

Beat: Miscellaneous

Bangladesh considers lowering marriageable age to 16

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USPA News - Bangladesh is considering a proposal to lower the legal age of marriage from 18 to 16, the country's junior health minister announced on Thursday, prompting condemnation from a children's rights organization which said a consideration alone would send the "wrong message." Junior Health and Family Affairs Minister Zahid Maleque, addressing an audience comprised of development partners, donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government officials, said the proposal was made by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs after increased pressure from rural areas.

"Our prime minister is under pressure from rural areas to lower the age limit of marriage since rural adolescent girls flee home to get married," Maleque was quoted as saying by the local UNB news agency. It is unclear whether the government is considering to lower the marriageable age for both boys or girls, or only for girls. Maleque told the audience that improvements in education and the empowerment of women had led to a "growing tendency" for girls in rural areas to run away from home to get married. "[In those cases] sometimes there is a need to marry them off early," he said, adding that the government would make a final decision on the matter after discussions with all sides. Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with about 64 percent of women aged 20 to 24 having been married before their 18th birthday, according to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), which said child marriages are particularly common in rural areas. The South Asian country currently has a marriageable age of 21 for men and 18 for women. A July report issued by ICRW said the rate of marriage among girls below the age of 14 had declined considerably over the last 15 years, but the number of girls getting married at ages 16 and 17 is on the rise. Dr Ishtiaq Mannan, of children's rights organization Save the Children, said he was surprised by Thursday's announcement. "It's a very wrong step. Even putting it on the table for discussion will send a wrong message across Bangladesh as well as throughout the world," he told local news outlet Bdnews24. Mannan added: "Boys and girls will not be mentally prepared for the marriage if they are married off at an early age, so it can create disharmony in the family resulting in violence and divorce. I am surprised how it can be put on the table for discussion. Early marriage contributes significantly to maternal mortality and disability." The proposed legal changes are likely to prompt international condemnation but would not violate the country's international obligations. The UN Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages, requires the minimum age of marriage to be 15 at the minimum.

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