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Why girls elope: Study has answers


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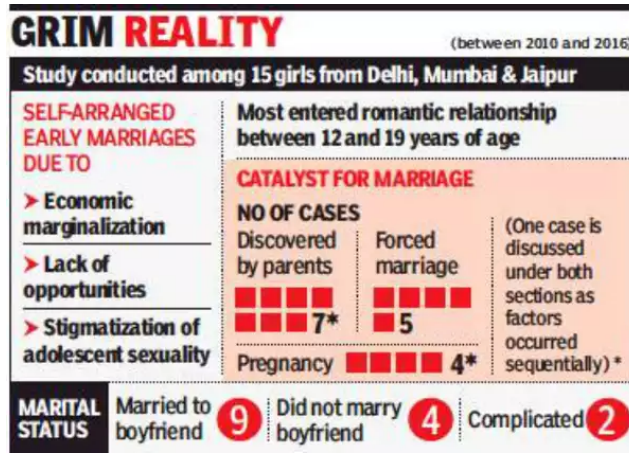


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CHENNAI: A report analysing the [trend of self-arranged marriages \(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/trend-of-self-arranged-marriages\)](#), among adolescents following a [study \(https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/topic/study\)](#) of 15 girls aged between 15 and 20 years from Delhi, Mumbai, and Jaipur, was released by Partners for Law in Development (PLD) in the city on Friday.

Titled 'Why Girls Run Away to Marry – Adolescent Realities and Socio-legal Responses in India', the study explains how economic marginalisation and lack of opportunities along with stigmatisation of adolescent sexuality have resulted in the trend of self-arranged early marriages. It details factors such as lack of rapport with parents, fear of censure and punishment, and strict rules against pursuit of interests as some of the contributors.



Drawing distinction between forced, arranged and choice marriages, it looks at how policy responses and use of laws such as Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (Pcma) and Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (Pocso) Act often unjustly persecute older adolescents.

The study points out that after the legal age of sexual consent was increased from 16 to 18 years in 2012, consensual relations between adolescents, including non-coercive relationships between peers, have been viewed as sexual abuse. "When we looked at trial court records, we found that in nearly 70 % of the cases, Pcma was used by parents against daughters who had eloped, many times with Pocso," said Madhu Mehra, executive director at PLD and one of the authors.

This not only leads to young couples facing parental backlash but brand boyfriends and young husbands as sex offenders. This is particularly crucial following the recent amendments to Pocso Act that awards stringent punishment including a minimum term of ten years for aggravated penetrative sexual assault on a person under 18 years of age.

"There are separate statistics for cases of child marriages and Pocso, they cannot be viewed under one lens. While the marriage of under-18 girls is illegal, the 2016 National Family and Health Survey (NFHS-4) revealed that 27% of girls married before they turned 18 and 31% of married Indian women gave birth by the age of 18 years" said Vidya Reddy, founder of Tulir. "We have been looking at this issue only in terms of child marriage. Now, it's time to look at the nuances," she added.

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