age at 18, yet still allows 16- and 17-year-olds to marry with judicial approval . While the 2019 reforms were a meaningful step forward, experience since that time makes clear that judicial review has not eliminated the core problem: children are still being entered into marriages they are not legally or developmentally equipped to navigate, and are legally unable to extricate themselves from until after they reach the age of 18.

At its most basic level, this issue presents a stark legal inconsistency. In Colorado, a person under 18 generally cannot enter into a binding contract, retain counsel independently, or initiate legal action without a guardian . Yet that same minor can, under current law, enter into a marriage — one of the most consequential legal contracts our system recognizes. That contradiction is difficult to reconcile. If we as a state deem a young person too immature to sign a lease or take out a loan, we should not deem them capable of assuming the lifelong legal, financial, and personal obligations of marriage.

The troubling reality is that marriage can create legal shields in circumstances that would otherwise constitute sexual assault . No public policy objective justifies a framework in which marriage operates as an exception to protections designed to safeguard minors.

Furthermore, there is a broader principle at stake. In recent years, young women in this country have experienced significant curtailments of their freedom and bodily autonomy. In that context, it is especially important that state law not compound those losses by continuing to allowing minors — particularly girls — to be placed in binding marital relationships before they have reached legal adulthood. Whatever one's views on other contested issues, we should be able to agree that a child's right to reach adulthood before entering marriage is a minimal and commonsense protection.

SB048 is a straightforward solution. It retains the marriage age of 18 and removes the exception . It does not intrude upon adult choice. It does not impose fiscal burdens. It simply aligns our marriage laws with the age of majority and with our broader contractual framework.

Colorado has long prided itself on pragmatic, principled leadership. Enacting SB048 would affirm that we do not treat marriage as a workaround for problems of pregnancy, parental pressure, or immigration status, and that we will not allow a legal structure that can facilitate coercion under the guise of consent. For these reasons, I respectfully ask that you vote in favor of SB048.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of this important legislation.

Best Regards,

Gretchen Miller Busch  
Co-founder, the BadAss Collective  
[gretchen@badasscollective.net](mailto:gretchen@badasscollective.net)  
720-333-0893

**Testimony in Support of SB048**  
**Remove Exception to Marry with Judicial Approval**  
**Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans & Military Affairs Committee | February 17, 2026**

Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan, and Distinguished Committee Members:

As a former resident of Colorado, and as a child-marriage survivor, I am pleased that you are considering this bill. Colorado is an exceptional state and approval of SB048 will improve the lives of its most vulnerable population, minors who need its strong protection for their safety and well-being. Guard their future with diligence, because the future of its children is the future of Colorado.

My husband and I were both 16 years old when our mothers made the decision for us to marry. They were both in their early 50's, had been married and divorced, had adult children, and were grandmothers. They had to have known how difficult marriage would be for us, but it was convenient for them so that was all that mattered at the time. Neither of our fathers were consulted. We were driven out of state and married by a justice of the peace. He didn't ask us if we wanted to get married, but even if he had we would have said yes because we didn't feel like we could say no.

We were too young to live on our own so we lived with my husband's family. The first thing they did was pull him out of school to work on the farm. His step-father promised to pay him a weekly wage, but he never did. We did not have free access to a vehicle or a phone. We wanted to leave but had no where to go. When we finally turned 18 and found a way out, his step-father pointed a loaded rifle at him and told him he wasn't going anywhere. My husband told him to go ahead and shoot. That's how bad it was, that a teenager would rather be shot than to have to stay there. We did leave, but the trauma has followed us all our lives.

My husband got his GED and joined the Air Force, an option that is no longer available today as a high school diploma is now a requirement. That is how we came to Colorado where we lived for almost 30 years. Our grandchildren are natives and still live there. The oldest is 16, the same age we were when we were married. He is experiencing high school, friends, cross country, track, and is a state bowling champion. That's the way a teenager's life should be.

Please pass SB048 and repeal the exception to the current law. Marriage is a life-altering commitment and under-age minors are not prepared for that. We have a tendency to romanticize marriage, but it requires a tremendous amount of work and determination and even then many do not make it. Children need all the help they can get to succeed in life, not set up to fail from the start.

Sincerely,  
Marilyn Smith  
Johnson City, TN

**Testimony in SUPPORT of SB048:  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee  
February 15, 2025**

Dear Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Zonta International is a 105-year-old organization that seeks to build a better world for women and girls. The Zonta USA Caucus conducts nonpartisan advocacy for women and girls representing hundreds of Zonta Clubs in the U.S. including members and clubs in Colorado: Canon City-Royal Gorge, Denver, Denver II, E-Club USA 7 (Colorado Springs), Foothills Club of Boulder County, Fort Collins, Greeley, Pikes Peak Area, and Prowers County. **We strongly urge you to vote “YES” on SB048.**

**Child Marriage is a Serious Problem:** Colorado’s marriage law has a dangerous loophole that allows 16- and 17-year-olds to get married with approval by a juvenile court. This problematic law was passed in 2019. Previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval. The 2019 law change represented a first step in the right direction but should be amended to eliminate the loopholes that still make child marriage legal.

**Dangers in the Current Law**

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own children to marry, even with the amendments added in 2019. Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law, which is not surprising as 98% of the children who were married here before 2019 were just 16 or 17 years old. Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.
- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older – unless the perpetrator is married to the minor.
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage, which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them. This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence. The current law also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.

**Devastating Lifetime Consequences of Child Marriage**

- Child marriage destroys every aspect of a child’s life: health, education, economic opportunities, freedom, physical safety, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.
- **The U.S. Department of State calls all marriages before 18 a “human rights abuse.”**
- Teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18. Even at 15, 16, or 17, they cannot easily leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or bring a legal action including divorce or seeking a protective order.
- Marriage before 18 results in divorce 70% to 80% of the time.

**Alarming Statistics in Colorado**

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men that were on average 3.93 years older.

- Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.
- Colorado's average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado's average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.

#### **Simple Legislative Solution**

- **SB26-048** costs nothing, harms no one and saves girls from a human rights abuse.
- **Passing SB26-048** eliminates the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage, marriage before the age of 18.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage. More information is at [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org).
- Learn more at: [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org)

The Zonta USA Caucus engages in non-partisan advocacy to build a better world for women and girls. You can make a difference in the lives of children by ending child marriage. Please pass SB26-048 out of committee and support it throughout the bill's process.

Respectfully,

Lisa J. Lesniak  
Advocacy Committee Member  
Zonta Foothills Club of Boulder County  
Zonta International District 12



**Testimony in SUPPORT of SB048:  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee  
February 14, 2025**

Dear Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Zonta International is a 105-year-old organization that seeks to build a better world for women and girls. The Zonta USA Caucus conducts nonpartisan advocacy for women and girls representing hundreds of Zonta Clubs in the U.S. including members and clubs in Colorado: Canon City-Royal Gorge, Denver, Denver II, E-Club USA 7 (Colorado Springs), Foothills Club of Boulder County, Fort Collins, Greeley, Pikes Peak Area, and Prowers County. **We strongly urge you to vote “YES” on SB048.**

**Child Marriage is a Serious Problem:** Colorado’s marriage law<sup>1</sup> has a dangerous loophole that allows 16- and 17-year-olds to get married with approval by a juvenile court.<sup>2</sup> This problematic law was passed in 2019. Previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval.<sup>3</sup> The 2019 law change represented a first step in the right direction, but should be amended to eliminate the loopholes that still make child marriage legal.

**Dangers in the Current Law**

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own children to marry, even with the amendments added in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law, which is not surprising as 98% of the children who were married here before 2019 were just 16 or 17

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<sup>1</sup> Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) § 14-2-106(1)(a)(I)

<sup>2</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108.

<sup>3</sup> HB19-1316 was signed into law on 31 May 2019 and went into effect on 2 August 2019. See: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb>

<sup>4</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108(2). The safeguards include: (1) The court must appoint a guardian ad litem for the underage party, and the guardian ad litem must file a report advising whether the marriage is in the underage party’s “best interests.” However, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse” (See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>). How can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor’s best interest? (2) The court must “consider” the following: (a) The wishes of the underage party. However, this puts the onus on traumatized teens to find a safe way to communicate to the court that they are being forced to marry; (b) The view of the parents or legal guardians. However, the fact that parents or guardians “consent” to a marriage in no way means the marriage is consensual; (c) The ability of the underage party to assume the responsibilities of marriage. However, the statute does not specify what the “responsibilities of marriage” are; (d) The circumstances surrounding the marriage. However, when parents are pushing a marriage on their teenage child, and the teenager is too scared to disclose that information, the court has no way to know the actual circumstances surrounding the marriage; (e) The ability of the underage party to manage their financial and other affairs. However, requiring a court to “consider” this is a low bar that does not ensure only self-sufficient minors are entered into marriage. (3) The court must determine that the marriage would serve the minor’s “best interests”

years old.<sup>5</sup> Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.<sup>6</sup>

- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older<sup>7</sup> – unless the perpetrator is married to the minor.<sup>8</sup>
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage,<sup>9</sup> which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them.<sup>10</sup> This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence.<sup>11</sup> The current law also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

### Devastating Lifetime Consequences of Child Marriage

- Child marriage destroys every aspect of a child’s life: health, education, economic opportunities, freedom, physical safety, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.<sup>13</sup> **The U.S. Department of State calls all marriages before 18 a “human rights abuse.”**<sup>14</sup>
- Teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18.<sup>15</sup> Even at 15, 16, or 17, they cannot easily leave home,<sup>16</sup> enter a domestic violence

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<sup>5</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> C.R.S. § 18-3-402(1)(e).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* The perpetrator commits sexual assault only if they are “not the spouse of the victim.”

<sup>9</sup> *In re Marriage of Fetters*, 584 P.2d 104, 106 (Colo. Ct. App. 1978).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bornstein, The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces, *American Psychologist* (September 2006), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16953747>.

<sup>12</sup> Federal law (8 U.S. Code § 1101) does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside (see: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages (11 January 2019), [https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURLgpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURLgpo115058.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURLgpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURLgpo115058.pdf)). This means Colorado’s current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to U.S. citizenship. Colorado’s current marriage laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their child bride or child groom.

<sup>13</sup> Fraidy Reiss, Why Can 12-Year-Olds Still Get Married in the United States, *Washington Post* (10 February 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/why-does-the-united-states-still-let-12-year-old-girls-get-married>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al., United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101: The age of adulthood is 18. (Note that Colorado statute refers to anyone under age 21 as a “minor,” per C.R.S. § 2-4-401(6). However, that designation does not supersede other statutes, such as § 13-22-101. In this memo, “minor” refers to persons under age 18.)

<sup>16</sup> C.R.S. § 26-5.7-104: Law enforcement may take a minor into custody if the minor’s parent reports them as a runaway.



shelter, retain an attorney,<sup>17</sup> or bring a legal action including divorce or seeking a protective order.<sup>18</sup>

- Marriage before 18 results in divorce 70% to 80% of the time.<sup>19</sup>

### Alarming Statistics in Colorado

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.<sup>20</sup>
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men that were on average 3.93 years older.<sup>21</sup>
- Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.<sup>22</sup>
- Colorado's average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado's average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.<sup>23</sup>

### Simple Legislative Solution

- **SB048** costs nothing, harms no one and saves girls from a human rights abuse.
- **Passing SB048** eliminates the dangerous loopholes that allows child marriage, marriage before the age of 18.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.<sup>24</sup> More information is at [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org).
- Learn more at: [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org)

The Zonta USA Caucus engages in non-partisan advocacy to build a better world for women and girls. You can make a difference in the lives of children by ending child marriage.

Respectfully,

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<sup>17</sup> We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential; they must notify the parent within 24 hours (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-106(2)). Also, youth shelter stays are limited to 21 days, and youth shelters must strive to reunite the youth with their family within that time (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-105(2)).

<sup>18</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(a): Persons must be age 18 or older to enter into any legal contractual obligation and be legally bound thereby. See also: *Doenges-Long Motors v. Gillen*, 328 P.2d 1077, 1080 (Colo. 1958). See also: *Nicholas v. People*, 973 P.2d 1213, 1219 (Colo. 1999), citing *Jones v. Dressel*, 623 P.2d 370, 373 (Colo. 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>.

<sup>20</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Based on Unchained At Last's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>23</sup> Based on Unchained At Last's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note that the calculations were based on the state that issued each marriage license (not the state of residence) and the issuing state's population.

<sup>24</sup> C.R.S. §§ 14-2-105; 14-2-106; 14-2-107: Colorado does not impose a residency requirement for marriage.

Zonta USA Caucus

<https://zontausa.org/>

[hello@zontausa.org](mailto:hello@zontausa.org)

Zonta International District 1

Zonta International District 2

Zonta International District 3

Zonta International District 4

Zonta International District 5

Zonta International District 6

Zonta International District 7

Zonta International District 8

Zonta International District 9

Zonta International District 10

Zonta International District 11

Zonta International District 12

- Zonta Club of Canon City-Royal Gorge
- Zonta Club of Denver
- Zonta Club of Denver II
- Zonta Club of E-Club USA 7 (Colorado Springs)
- Zonta Club of Foothills Club of Boulder County
- Zonta Club of Fort Collins
- Zonta Club of Greeley
- Zonta Club of Pikes Peak Area
- Zonta Club of Prowers County

Zonta International District 15



**Testimony in SUPPORT of SB048:  
Presented to the Colorado Senate State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee  
February 14, 2025**

Dear Chair Wallace, Vice Chair Sullivan and Distinguished Committee Members:

Zonta International is a 105-year-old organization that seeks to build a better world for women and girls. The Zonta USA Caucus conducts nonpartisan advocacy for women and girls representing hundreds of Zonta Clubs in the U.S. including members and clubs in Colorado: Canon City-Royal Gorge, Denver, Denver II, E-Club USA 7 (Colorado Springs), Foothills Club of Boulder County, Fort Collins, Greeley, Pikes Peak Area, and Prowers County. **We strongly urge you to vote “YES” on SB048.**

**Child Marriage is a Serious Problem:** Colorado’s marriage law<sup>1</sup> has a dangerous loophole that allows 16- and 17-year-olds to get married with approval by a juvenile court.<sup>2</sup> This problematic law was passed in 2019. Previously, parents could marry off children of any age with judicial approval.<sup>3</sup> The 2019 law change represented a first step in the right direction, but should be amended to eliminate the loopholes that still make child marriage legal.

**Dangers in the Current Law**

- A requirement for judicial approval does not prevent parents from forcing their own children to marry, even with the amendments added in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Judicial review puts the onus on terrified teens to figure out how to explain that they are being forced to wed, without facing dire repercussions at home.
- Child marriage continues to happen at an alarming rate under the 2019 law, which is not surprising as 98% of the children who were married here before 2019 were just 16 or 17

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<sup>1</sup> Colorado Revised Statutes (C.R.S.) § 14-2-106(1)(a)(I)

<sup>2</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108.

<sup>3</sup> HB19-1316 was signed into law on 31 May 2019 and went into effect on 2 August 2019. See: <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/hb>

<sup>4</sup> C.R.S. § 14-2-108(2). The safeguards include: (1) The court must appoint a guardian ad litem for the underage party, and the guardian ad litem must file a report advising whether the marriage is in the underage party’s “best interests.” However, the U.S. State Department calls marriage before age 18 a “human rights abuse” (See: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>). How can a human rights abuse ever be in a minor’s best interest? (2) The court must “consider” the following: (a) The wishes of the underage party. However, this puts the onus on traumatized teens to find a safe way to communicate to the court that they are being forced to marry; (b) The view of the parents or legal guardians. However, the fact that parents or guardians “consent” to a marriage in no way means the marriage is consensual; (c) The ability of the underage party to assume the responsibilities of marriage. However, the statute does not specify what the “responsibilities of marriage” are; (d) The circumstances surrounding the marriage. However, when parents are pushing a marriage on their teenage child, and the teenager is too scared to disclose that information, the court has no way to know the actual circumstances surrounding the marriage; (e) The ability of the underage party to manage their financial and other affairs. However, requiring a court to “consider” this is a low bar that does not ensure only self-sufficient minors are entered into marriage. (3) The court must determine that the marriage would serve the minor’s “best interests”

years old.<sup>5</sup> Just between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2023, the latest date for which data are available, 139 minors were entered into marriage in Colorado.<sup>6</sup>

- Child marriage gives a “get out of jail free” card to child rapists. Sex with a 16-year-old is considered sexual assault if the perpetrator is 10 or more years older<sup>7</sup> – unless the perpetrator is married to the minor.<sup>8</sup>
- Teens are automatically emancipated upon marriage,<sup>9</sup> which terminates their parents’ financial obligation to them.<sup>10</sup> This can force the teen to become financially dependent on their spouse – a risk factor for domestic violence.<sup>11</sup> The current law also incentivizes forced child marriage, so a parent can get out of a child support obligation or child custody battle.
- Child marriage encourages the legal trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

### Devastating Lifetime Consequences of Child Marriage

- Child marriage destroys every aspect of a child’s life: health, education, economic opportunities, freedom, physical safety, and increases their risk of experiencing violence.<sup>13</sup> **The U.S. Department of State calls all marriages before 18 a “human rights abuse.”**<sup>14</sup>
- Teens can easily be forced into marriage or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18.<sup>15</sup> Even at 15, 16, or 17, they cannot easily leave home,<sup>16</sup> enter a domestic violence

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<sup>5</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> C.R.S. § 18-3-402(1)(e).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* The perpetrator commits sexual assault only if they are “not the spouse of the victim.”

<sup>9</sup> *In re Marriage of Fetters*, 584 P.2d 104, 106 (Colo. Ct. App. 1978).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bornstein, The Complex Relationship Between Dependency and Domestic Violence: Converging Psychological Factors and Social Forces, *American Psychologist* (September 2006), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16953747>.

<sup>12</sup> Federal law (8 U.S. Code § 1101) does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside (see: U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *How the U.S. Immigration System Encourages Child Marriages* (11 January 2019), [https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURLgpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4\\_G74\\_9-PURLgpo115058.pdf](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURLgpo115058/pdf/GOVPUB-Y4_G74_9-PURLgpo115058.pdf)). This means Colorado’s current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to U.S. citizenship. Colorado’s current marriage laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Colorado as their child bride or child groom.

<sup>13</sup> Fraidy Reiss, *Why Can 12-Year-Olds Still Get Married in the United States*, *Washington Post* (10 February 2017), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/why-does-the-united-states-still-let-12-year-old-girls-get-married>.

<sup>14</sup> U.S. Department of State, et al., *United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls* (March 2016), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/254904.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101: The age of adulthood is 18. (Note that Colorado statute refers to anyone under age 21 as a “minor,” per C.R.S. § 2-4-401(6). However, that designation does not supersede other statutes, such as § 13-22-101. In this memo, “minor” refers to persons under age 18.)

<sup>16</sup> C.R.S. § 26-5.7-104: Law enforcement may take a minor into custody if the minor’s parent reports them as a runaway.

shelter, retain an attorney,<sup>17</sup> or bring a legal action including divorce or seeking a protective order.<sup>18</sup>

- Marriage before 18 results in divorce 70% to 80% of the time.<sup>19</sup>

### Alarming Statistics in Colorado

- At least 5,519 minors were wed in Colorado between 2000 and 2023.<sup>20</sup>
- Some 80% were girls wed to adult men that were on average 3.93 years older.<sup>21</sup>
- Between 2000 and 2021, at least 90 and as many as 121 marriages occurred at an age and/or with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime if not for the marital exception to statutory rape.<sup>22</sup>
- Colorado's average rate of child marriage between 2000 and 2021 was the 16th highest among the 44 U.S. states with available data. During that period, Colorado's average rate of child marriage was 1.27 per 1,000 minors aged 15 to 17.<sup>23</sup>

### Simple Legislative Solution

- **SB048** costs nothing, harms no one and saves girls from a human rights abuse.
- **Passing SB048** eliminates the dangerous loopholes that allows child marriage, marriage before the age of 18.
- States and territories across the U.S. and countries around the world are making the marriage age 18, no exceptions. Colorado is falling behind and risks becoming a destination site for child marriage.<sup>24</sup> More information is at [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org).
- Learn more at: [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org)

The Zonta USA Caucus engages in non-partisan advocacy to build a better world for women and girls. You can make a difference in the lives of children by ending child marriage.

Respectfully,

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<sup>17</sup> We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential; they must notify the parent within 24 hours (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-106(2)). Also, youth shelter stays are limited to 21 days, and youth shelters must strive to reunite the youth with their family within that time (See: C.R.S. § 26-5.7-105(2)).

<sup>18</sup> C.R.S. § 13-22-101(1)(a): Persons must be age 18 or older to enter into any legal contractual obligation and be legally bound thereby. See also: *Doenges-Long Motors v. Gillen*, 328 P.2d 1077, 1080 (Colo. 1958). See also: *Nicholas v. People*, 973 P.2d 1213, 1219 (Colo. 1999), citing *Jones v. Dressel*, 623 P.2d 370, 373 (Colo. 1981).

<sup>19</sup> Vivian Hamilton, *The Age of Marital Capacity: Reconsidering Civil Recognition of Adolescent Marriage*, William & Mary Law School Scholarship Repository (2012), <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/1430>.

<sup>20</sup> Based on marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> Based on Unchained At Last's analysis of Colorado's statutory rape laws and marriage-license data Unchained retrieved from the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Center for Health & Environmental Data, Vital Statistics Program.

<sup>23</sup> Based on Unchained At Last's analysis of marriage-certificate data from 44 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., and U.S. Census Bureau population data. Note that the calculations were based on the state that issued each marriage license (not the state of residence) and the issuing state's population.

<sup>24</sup> C.R.S. §§ 14-2-105; 14-2-106; 14-2-107: Colorado does not impose a residency requirement for marriage.

Zonta USA Caucus

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- Zonta Club of Denver
- Zonta Club of Denver II
- Zonta Club of E-Club USA 7 (Colorado Springs)
- Zonta Club of Foothills Club of Boulder County
- Zonta Club of Fort Collins
- Zonta Club of Greeley
- Zonta Club of Pikes Peak Area
- Zonta Club of Prowers County

Zonta International District 15