

## **Submission to Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, regarding the proposed increase in Minimum Age of Marriage**

We are thankful for this opportunity to present our views on the subject of the bill proposing to amend the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (PCMA), 2006 to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls to 21 years. We would like to point out that amendment while not helping to raise the average age at which girls get married, may instead harm young people- both girls and boys. Our recommendations are based on various research studies as well as our observations from our extensive field level interventions.

We work with adolescent children, both girls and boys and young women and men in several states of India to bring awareness on women's status in the society and gender discrimination, to build leadership to enable gender equality and work with the community to stop Child, Early and Forced Marriages (CEFM) and violence against women and girls.

We examine the key reasons behind early marriages, make recommendations which will reduce child marriages and contend that increasing the minimum age of marriage in law is not the best solution to raise the age of marriage. Because social change is a slow moving process, the said move will not automatically accomplish an end to underage marriages, but may instead have a deleterious effect on the lives of young people as we state below.

### **Main reasons to oppose the move to raise minimum age of marriage**

We note here the main reasons for opposing the proposed amendment. The arguments are then substantiated by data below.

I. **Amendment is not consistent in law and will not work:** The current minimum age of marriage for girls is 18 years since 1978. This has yet not become a reality. The nation-wide representative NFHS 5 survey (2020-22) showed that 23% of young girls got married under the age of 18 years. This shows that legal provisions have not worked as expected.

Besides, the proposed amendment is not consistent with current laws and UN conventions to which India is a signatory; it contradicts other laws currently in force in the country and does not uphold constitutional guarantees. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>1</sup> deems all those who attain the age of 18 years as adults and India is a signatory to it. By raising the minimum age of marriage for girls to 21 years, effectively the legislation would bring girls under 21 into the ambit of being children. It would also contradict other acts such as The Child Labour (prohibition and regulation) Amendment Act 2012 which makes persons older than 14 years eligible for employment in a regulated manner. It would also contradict laws which give all those above 18 years the right to vote, the right to sign contracts and the right to drive, to give a few examples. As per the Indian Constitution all Indian Citizens have the right to marry and found a family. While the PCMA, 2006 lays out 21 years as the minimum age of marriage for boys, the 205<sup>th</sup> report

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

of the Law Commission has provided a redress for the difference in the ages of girls and boys under PCMA. The [205th Law Commission of India Report \(2008\)](#)<sup>2</sup> recommended that minimum age of marriage for girls should remain at 18 years and that for boys be brought down to 18 years as well in keeping with their rights as majors. **The Law Commission did not find it necessary or feasible to recommend increasing the age of marriage for girls.**

**II. Global Trend:** [A large majority of countries](#) (145) have 18 years or lower as the minimum age of marriage in cognizance with the reality of young people. 90 countries have the minimum age of marriage at 18 years, 55 place it below 18 years and only 17 countries place it above 18 years. In Nepal the age of marriage with parental consent is 18 years, while without that is 20 years. The countries which have age of marriage at 21 are- Botswana, Brazil, Cook Islands, Fiji, Libya, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Zambia; and those above 18 years but below 21 are- some states of USA (19 years), Nigeria, Samoa, China, Japan, New Zealand, Suriname and Tunisia. **Social interventions are the most recommended by development agencies such as UNICEF and UNFPA in order to organically increase the age of marriage.**

**III. Amendment will not lead to Gender Equality in any substantive manner:** It is well recognised that underage marriages are a sign of gender inequality. In India 23% of girls married under the age of 18 years as against 18% boys who married under 21 years. Fewer boys marry underage because they do not face the same adverse conditions as do girls; adverse conditions such as pressure to give dowry which may increase with age and education of girl, being considered a burden on the family and being under-valued. Many boys from marginalised communities do leave school to start earning, but not to get married. In fact, the median age of marriage for boys is 24.5 years (NFHS 4), well above the minimum age. This gender inequality is also seen in multiple development indicators such as adverse sex ratio, literacy gap etc and will not be bridged merely by raising the age of marriage of girls to 21 years. **However, in the interest of formal equality and because boys too are majors at the age of 18 years, we recommend that the minimum age of marriage for boys may be brought down to 18 years; as per recommendations by the 205<sup>th</sup> Law Commission Report of 2008.**

**IV. The Prohibition of Child Marriage (PCMA) Law, 2006 is ineffective in its functioning:** The NFHS 5 shows that 23% of young women (in the age group of 20-24 years) married below the age of 18 years. Yet only 785 cases were filed under PCMA law as seen in Crime in India report of 2020. Many states do not have dedicated personnel (such as Child Marriage Prohibition Officers- CMPOs) under the law, dedicated office or staff, capacity building and motivation to implement the laws. These officers are given additional charges to implement other laws (such as the Domestic Violence Act). It is well recognised that laws such as PCMA need a dedicated budget for their implementation which has not been made available. Given that concerns such as social norms and dowry strongly push for early marriages, especially when girls are not in school or gainfully employed, it requires considerable political will and dedication by PCMA staff to go against the grain of the

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<sup>2</sup> [Law Commission of India, 2008, Report No 205, Proposal to Amend The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 and other Allied Laws](#)

community and implement the law. Unfortunately, it is seen from ground observations that when parents are solemnizing the underage match, there is little opposition to it from those charged to implement the law. Opposition to an underage marriage comes only where the parents are unhappy over the match. Therefore, the PCMA law is unlikely to be effective even with the amendment. **Making the PCMA functional while retaining the minimum age at 18 years will be much more effective.**

**V. Does not change the material reality of girls' lives:** Only two factors which change the material reality of young people and their families' lives are proven to raise the age of marriage among girls: access to secondary education and poverty reduction. The proposed amendment makes no mention of these two and is unlikely to make any change to the material reality of young people's lives. **Bring focus and funding to these two measures to accelerate the reduction in underage marriages.**

**VI. Does not, of itself, improve maternal health:** Improvement in maternal health and reduction in maternal mortality is one of the reasons given for this move. Healthy women above the age of 18 years can have a safe child-birth provided they receive the necessary health care. The most important factors which affect maternal health and increase maternal deaths are undernutrition (including anaemia which is the leading cause of maternal deaths) and poverty. Mere increase in age of marriage and subsequently of motherhood will not improve maternal health; and older women too if poor, anemic and under-nourished are known to die in child birth. Girls marrying after the age of 18 years are also from a better socio-economic status, tend to be better nourished and subsequently also have a lower mortality which may give an impression that mere age of first birth matters to make child birth safer. **Focus on improved nutrition, reduced anaemia and reduction in poverty will help to improve maternal health and reduce maternal mortality, rather than mere focus on age.**

**VII. Large scale criminalization of poor families:** 63% of young women were married under the age of 21 years as per NFHS 4 (2015-16). Majority of marriages under the age of 18 years, happen among the poorest and poorer classes in society and among Dalit and Adivasi communities, again on account of their impoverished status. All of these families, adult parents and adult groom above 21 years will be deemed criminals if the amendment goes through. This will lead to child marriages going underground, harassment of families and corrupt practices such as accepting bribes for not filing cases. **Criminalizing such a large section of the population will also make it extremely difficult to enforce the law.**

**VIII. Will harm the well-being of young people:** Majority of marriages in India are arranged by families and happen within the caste and religious configurations acceptable to parents and families. A 1000 honour killings<sup>3</sup> happen in India, mostly of girls, when the parents do not like the partners chosen by their daughters. Ground level research shows that parents are known to mis-use both the Prohibition of Child Marriage Law (PCMA), 2006 and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO), 2012 law to punish young men who do not belong to compatible castes and religion in self-choice marriages of young people.

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<sup>3</sup> Murugananthan S, 2014, Honour Killing The Menace- A case study from Tamil Nadu [https://www.academia.edu/35478626/Honour\\_Killing\\_the\\_Menace\\_A\\_case\\_study\\_in\\_Tamil\\_Nadu](https://www.academia.edu/35478626/Honour_Killing_the_Menace_A_case_study_in_Tamil_Nadu)

The proposed amendment will be another tool in the hands of parents to exercise control over their children and oppose young people from choosing their partners.

**IX. Will restrict access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) services:** As per UNICEF data 10-12% of young people in middle and low income countries are sexually active before the age of 15 years, and a substantial more below the ages of 18 years<sup>4</sup>. All sex, including of consenting adolescents under the age of 18 years, which is the legal age of consent is already a crime and medical care is not available to these young people unless the 'crime' is reported to the police. Several instances of restrictions to SRH services have emerged on this account. There is also wide-spread taboo to sex education and pre-marital sex which fuels similar kind of restrictions for unmarried girls. With the raising of age of marriage this taboo will affect a wider range of young people and will affect their access to sexual and reproductive health services- particularly access to safe abortions, condoms and contraception and treatment for sexually transmitted diseases.

In short, we would strongly recommend:

1. **Not to make any changes to the PCMA to raise minimum age of marriage for girls** as these changes will not help to bring down underage marriages but harm young people
2. **Instead, make budgetary allowances to improve material reality of young people, namely**
  - i. access to secondary education,
  - ii. meaningful employment and
  - iii. reduction in poverty
3. **Improve the implementation of the PCMA, 2006** by investing more budgets and dedicated personnel as well as investing in their capacity building

Some of the arguments made above are substantiated below:

**I. Focus on what works to eliminate early marriages instead of what is unlikely to work, but instead harm young people.**

The age of marriage for girls has been rising slowly and steadily since the year 1990s. The percentage of young girls married under the age of 18 years saw an impressive fall from 47% in 2005-06 to 27% in 2015-16<sup>5</sup> and to 23% in 2020-22. In the year 1998-99 young women's median age of marriage was 16.7; in 2005-06 it was 17.2 years, and in 2015-16 it

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4 Cited in Petroni S, Das M, Sawyer SM. Protection versus rights: age of marriage versus age of sexual consent. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. 2018. DOI:10.1016/S2352-4642(18)30336-5 [[Crossref](#)], [[Google Scholar](#)]

<sup>5</sup> Data from NFHS-2, 3 and 4

is 19 years.<sup>6</sup> The main drivers of change have been increasing access to education- both primary and secondary education; and reduction in poverty.

**Key reasons behind underage marriages:** The key reasons behind early marriages that continue to remain:

- Girls dropping out of school after primary schooling
- Fear of girls' safety
- Fear of increase in dowry for girls with increase in age of marriage
- Poverty
- Fear that girls will elope, make relationships outside the caste and religion and bring 'dishonour' to the family

**However, none of the above factors will be remedied or impacted by an amendment to raise the minimum age of marriage for girls.** It would be important to put the focus back on what works to increase the age of marriage organically, while also empowering girls to negotiate the real challenges mentioned above.

#### **Education:**

**a. Higher the girls' education, higher is the age of marriage:** Data from the National Family Health Survey-IV (2015-16) establishes a direct relationship between age of marriage and education. Median age of marriage for girls with 8 to 9 years of schooling is 18.9 years; with 10-11 years of schooling is 19.7 years; and with more than 12 years of schooling is 22.7 years. In comparison girls who receive less than 5 years of education marry at a median age of 17.5 years<sup>7</sup>. **It is clear that girls with more than 12 years of schooling, will marry a full five years later than those with less than 5 years of schooling.**

Percentages of 18-23 year olds who were married below age 18 fell gradually from among those who had no formal education to those with higher education (NFHS 5). It fell from 45 among those who had no formal education, to 40 among those who had a primary school education, to 23 who had completed secondary school and three, among those with higher education (NFHS-4, 2015-16). Corresponding percentages in 2005-06 were 69, 54, 29 and three.

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<sup>6</sup> Data from NFHS-2, 3 and 4

<sup>7</sup> Data from NFHS – 4 of women whose current age is between the bracket of 25-49 years

## Education and Percentage of 18-23 year olds who married under the age of 18 years

Percentage of 18-23 year olds who married under the age of 18 years	NFHS 4 (2015-16)	NFHS 3 (2005-06)
Girls with no formal schooling	45	69
Girls with Primary Schooling	40	54
Girls with Secondary Schooling	23	29
Girls with Higher Education	3	3

### b. Secondary School and Higher Education stops underage marriages:

The enactment of the Right to Education Act (RTE), 2009 has been a major cause of increased enrollment of girls in primary school. There is now almost no gender gap in enrolment in primary school in most places in India. However, the bottleneck now is with access to secondary and higher education. Therefore, the phenomenon of 'child' marriage has now given way to 'adolescent' or 'early' marriages (marriages between 15 to 18 years of age).

**Analysis of NFHS-4 data has shown, that one unit increase in years of schooling completed was associated with an increase of 0.36 years in age at marriage<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, securing access to secondary school and higher education for girls is one of the most important methods to reduce early marriages.** Completion of secondary education amongst girls who married before age 18 is low, for example, in Bihar it is only 51%, followed by Delhi (54%) and Rajasthan (57%)<sup>9</sup>.

c. **Higher the Education, higher is the age at first birth:** There exists a direct relationship also between girls' education and the age at which they give birth to their first child. If a girl has completed less than 5 years of schooling, the median age at which she has a child is 19.8 years as per the National Family Health Survey- 4 (2015-16). If the girl has completed 5-7 years of schooling the median age is 20.2 years, for 8-9 years of schooling the median age is 21 years, for 10-11 years of schooling the median age is 21.7 whereas for 12 or more years of schooling, the median age of her first birth is 24.7<sup>10</sup>. Thus, even for delaying the birth of the first child and for better maternal health, improving access to secondary and higher education for girls will work better.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Jejeebhoy, S.J. 2019. Ending Child Marriage in India, Drivers and Strategies. New Delhi: UNICEF.

<sup>9</sup> [India Child Marriage and Teenage Pregnancy, Based on NFHS 4 \(2015-16\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> Data from NFHS – 4 of women whose current age is between the bracket of 25-49 years

**d. Dropping out of school precipitates early marriages:** There is increasing evidence to show that girls first drop out of schools for various reasons, and when they are unoccupied and unsupervised at home, the parents are anxious to get them married off<sup>11</sup>. **Evidence also shows that when girls are able to continue into secondary and higher secondary school, not only do they tend not marry early but their ability to negotiate choices in life regarding marriage, contraception, number of children, employment options also potentially increase.**

The common reasons why girls drop out of school include:

- Secondary schools are not available close to the community
- Sexual harassment and other reasons make travel unsafe for girls
- Many schools do not have separate toilets for girls
- Lack of availability of infrastructure and resources like books and uniforms

The National Education Policy 2020 speaks of making secondary school education free and accessible. However adequate funding and a road map of how this will be taken up is absent as of now.

The following steps are needed to ensure girls' retention in secondary schools<sup>12</sup>:

- Investment in teacher training to enable schooling appropriate to the needs and realities of adolescent girls and boys
- Provision of supplementary coaching for disadvantaged students
- Active vigilance for school drop-outs and special efforts to reconnect them back to schools
- Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in schools to make schooling more engaging,
- Provision of scholarships, bicycles, mid-day meals and cash transfers and other means to incentivise school attendance
- Make residential and safe school facilities available and safe where families migrate for work

These have all been found as effective mechanisms for keeping adolescents in school. **Keeping girls in school is a powerful strategy for delaying marriage.**

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<sup>11</sup> Akanksha A. Marphatia, Jonathan C. K. Wells, Alice M. Reid, Chittaranjan S. Yajnik; Biosocial life-course factors associated with women's early marriage in rural India: The prospective longitudinal Pune Maternal Nutrition Study; 19 October 2021; available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajpa.24408>

<sup>12</sup> Banerjee, Cole, Duflo, and Linden, 2007; Glewwe and Muralidharan, 2015

## Poverty and Social Exclusion

a. **Poverty and social exclusion fuels child marriage:** Similar to education levels, the average age of marriage increases with increase in the household incomes. The median age of marriage for women belonging to the poorest families is 17.4 years, for the poor is 17.7 years, for the middle income is 18.2 years while the median age of marriage for the richest is 20.8 years<sup>13</sup>. The median age of marriage amongst social groups also shows a gradient. The median age for women belonging to SC communities is 18.6 years; it is 18.7 years for women belonging to ST communities as compared to the General category which is 19.8 years<sup>14</sup>.

Thus poverty and belonging to marginalized groups is an important predictor for age of marriage. Poverty, social exclusion and poor standard of living are the root cause of early or late adolescent marriage in girls. On the other hand, no increase in minimum age was required to push up the age of marriage for girls among the middle and well off classes and among the more educated sections of society. In fact, the context of loss of livelihoods, especially among the poor and marginalised sections, coupled with school closures and lack of on-line access fueled child marriages during the COVID crisis which were reported widely in the media<sup>15, 16</sup>.

To alleviate the distress of families and poverty, the following steps are important:

- Focus on getting children, especially girls back to school
- Invest in expansion of the MNREGA to provide adequate work to all those who ask for it, besides also ensuring that payments are made on time. Nearly 50% of MNREGA work is done by women, thus also ensuring work for them closer to home
- Invest in vocational training, skill building and income generation for girls and women
- Expand subsidized food under the National Food Security Act and delivered through the Public Distribution System. Increase budgets for the same
- Institute cash transfer schemes for the particularly vulnerable, including debt reliefs and easy access to credits and loans

b. **Poverty fuels poor maternal and child health:** As we see above, early marriages mostly happen among poor families and among those from marginalized sections of society. High undernutrition among girls and women and poor maternal health are also common in poor families and among the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Poverty and social marginalization play an important role in women's health as well as their children's. Mother's education, socio-economic status and weight were the most important factors to decide the health of the child, each respectively accounting for 18%,

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<sup>13</sup> Data from NFHS – 4 of women whose current age is between the bracket of 25-49 years

<sup>14</sup> Data from NFHS – 4 of women whose current age is between the bracket of 20-49 years

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/06/07/covid-distress-quadrupled-child-marriages-in-maharashtras-largest-district>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/child-marriages-during-pandemic>



13% and 15% of differences between those with better and worse indicators for maternal health seen in a Lancet study<sup>17</sup>. As we can see, all three factors are closely linked to poverty and socio-economic status of mothers. The recent NFHS 5 survey shows that anaemia among pregnant women (52% anemic women) has increased over NFHS 4 (50%) and the gains made in addressing undernutrition are very less. Rather than change in child marriage law, recommendations to improve maternal health need to give due consideration to combating anaemia and undernutrition, food security, increase in standard of living of the poor and marginalised. This will also eliminate child marriages which happen due to family distress.

### **Gender discriminatory Social Norms**

Gender discriminatory social norms such as the practice of dowry, fear of girls' safety, misconceptions which link family honour to a girl's virginity and chastity, and stigmatized pre-marital sexual relations fuel underage marriages. An amendment to the PCMA will not remedy any of these situations. Young people, including women, articulate that they need better education opportunities, more agency, more employment opportunities and freedom from poverty to improve their lives<sup>18</sup>. Additionally, focus must be on the following which will make adolescent sexuality safer and will not cause it to be an added reason for early marriage.

- Comprehensive sexuality education in schools and for out-of-school adolescents
- Menstrual Hygiene and Sanitary Facilities at school, including clean toilets with running water
- Measures to counter regressive social norms which foster gender inequality such as girls are a burden on the family and dowry practices, e.g life skills education for girls, gender trainings integrated in curriculum, scholarships and other resources for girls which increase her confidence and self esteem
- Improved functioning of the 'Rashtriya Kishori Swasthya Raksha Karyakram'
- Stigma and criminalization free access to sexual and reproductive health services including contraception and safe abortion services

### **II Desist from criminalizing families and young people**

- a. **Amendment to increase age of marriage will lead to large scale criminalizing of young people and their families and stigmatizing of youth sexuality:** There is an increasing trend to police adolescent and youth sexuality and marriages. Given that nearly 60% of marriages

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<sup>17</sup> Social, biological, and programmatic factors linking adolescent pregnancy and early childhood undernutrition: a path analysis of India's 2016 National Family and Health Survey; Author links open overlay panel Phuong Hong Nguyen PhD<sup>a</sup> Samuel Scott PhD<sup>a</sup> Sumanta Neupane MPH<sup>a</sup> Lan Mai Tran MPH<sup>b</sup> Purnima Menon PhD<sup>a</sup>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352464219301105>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.concernedforworkingchildren.org/>

take place under the age of 21 years, the amendment will create widespread criminalizing of families. Criminalizing will be accompanied by driving child marriages underground and these girls will then find it very difficult to reach out if they face domestic violence or pregnancy and child birth and to access safe abortions or contraception. For example, in Karnataka and Haryana<sup>19</sup>, all underage marriages have been made void ab initio (void from the beginning), as against the PCMA 2006 which only makes marriages voidable on request of young people. The draft UP rules for the PCMA, 2006 have also proposed making all child marriages void. This is creating havoc at the ground level where it is implemented because it hinders a number of women's rights which are derived from marriage. For example, in Karnataka, child rights activists are struggling to ensure that girls who got widowed before 18 years get rights to the husband's property, access to compensation and insurance schemes as entitled to any married girl. Since the marriage is socially accepted, most girls would continue in the marriage irrespective of what the law says. Without any social support girls find it very difficult to access provisions to make their marriages void.

Ground experience shows that parents are much more likely to use the child marriage act to annul marriages against their wishes and against their caste and religious preferences; rather than non-consenting young people using the child marriage law<sup>20</sup>. However, an increase in the minimum age of marriage will only increase harassment of young couples.

**b. Amendment will risk girls' access to other welfare schemes:** As we saw above nearly 23% of young girls still get married under the age of 18 years. The law, by itself, has not been able to stop these marriages and any change in law will not make it automatically more efficient. On the other hand, the minimum age of marriage has been used as the basis to decide the cut off age to benefit from schemes such as the Janani Shishu Suraksha Yojana (JSSY) and the Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY), both of which make 19 years or older women eligible to benefit from this scheme. Both these schemes are crucial for the wellbeing of pregnant women and their children. The JSSY with benefit of INR 1400/- for rural women is meant to incentivize and help to cover expenses for an institutional and safe delivery. The PMMVY with benefit of INR 5000/- is a maternity benefit scheme for poor women and women outside the formal sector, and meant to cover partially for wages ensuring adequate rest and a healthy diet for women during pregnancy and lactation period. 6.8% adolescent girls in the age group of 15 to 19 years, which means 7,124 girls were already mothers as per NFHS 5 (2020-22), but they would not have received these benefits. Even as women who are pregnant and deliver before the age of 18 years are most vulnerable, the benefits of JSSK and PMMVY do not accrue to them, and the basis of exclusion is the minimum age of marriage of 18 years. About 65% women were married under the age of 21 years as per NFHS 4. There is a risk that a large number of these women and their pregnancies would be excluded as laws may be modified as per the new minimum age. Even if formally not excluded, this will certainly create a grey zone for

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<sup>19</sup> <https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/views/to-put-an-end-to-child-marriages/articleshow/63260153.cms>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.academia.edu/40718265/WHY\\_GIRLS\\_RUN\\_AWAY\\_TO\\_MARRY\\_ADOLESCENT\\_REALITIES\\_AND\\_SOCIO-LEGAL\\_RESPONSES\\_IN\\_INDIA](https://www.academia.edu/40718265/WHY_GIRLS_RUN_AWAY_TO_MARRY_ADOLESCENT_REALITIES_AND_SOCIO-LEGAL_RESPONSES_IN_INDIA)

women under the age of 21 years to receive these benefits, and may also fuel corrupt practices.

**Conclusion:** As substantiated in this submission, we write to register our strong view that the minimum age of marriage for girls under PCMA, 2006 should not be raised to 21 years. Increase in the minimum age of marriage will criminalize the marriages of nearly 50 to 60% young people (in the age group 20 to 24 years) who generally get married under the age of 21 years every year. This will drive child marriages underground and restrict access to sexual and reproductive health services; besides fueling corrupt practices. Efforts need to be made, first to ensure that girls do not get married before the age of 18 years in a manner that will foster girls' empowerment and strengthen the implementation of the existing law. The proposed amendment to the bill only speaks of raising the age of marriage and does not propose any changes to the material reality of young girls' or their parents' lives. Therefore, making this change in law will not alter any ground level reality, such as education, improved nutrition and better incomes, for young girls or their families. These improvements have the potential to not only increase the age of marriage but will go a long way in ensuring the well-being and maternal health of girls, improve maternal health as well as will bridge inter-generational undernutrition. This is particularly important in the aftermath of the COVID crisis. On the other hand

**Our asks in this regard are:**

- **Retain the minimum age of marriage under PCMA, 2006 at 18 years**
- **Bring down the minimum age of marriage for boys to 18 years, the age of majority**
- Improve the implementation of the PCMA, 2006 by setting aside a budget which would include recruitment of dedicated personnel, their capacity building, travel, social support to girls who wish to leave the marriage, and building a network of community based organisations which can support the implementation
- Ensure that girls are able to access free and quality secondary school education, at a minimum
- Ensure comprehensive sexual health education in schools as well as for out of school adolescents
- Ensure that '*Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram*' provides comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services for adolescents
- Invest in improving nutrition of girls and women and reduction in anaemia as also better access to maternal health care to improve maternal health
- Invest in expansion of the MNREGA to provide adequate work to all those who ask for it, besides also ensuring that payments are made on time
- Invest in vocational training, skill building and income generation for girls and women

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