

Where does India stand on child marriage? | Explained

Will India be able to end child marriage by 2030? How has it managed to reduce it? What are the key schemes for girls?

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PRISCILLA JEBARAJ



Image for representational purposes only. | Photo Credit: Nagara Gopal

The story so far: The Union government marked the first anniversary of its Bal Vivah Mukta Bharat Abhiyan earlier this month with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage, as part of its commitment to the UN to end child marriage by 2030. Though there has been significant progress in this effort over the last decade, it has been uneven across States and socio-economic groups, with a good way to go to meet the UN's target.

What is the global situation?

The fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Within this SDG, Target 5.3 is to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, as well as early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation. Progress on child marriage is monitored using the indicator of the proportion of women between the ages of 20 and 24 years who were married before they turned 18. Girls Not Brides, a global partnership, warns that the child marriage target will also impact other SDGs. “Unless we make significant progress on ending child marriage, we will fall short on at least nine of the SDGs, including those related to poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, climate action, and peace and justice,” it said. In 2023, UNICEF estimated that 64 crore girls got married in childhood, with a whopping third of them in India alone. It added that progress needs to happen 20 times faster than it has been to reach the 2030 target.

What is the situation in India?

India has made tremendous strides in reducing child marriage, dropping from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 26.8% in 2015-16, a sharp decline of 21 percentage points over a decade, according to data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS). Progress slowed thereafter, with child marriage rates dropping just 3.5 percentage points over the next five years to reach 23.3% in 2019-21. More concerning, the progress has varied widely by geography. The highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years was seen in West Bengal (42%), Bihar (40%), and Tripura (39%), according to NFHS data, with another seven States also recording rates higher than the national average: Jharkhand (35%), Andhra Pradesh (33%), Assam (32%), Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (28%), Telangana (27%), Madhya Pradesh (25%), and Rajasthan (25%). The percentage of women marrying before the legal minimum age of 18 years is lowest in Lakshadweep (4%), Jammu & Kashmir (6%), Ladakh (6%), Himachal Pradesh, Goa, and Nagaland (7% each).

There are also disparities on the basis of higher education and income. The UN Population Fund’s analysis of NFHS data shows that 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education. Also, 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile.

What action is being taken?

The Prevention of Child Marriage Act was passed in 2006, and national child marriage rates have halved since then. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 has also helped prevent child marriage. However, experts note that legislation has a limited impact without a shift in social norms, especially with respect to the education of girls, which has the highest impact on raising the age of marriage.

The Bal Vivah Mukht Abhiyan portal records that, as of December 20, 54,917 child marriage prevention officers have been appointed across the country to conduct awareness activities and act on child marriage complaints. In the year since the campaign began, it has prevented 1,520 reported instances of child marriage either through persuasion or administrative action, with Madhya Pradesh and Haryana recording the highest figures. However, it also records that 198 child marriages were not prevented, resulting in police complaints, reports to the Child Welfare Committee or the provision of annulment. Apart from such official mechanisms, the campaign has partnered with faith leaders, youth groups and community networks that hold real influence at the grassroots-level to change the narrative on child marriage and encourage timely reporting and prevention.

The Centre's flagship Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme aims to address the declining child sex ratio through empowerment measures, especially promotion of education, though effective implementation has been patchy on the ground. Laadli schemes offer financial support to families with girl children from birth, and steps are being taken to increase the enrolment of girls in school, with measures such as cycles for safe transport to better sanitation in schools.

A number of States offer financial aid for girls' education, such as, for instance, West Bengal's Kanyashree scheme, which offers low-income families ₹1,000 per year to educate their girls between the ages of 13 and 18, along with a one-time grant of ₹25,000 for 18 and 19-year-olds, provided that girls pursue higher education and delay marriage. Some women's activists, however, say that the State with the highest rates of child marriage is sending mixed signals with its Rupashree scheme, offering ₹25,000 to low-income families at the time of a daughter's marriage, though the stipulation is that she has crossed 18 years.

What about changing legal age of marriage?

The Union government proposed to raise the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 years to bring them at par with men, and to pave the way for women to complete their

higher education, and have greater skills, maturity and independence when they get married. It could also increase the participation of women in the labour force and improve maternal and child health. However, Opposition MPs sought greater scrutiny of the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill. Critics warn that without social reform, a mere legal change could simply criminalise many communities, given that a staggering 61% of women aged 20 to 24 years married before they turned 21 years.

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