

**GFWC Convention
August 9, 2025
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I want to express my sincere thanks to the General Federation of Women's Clubs for this recognition. So often, journalists work alone, striving to make a difference in the world. It is with immense gratitude, I accept this award on behalf of the many victims of child marriage, forced marriage, and coerced marriage.

This story haunted me. It was emotionally difficult to write and kept me up at night searching for the best way to tell you, the reader, about the terrible situation facing many victims, mostly girls.

As a volunteer journalist and member of a woman's club, my articles for California Clubwoman Magazine have included stories about topics such as "20 Quaint Towns to Visit in California," or "Disaster Preparedness," or even "What Makes a Strong Club?"

Occasionally, I write about heavier topics such as homelessness, or even an article I wrote about eight years ago for the GFWC Clubwoman Magazine about Human Trafficking. I used to write on similar topics for six newspapers on a weekly basis.

These heavier topics are always a challenge. I try to tell horrible stories in a careful way. First, I tell the story with just enough information to describe the problem, but not so much that the reader turns away in fear or disgust. Then, I tell who is trying to solve the problem such as government agencies or non-profit organizations. Finally, I don't want readers to leave feeling hopeless, so I share ways each of us can help the people who are working to solve the problem. Maybe they need money, or volunteers, or help spreading the word.

My goal is two-fold. First, to empower the reader to feel they can make a difference, then, most important, motivate the reader to action.

I wrote this story, called *Here Comes the Bride*, then crossed my fingers that someone would be motivated to take up the cause. Remarkably, clubs in California shared the article in their newsletters, and talked about it with their members.

My interview was with Fraidy Reiss, Founder and Executive Director of Unchained at Last, a non-profit organization working to change state laws, and stop forced and child marriage.

Before you think this story is from the distant past, or in another country, know that it is about the United States of America, today.

In a recent study conducted by Unchained at Last, from 2000 to 2018, marriage certificates show that 300,000 minors were wed in the U.S. If you each google your state name and the minimum age for marriage, you may be shocked. Please don't do it now. My article shows a map of the U.S. with states that have a minimum age for marriage, but that doesn't mean the age isn't 15 or 16.

In California, the minimum age for marriage, with parent approval, is ZERO. The one caveat for California is that a minor child must have approval from a judge. You would think that would stop it right there. However, if a parent brings their 15-year-old pregnant daughter to court, and the daughter agrees to the marriage, and the parent agrees, then the judge can say, "Yes," and the child gets married.

So, why would the girl agree? One example is a child who has been raped or coerced into an intimate relationship by an adult neighbor or friend. The parents do not want to be embarrassed by having an unmarried teen in their family, so they threaten the daughter that she must marry the man, or she will be tossed out on the street. Through extreme coercion, and threats to the man, too, the terrified girl agrees to the marriage. She often ends up in a violent relationship with a man who may or may not have wanted to marry the girl. He, as an adult, has all the rights of an adult. She does not. It is an unequal relationship.

The girl is not emotionally or physically mature enough to handle a marriage. In most states, being underage, she cannot go to a domestic violence shelter, or hire an attorney to get a divorce. She is trapped. She has nowhere to go and, once she has children, she ends up in a cycle of violence to herself, and fear for the safety of her children. She typically has no money and no one to help. If she tries to leave, since she has not graduated high school, she ends up in a low-wage, dead-end job. Often, when a victim tries to escape, her parents will shun her as punishment.

Another example, cited by Fraidy told of parents who were divorced, with their teen daughter living primarily with mom in California. She spent summers and vacations with her father in Idaho.

Like a typical teenager, the 16-year-old was complaining to her father about how strict her mother was. The dad told her that, if she got married, then mother couldn't tell her what to do anymore. The girl agreed, and the dad paid a young man in his twenties to marry her. The mother took the case to court (*Carver v Hornish* 2021) to annul the marriage because it turned out the father's real goal was to get out of paying child support. The court could do nothing about it, stating there was no law in Idaho to prevent it.

You may think this problem is because of certain religious or cultural groups, but Fraidy Reiss says it is not. There is no one type of parent that forces their child to marry.

Some reasons she cited were to establish connections between families, to settle financial debts, to assist friends with immigration, or to assure that their teenager doesn't get pregnant by a boyfriend.

The girls are usually teens, with the new husbands being in their twenties, or even older. The youngest brides they found were two girls aged ten.

Imagine being married to a stranger and facing the horror of a wedding night with that stranger touching your naked body in intimate ways. Imagine that continuing for years. Some girls who cannot escape the abuse end up committing suicide.

I apologize for being so graphic, but it's the reality for too many young girls. This is the challenge I faced writing this story.

So, I have told you a little about the story I wrote, and the organization that is working to solve it. Now, let's get to the part where WE, where YOU, can help. You may want to have your pen ready to write down a few things that can be done:

1. The California Federation of Women's Clubs has taken the first step. One club, then their district, then the state federation created a Resolution that passed at the 2024 state convention that condemns forced and coerced marriage. It was brought back just a few weeks ago at the 2025 state convention for a little more tune-up. It is now being sent to the General Federation of Women's Clubs, GFWC, for Resolution consideration at the national and international level.

2. It would be wonderful if GFWC would invite Fraidy Reiss, from Unchained at Last to speak at a future GFWC convention to explain more fully the problem, and answer your questions.
3. You can check to see if your state prevents child and forced marriage. Unchained at Last can help provide that information at unchainedatlast.org, or by phone at (908) 481-HOPE. Fraidy, and her few employees are working state by state to change child marriage laws. She has been successful in some states, but see if there is some way you can help change the laws in your state. Statistically, someone in this room, or many more than one person, has been a victim of child marriage or forced marriage. If it is you, then you know how it felt. If it is not you, be thankful, but help, anyway. Ask Unchained at Last how you can help in your state.

I will close with a little story. Currently, as president of Orange District, CFWC, in Orange County, CA, my district has 20 women's clubs, with 1,400 members.

When deciding on the theme for my two-year term as district president, I wanted to tell the story of our organization's founder, Jane Cunningham Croly.

There is a presentation I offer to clubs sharing the incredible odds she faced getting this organization started. I also share some of the amazing BIG things done by GFWC clubs working together, including: in the 1930s we received recognition for creating 75% of the nation's libraries; in 1945 being one of five women's organizations who participated in the formation of the United Nations; and in 1961 getting one million seat belts installed in cars in one year. These are just a few of the many major accomplishments – and YOU did them.

Remarkably, in the late 1800s, Jane was 61 years old when she federated the first 63 clubs during a meeting held in New York.

Imagine the challenges she faced. There was no easy form of communication. Almost no one had cars, so travel was difficult. There was no email. Everything she did was hard. Yet she did it.

So, the theme I selected is, "Be Like Jane. Get the Job Done." I purchased a button maker and started making buttons.

They feature a photo of Jane, along with my theme. I brought a few hundred buttons here with me, and yes, you may have one.

The button will remind you of this magazine story and presentation. It will also remind you of your opportunity to make a difference for victims of child and forced marriage.

Stop by and see me today, I am happy to give you a button to keep and wear. My district members have been told to wear theirs everywhere. When someone sees your button and asks, "Who is Jane?" Tell them about Jane; who she was, what she did, what your club does in your community, and how they can join your club." Inside, you will know that for you, it also reminds you to see how you can help victims of child marriage.

You are welcome to read the full magazine article. You can find it on the California Federation of Women's Clubs website at:

cfdc.org

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Or, you can stop by and see me for a copy today, as long as my supply lasts.

On a personal note, I am still writing for California Clubwoman Magazine. Late last year, I had a short story and a poem published on Amazon in an anthology, and am currently working on a novel about solving the homeless problem. I hope to publish the novel next year.

I will close by saying, "Thank you, GFWC" for this Jane Cunningham Croly Award for Excellence in Journalism, and for the opportunity to share this message with everyone here today. I would like to remind you all to "Be Like Jane. Get the Job Done!" Thank you.