

CSOs urge govt not to increase age of marriage for girls to 21

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A large number of civil society organisations (CSOs) came together and urged the government not to increase the age of marriage for girls from 18 to 21. At a Press conference today, these organisations and individuals with experience in research and advocacy on adolescents and young people, child rights and women's rights have also made submissions to the government's Task Force providing cogent reasons for why we need to question the government's hasty desire to raise the legal age of marriage for women.

In the Independence Day's speech, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that his government is contemplating raising the minimum age at marriage to 21 from 18 years for girls (at present it is 18 for girls and 21 for boys). "We have formed a committee to ensure daughters are no longer suffering from malnutrition and they are married off at the right age. As soon as the report is submitted, appropriate decisions will be taken about the age of marriage of daughters," the PM said. He was referring to the Task Force constituted by the government, which has been

in existence since 4 June 2020, deliberating on this issue. In the panel discussion, these civil society members said the announcement may cause damage to the society, citing various national data on early marriage, health, education, labour and the law. Amending the law by fiat will not further gender equality, women's rights or empowerment of girls, and will do little to improve the health of mothers and infants.

They said child marriage has already given way to late adolescent marriage. As per the National Family Health Survey-4, only 6.6 per cent were married below 15 years (young adolescents), while as many as 20.2 per cent were married between 15 and 17 years (late adolescence).

In other words, less than 27 per cent (of women in the 20-24 age group) were married before the current legal age of 18 years. This marks an improvement from last decade. The members highlighted that early marriage is the consequence, not the cause of girls dropping out of school. Poverty, not early marriage, is the main cause of ill health of mothers and their children. Therefore, raising the age of marriage will only criminalise – not prevent – early marriages.

