

Minutes of the Consultation with Adolescent and Youth Groups under the Chairmanship of Ms. Jaya Jaitly held on 17.07.2020

A Consultation with adolescent and youth groups was held on 17th July, 2020 under the Chairmanship of Ms. Jaya Jaitly, Chairperson of the Task Force to understand the perspectives of the adolescent and youth groups on the age of marriage and motherhood. List of participants is attached.

2. Mr. Alok Kumar, Adviser, Health and Nutrition, NITI Aayog, welcomed all the Members of the Task Force and the youth and the adolescent groups. In giving the background to the Consultation, Adviser explaining that a Task Force under the Chairpersonship of Ms. Jaya Jaitly has been constituted, which is essentially examining the age at marriage for girls and the various socio-economic, legal, health and nutrition and cultural factors associated with it. He explained it is crucial to hear the voices of adolescent girls and boys as they are the biggest stakeholders in this entire exercise and any decision made will deeply impact their lives.

3. Ms. Jaya Jaitly, Chairperson of the Task Force, welcomed all the participants and Members of the Task Force. She appreciated the enthusiasm of the youth/adolescent organizations and groups in reaching out to her and sharing their views on the issues. She explained that as issues around age of marriage and motherhood entail gender empowerment and equality, it is important to hear adolescent voices and thoughts on the same to enable and strengthen the decisions made by the Task Force.

3. Thereafter, Ms. Rhea Chawla, Program Manager, YP foundation, informed that the YP foundation is committed to enhancing the rights of young women girls, and marginalized communities through building feminist leadership. They have worked with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare to ensure meaningful participation of young people in decision making around national programs such as Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) and so on. She was responsible for moderating 5 Resource persons aged 18-21 years across 7 states of the county to discuss their views issue on these issues:

- Ms. Poorva Prabha Patil, 21 years from Maharashtra and also the first woman president of the Medical Students Association of India informed that increasing the age of marriage for girls to 21 years would not benefit but would instead give rise to further challenges. She raised the concern that increasing the age of marriage to 21 years will only increase home based deliveries due to the fear of reporting. It will increase cases of criminalization and harassment, especially for couples who consensually want to marry. She further flagged the issue of age of sexual consent and the need for sensitization of society and the health workers towards the sexual needs of youth girls.
- Ms. Anjali Suryavanshi, 19 years from Gujarat, youth volunteer with Sahaj, mentioned that increasing the age of marriage to 21 years will enable girls to complete her higher education, increase the likelihood to be employed and be

financially independent and consequently enable her to make informed decisions. She, however, emphasized the importance of free and consensual marriage. She explained that some of the factors contributing to child marriage include parent's fear of sexual relationship of their adolescent daughters, poverty and thus lack of resources to invest in her education, and there is a need to address them.

- Ms. Venkata Nandini, 18 years from Madanapalle, Andhra Pradesh, youth volunteer for People's Organization for Rural Development, justified that increasing the age of marriage may benefit girls in aspects like completing her education, getting job opportunities, and being physically and mentally healthier. She explained these factors can provide cushion support in times of unforeseen situations like divorce and so on. However, she also emphasized to reap full benefits of this, passing legal reforms may not be sufficient and structural support in terms of schools, colleges and ensuring their accessibility for girls is important. Further, parents and kids should be counseled on the importance of girl's education, skill training, health and employment opportunities. She emphasized the need to strengthen the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer's post for better implementation of PCMA.
- Mr. Amos, 20 years, from Kerala, informed that the girls age of marriage should be increased to 21 years as it will help especially the vulnerable girls prepare better for marriage, in terms of their education, health and work opportunities. Girls married at 18 have little chance to complete their graduation and are thus forced to be dependent on husband for everything. Increasing the age will increase the likelihood of establishing their careers and becoming independent in decision making.
- Ms. Beauty Kumari Paswan, 20 years from Bihar elucidated that as Constitution provides girls and boys equal rights, the same should be extended to marriage as well. She explained that increasing the age of marriage for girls to 21 years will enable them to finish their education, get exposed to new ideas, have occupational aspirations, and ultimately delay their child bearing age as well. However, she raised a concern for couples who are in a consensual relationship, and that this legal reform will cause them further harassment by police. She further emphasized the importance accessibility of Sexual and Reproductive Health knowledge and services among young girls. Youth medical centres have opened but these services are not extended to unmarried couples due to biases of nurses stationed there. There is a need for massive awareness campaigns against child marriages and on sexual and reproductive health among adolescents, similar to the awareness drives on family planning. Thus, increasing age will not be relevant if it is not supplemented by these efforts.
- Mr. Gurdeep Singh, 20 years from Delhi, raised concerns for couples who are in a consensual relationship. He emphasized that issues related to their education, employment opportunities, health and nutrition are more important and should be addressed before increasing their age of marriage.

3. Ms. Kavita Ratna, Director, the Concerned for Working Children thanked the Task Force for providing this platform for the youth to represent their views on these issues. She informed that the National Working group was coordinating Young Voices, a process that started after June 26th after knowing about the Task Force and its Terms of Reference. She informed that 4 youth from 4 zones were selected from more than 1600 people across 16 States and 30 organizations. These youth resource people come from vulnerable and marginalized backgrounds.

Summarizing the views, Ms. Ratna explained that overall, these adolescents discussed causes of continued persistence of child marriage in their zones, some of which include, poverty, patriarchy, lack of options and opportunities in life skills, education, gainful employment, vocational education, lack of agency to take decisions; lack of security, and fear of sexual assault. They further emphasize that these problematic factors have become further aggravated in the COVID-19 context. Highlights of the views of the resource persons are presented below:

- Ms. Damini Singh (North Zone), 19 years from Hardoi, working with Milaan Foundation, explained that lack of education opportunities due to lack of schools and other institutions is one of the biggest roadblocks which disables girls from realizing her potential. Schools are located far away and parents are not comfortable to send the girls to these schools due to the fear of their safety. She mentioned that every girl wants to be physically, mentally strong, financially independent and take their own independent decisions but absence of job opportunities and meaningful alternatives compel the parent's to get the girls married early. She emphasized the need for state support for education and job opportunities for girls as this will automatically enable these girls to delay their marriage. Further, girl's parents need to be jointly counseled by ASHA and Anganwadi Workers.
- Ms. Fathimabi (South Zone), 17 years Bellary, working with Karnataka Bhima Sangha informed that the situation of child marriage in Karnataka has changed from being voidable to void since 2017. One of the problems arising from this has been that girls continue to get married but now lack legal protection and are also unable to claim program and Scheme benefits like widow pensions, and so on. She emphasized that child marriages have become more rampant during COVID-19. She raised the concern that increasing age of marriage will increase female foeticide. She further explained that potential solutions to eliminating or delaying child marriage include improving economic situation of the families, livelihood opportunities, and promoting simple and affordable weddings.
- Ms. Mamta Jangid (West Zone), 19 years from Ajmer, Rajasthan, pointed out that despite PCMA, many girls are still getting married before 18 years despite the PCMA and increasing the age of marriage to 21 years will only increase administrative burden. According to her, increasing the age of marriage would not have any impact as age does not define and measure success. She emphasized that

the focus should be more on education; girl's safety against sexual violence; societal pressure to get girls married early; and so on- rather than increasing the age of marriage. She pointed out that awareness on sexual and reproductive rights among young girls is very limited and most of the teachers avoid teaching this section in schools, which leads to negative health outcomes. She further enquired about the legal status of children being born to girls who are between 18-21 years of age. She stressed on the importance of enabling conditions to improve girl's education, health and employment outcomes and other ways of empowering them that will create alternatives to her early marriage. She recommended a package for girls post Class X in areas like sports, education, and so on as an incentive to retain them in school.

- Ms. Priyanka Murmu (East Zone), 19 years, from Jharkhand, pointed out to issues related to lack of teachers and facilities in schools; means of transportation to reach schools which are located far away; safety and security of girls restricting their mobility; lack of employment opportunities; irregular health services provided in Anganwadi Centres and so on. She recommended these issues should be addressed and free education should be extended till class XII, as they are more important than passing any legal reforms on age of marriage.

4. Ms. Prathana, Project Coordinator, Nirantar Trust, thanked the Task Force for providing an opportunity for representing their views. She mentioned that Nirantar Trust works to promote women's empowerment through education. Highlights of the views of adolescents are presented below:

- Ms. Khushboo, 19 years, from West Champaran, Bihar, pointed out that increasing the age would not make any impact because most of the children are getting married before 18 years and there is less likelihood of families keeping their daughters at home after 18 year as they consider girls to be an economic burden. With the support of the government, girls are able to study till class VIII but poor parents are unable to finance their higher education. She stressed that before taking such decisions of increasing age of marriage, Government should improve the facilities for education, hostel, means of transportation, health and employment for girls. She raised concerns for those who want to get married before 21 years with consent. Facilities and benefits should be given to poor parents especially during the lockdown due to COVID-19.
- Ms. Nazia, 20 years, from Alwar, Rajasthan, stated that there would be no benefits by increasing age to 21 years. She raised issues like harassment in schools; societal pressure and associated issues of honour when girls move out of villages to study or work; girls treated as '*paraya dhan*' and economic burden; dowry and its relationship with age of girls; and so on as reasons which deter the parents to invest in girls education as it is considered it to be double cost burden for them. Thus, Government should make education free for girls; provide hostel, and transport facilities for them to be independent, empowered and capable. Further, education should also be linked to her employment opportunities so that families do not consider them as burden. She

further explained that PCMA itself is not been implemented properly, and it will be more problematic to increase the age of marriage to 21 years.

- Ms. Himadri Priya Duwara, 16 years from Assam, indicated that increasing age of marriage will not make a difference until structural inequalities are not addressed. She explained that the centrality of marriage is very strong in a girl's life and they do not have any other aspirations. She further mentioned that while education for girls with low income background is free in Assam till class XII but these schools are not in good condition compelling the parents to send them to unaffordable private schools, ultimately leading to their dropouts. She recommended that incentives should be provided to cover these expenses like books, uniforms, and so on as well. Awareness generation of parents and girls is important through women collectives like Mahila Samitis and Kishori Samitis. Livelihood opportunities through short courses training like stitching and so on would allow the girls to become independent and consequently delay her marriage.
- Ms. Heena, 19 years from Delhi, working with ActionAid, reiterated that increasing age would not benefit girls. She emphasized that there is a need to address problems like discrimination faced by girls in schools, absence of teachers, poor infrastructure and so on. Further, there is a need to extend free education till class XII and create conditions enabling easy access to loans for education with minimal conditions to incentivize girls to continue their education.
- Ms. Bhagwati, 20 years from Uttar Pradesh, believed that some people, especially in the rural areas, are not even aware of the 18 years age limit for marriage and thus increasing the same to 21 years will not have any impact. Poor marginalized groups like tribal families are usually illiterate as cannot afford to complete their education. Increasing the number of schools and colleges in backward areas and transportation and hostel facilities by Government are crucial for their school retention.
- Mr. Monu Gupta, 19 years, from New Delhi, working with ActionAid, also explained that increasing the age of marriage would not make any difference. In terms of education, schools have been constructed but they suffer from issues like absence of teachers, unfriendly environment like discrimination against their background, poor infrastructure and so on are prevalent. Education degrees are not relevant if not linked with job opportunities. He further stressed that relationships under 21 years based on consent should not be discriminated.

5. Dr. Dipti Shah, Dean, AMC MET Medical College and Member, Task Force, informed that Gujarat Government has initiated Mukhyamantri Yuva Swavalamban Yojana where selected students from poor backgrounds get Rs.10 Lakh as a scholarship for five years if he/she is taking education from the Gujarat Medical Education Research Society (GMERS) and dental courses. She explained that over the years, girls have benefitted from this Scheme in 2016-17, 67 girls out of 150 medical students received, a number which increased to 93 in 2017-18, and 101 in 2019-20. Gujarat Government has

also initiated an umbrella scholarship which provides for free education for Scheduled Tribe families with less than Rs.2,50,000 annual income. She pointed out that child marriage has poor health outcomes and decisions should be made taking socio-economic status, her health, cultural psychological status and so on. Different stakeholders like youth and adolescent clubs, religious leaders, panchayat leaders, women's collective groups, teachers, elders, local government officers, role models and so on need to be involved for the same. Finally, focus should be on girls and how to make her self-reliant and self-sufficient and economically empower them.

6. In conclusion, Ms. Jaya Jailty thanked all the participants and appreciated their efforts to improving the situation of girls on the ground. She mentioned that they are agents of change and source of inspiration for many girls to improve their lives. She further stressed the importance of women's leadership positions in panchayat to enable investment in gender sensitive areas like schools, roads, buses and other means of transportation, health, education and so on.

7. The Meeting ended with a Vote of Thanks to the Chair.

Annexure**List of Participants**

Participants	Organisation
Ms. Jaya Jaitly	Chairperson of the Task Force
Mr. Alok Kumar	Adviser, Health and Nutrition, NITI Aayog
Ms. Anamika Singh	Director (WCD), NITI Aayog
Dr. G. Narayana Raju	Secretary, Department of Legislative Department, Ministry of Law and Justice
Mr. Ashish Shrivastava	Joint Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Development
Dr. S.K. Sikdar	Adviser, Dr. Sikdar, RCH, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
Mr. Santosh Yadav	Joint Secretary, Department of School Education, Ministry of Human Resource Development
Dr. Dipti Shah	Member of the Task Force
Ms. Najma Akhtar	Member of the Task Force
Ms. Vasudha Kamat	Member of the Task Force
Ms. Rhea Chawla	Program Manager, YP foundation
Ms. Kavita Ratna	Director, the Concerned for Working Children
Ms. Prathana	Project Coordinator, Nirantar Trust
Ms. Vedeika Shekhar	Associate, Health and Nutrition, NITI Aayog
Ms. Poorva Prabha Patil	Resource Person
Ms. Anjali Suryavanshi	Resource Person
Ms. Venkata Nandini	Resource Person
Mr. Amos	Resource Person
Ms. Beauty Kumari Paswan	Resource Person
Mr. Gurdeep Singh	Resource Person
Ms. Damini Singh	Resource Person
Ms. Fathimabi	Resource Person
Ms. Mamta Jangid	Resource Person
Ms. Priyanka Murmu	Resource Person
Ms. Khushboo	Resource Person
Ms. Nazia	Resource Person
Ms. Himadri Priya Duwara	Resource Person
Ms. Heena	Resource Person
Ms. Bhagwati	Resource Person
Mr. Monu Gupta	Resource Person