

## Rise in child marriages worrying

by [s. indramalar](#)

PETALING JAYA: The incidence of child marriages is on the rise, judging by statistics compiled from various sources.

In Kedah alone, statistics from the state Islamic Religious Department show a 35% increase in marriage applications involving underaged individuals between 2008 and 2010.

The department received 75 marriage applications from underaged individuals in 2008, 99 in 2009 and 101 in 2010. Of the total, 90% involved girls under 16.

One of the reasons cited by parents for consenting to their underaged daughters to marry was that the girls were “too wild” and beyond their control.

They felt that getting them married would be the best solution. Another was for economic relief.

The majority of these cases reportedly were from Sik and Baling.

The statistics are worrying as they show child marriage to be a significant problem in Malaysia, said United Nations Population Fund Malaysia (UNFPA) programme manager Saira Shameem.

Today is the inaugural United Nations International Day of the Girl Child, with a focus on ending child marriages.

UN statistics show that globally, as many as 10 millions girls are forcibly married before they turn 18, amounting to 25,000 girls every day.

“In an economically-stable country like Malaysia, where women are educated and employed in high level jobs and where girls make up 60% of the students in tertiary education institutions, this should not be happening.

“We need to address sexual and reproductive health education for our young. Studies have shown that age-appropriate sex education actually delays sexual debut. Sexual and reproductive health education will also help girls make more informed choices,” said Saira.

Rights activities are calling for urgent action to stop child marriages in Malaysia, pointing out the harmful impact of early marriage on girls, and to a lesser extent boys.

In the human rights perspective, marriage marks the end of a child's adolescence and the curtailing of his or her freedom. Most girls who marry early also drop out of school and face health risks of early pregnancy and child birth.

Worldwide, pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15 to 19 year-old girls.

Under Malaysian law, the legal age for marriage for non-Muslims is 18. However, marriages are allowed for those between 16 and 18 with written consent from the chief minister.

For Muslims, the legal age of marriage for males is 18 and females, 16. With the permission of the syariah court, however, Muslims can marry at any age.

Sisters in Islam executive director Ratna Osman feels that the country's laws have to change, calling for the legal age for marriage for both Muslims and non-Muslims to be 18.

“In this day and age, child marriages are just unacceptable. Is this what we want for Malaysia? We want the legal age for both male and female to be 18, and the absolute minimum for Muslim girls to be 16 but with strict conditions.

“Among the conditions is that the minor has sufficient maturity to understand the nature and responsibilities of the marriage and that the judge consults respective experts to verify the child's readiness before issuing an approval,” said Ratna.

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