



# SDG REPORT CARD

## Ending Child Marriage in the United States

SDG 5.3

Mary Adams



US GRADE

C-

Marginal Progress

**The Sustainable Development Goals call for the elimination of child, early, and forced marriage by 2030.** While the United States has made marginal progress toward that goal with bans in 18 states, there are no national-level laws prohibiting child marriage. The US does not track the official UN statistical indicator for SDG target 5.3. With that federal neglect, 32 US states still allow child marriage. Children who marry cannot provide the full, free, and informed consent required of adults, leaving them vulnerable to coercion, exploitation, and abuse. Without comprehensive federal protections, consistent laws across states, and national reporting on progress, the United States lacks a coordinated approach to ending child marriage.

**314,000 children**

were married in the  
United States  
from 2000-2021

Unchained At Last 2025

### What Are the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

17 global goals adopted by UN member states in 2015 to address social, economic, environmental challenges and promote peace, prosperity, and sustainability by 2030. **SDG 5** focuses on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. **SDG Target 5.3** aims to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (United Nations 2025).

**32 states**

allow child marriage  
with parental consent  
or judicial approval

Mississippi, New Mexico  
have NO minimum age

Freedom United 2026

### What is Child Marriage?

Any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child (UNICEF 2026). Forced marriage occurs when at least one party has not given their full, free, informed consent to the union. UNICEF considers any marriage involving a child under age 18 a forced marriage because a minor lacks the maturity and legal standing to give consent.

### Survivor Voice

*"We got married that night after church," Sherry Johnson remembered. "I was 11. I knew he was 20. So I knew something was wrong. I was totally surprised that they allowed it to happen. I was being raped by people with authority. I didn't know what was actually really happening to me. I just know that something wasn't right about it." She gave birth to their first child at age 10. Soon, she was pregnant again (ABC News 2019).*

**86%**

of US child marriages  
involved girls  
compared to 14%  
for boys

Unchained At Last 2021

### US Girls and Child Marriage

In the United States, the legality of child marriage depends on each state rather than on federal policy (Equality Now 2026). The **Child Marriage Prevention Act**, a bipartisan bill first introduced in 2024, would create federal protections and incentives aimed at ending child marriage, but it has not advanced under the current administration (Tahirih Justice Center 2026). Unchained At Last, a survivor-led non-profit organization working to end forced and child marriage, notes that child marriage often acts as a legal "get out of jail free" card for adult rape perpetrators. While some jurisdictions have recently banned the practice, the **statutory rape loophole** remains a major human rights issue across numerous states (Unchained at Last 2021).

**10-17 years old**

Ages that girls are  
married in the US, as  
documented by state  
marriage data.

Unchained At Last 2021

## The Data Gap in the United States

**SDG indicator 5.3.1** measures the percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in a union before age 18. In the United States, there is no formal report on federal and state-level efforts to eliminate child, early, and forced marriage by the SDG target date of 2030, and there is no national-level data collection using the globally-agreed SDG 5.3.1. indicator. Because it lacks the nationally representative data required for official SDG reporting, the United States remains "invisible" in global monitoring databases. Without a federal law banning child marriage and national-level collection of 5.3.1 data, progress can only be measured state-by-state, severely limiting headway towards SDG 5.3.

Most countries report official SDG statistics as part of a Voluntary National Review (VNR), a process through which they inform the United Nations on their progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. As of 2026, **only three countries have not participated in the VNR process: Haiti, Myanmar and the United States** (Sachs et al. 2026).

### Survivor Voice

*Trevica was a 13-year-old high school freshman when her mother picked her up from school and announced that she would be married that very day. Afraid to question her mother, Trevica sat shocked and confused on the drive to the Houston courthouse. The groom was 26-years-old and just out of prison. Despite these obvious red flags, the Justice of the Peace performed the marriage as if there was nothing alarming about the picture in front of him (Tahirih Justice Center 2020).*

### 60-year age gap

In Alabama, a 14-year-old girl was married to a 74-year-old man.

Child USA 2024

### 18 states

ban child marriage

Delaware the first (2018)  
New Jersey, Pennsylvania  
Minnesota, Rhode Island  
New York, Massachusetts  
Vermont, Connecticut  
Michigan, Washington  
Virginia, New Hampshire  
Maine, Oregon  
Missouri, Oklahoma  
California (2026)

Freedom United 2026

## US Women's Caucus Recommendations

### Pass the Child Marriage Prevention Act

to provide federal protection for minors and ensure no one under 18 is subjected to marriage.

### Improve National Data Collection

aligned with SDG 5.3 and participate in the Voluntary National Review process.

### Coordinate State-by-State Efforts

to raise minimum marriage age to 18 without exceptions and strengthen protections for children across the US.

## References

ABC News 2019. *Child Brides in US Share Stories of Exploitation*.  
Child USA 2024. *National Overview of Child Marriage Data and Law*  
Equality Now. *Child Marriage in the United States*.  
Freedom United 2026. *U.S. Child Marriage Laws: Individual State Legislation*.  
Koski, Alissa and Jody Heymann 2018. *Child Marriage in the United States: How Common Is the Practice?*  
Sachs, Jeffrey D. et al. 2026. *Sustainable Development Report Part 4: Government Efforts to Implement the SDGs*.  
Tahirih Justice Center 2020. *Child Marriage in the U.S.: Survivor Story Compilation*.  
Tahirih Justice Center 2026. *Child Marriage Prevention Act*.  
Unchained At Last 2025. *United States' Child Marriage Problem: Study Findings 2000-2021*.  
UNICEF. *Child Marriage*.  
United Nations 2025. *UN Gender Snapshot 2025*.

*US feminists collaborating to advance human rights and gender equity for women and girls worldwide*  
[www.uswomenscaucus.org](http://www.uswomenscaucus.org) [info@uswomenscaucus.org](mailto:info@uswomenscaucus.org)