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## On the question of love and underage marriage

By [Namita Bhandare](#) 

Nov 15, 2019 06:23 PM IST



India has the largest number of underage brides in the world and 26.8% of girls marry before they are 18. This is the age of consent under a 2012 amendment, which makes even those under 18, in consensual relationships, vulnerable to parental backlash, with boyfriends and husbands branded as sex offenders.

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They met at a wedding; she was 16 and he was 18. They exchanged numbers and were so [OPEN APP](#)  
When Anju's father started looking for a match for her, she told her mother about her boyfriend, Prem. Her father fixed a match anyway. Anju eloped, her father filed a case, Prem was arrested, and Anju was packed off to a shelter home where she discovered she was pregnant. She gave birth to a boy and is now waiting to turn 18 when she can be reunited with her husband, now out on bail. Her parents say she is dead to them.





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The story of adolescent girls and their quest for love is rarely told. These are girls who live with inflexible rules that restrict their mobility and access to technology; are burdened with housework with barely any time for leisure and friendship; and live with parents who enforce cultural norms about sexual purity and filial obedience. It is this isolation that makes so many so receptive to love.

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This often tangled intersection of teenage assertion, sexuality, cultural norms and the law, has, for the first time, been the subject of an investigation, *Why Girls Run Away to Get Married*, by Partners for Law in Development (PLD), with research partners including the HAQ Centre for Child Rights and Vishakha.

The study examines 15 girls from low to middle-income families, chosen because of the intervention of social workers, police and shelter homes. But the spread of “love” cases is far wider. One Delhi police station reported receiving up to five such cases every fortnight.

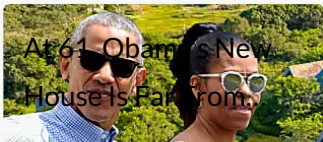
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Globally, there is a tendency to view all underage marriages as forced. The race to meet Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate child marriage by 2030 is resulting in laws that paint all such marriages as a violation. Karnataka has already amended the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act to declare all underage marriages void.

But the 2006 child marriage law is more nuanced, differentiating between types of under marriage. So, kidnapping and trafficking have no legal validity, but there is leeway for many others. "Labelling every marriage of a girl younger than 18 as 'forced' is not reflective of reality or even of the girl whom policy responses seek to protect," says PLD executive director Madhu Mehra.

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religion. The couple moved to her village where they thought they would live peacefully. But the community refused to accept them and they faced with unemployment and insults.

The husband took to drugs and eventually left. Chitra remains estranged from her parents.

*Namita Bhandare writes on gender*

*The views expressed are personal*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Namita Bhandare

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Namita Bhandare writes on gender and other social issues and has 25 years of experience in journalism. She has edited books and features in a documentary on sexual violence. She tweets as @namitabhandare

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