

## The Elders: Momentum is building to tackle child marriage in India

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### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

At the conclusion of a four-day visit to India, members of [The Elders](#) feel that momentum is building to tackle child marriage in India. The delegation was led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Chair of The Elders, who was joined by Ela Bhatt, founder of India's Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Dr Gro Brundtland, former Prime Minister of Norway, and Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland. Their visit was part of The Elders' work to promote equality for girls and women worldwide.

The four Elders visited New Delhi and the state of Bihar to better understand the causes of child marriage in India, and to encourage government officials, NGO and private sector representatives who are working to end child marriage. They were particularly impressed by their encounter with a group of young people from the ['Jagriti'](#) campaign in Bihar, a youth-led social change campaign to stop child marriage.

Nationally, 47 per cent of girls in India marry before they turn 18. The state of Bihar has the highest rate of child marriage, where 69 per cent of girls marry before the age of 18, 48 per cent before 15.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, said: *"India is a great democratically-governed nation with the capacity to play a strong moral role in the world. We have certainly been encouraged by our conversations with leaders in Delhi and Patna who recognise the importance of ending child marriage and emancipating girls and women."*

*"We believe this country will be even greater if all politicians, community leaders, business and religious leaders – most of them males – enable girls and women to play a full part in all aspects of life and decision-making. This is not an issue unique to India; the country with the highest rate of child marriage for girls is Niger in Africa – but what we see everywhere is that those countries that promote gender equality, do better."*

Mary Robinson said: *"We were particularly impressed by a group of girls and boys we met in Bihar, one of the country's poorest, but fastest-growing states. These teenagers are very smart and they desperately want to be part of their state and their country's incredible progress, but*

*they know that getting married very young will hold them back. They are working hard to enlist the support of adults to help them to complete their education and marry later. We get the sense that things are changing, momentum is building, and we hope that progress can be made more quickly so that these wonderful young people can fulfil their dreams.”*

Dr Gro Brundtland said: *“We were asked a tough question by the teenagers in Bihar. They asked us: ‘If adults know that child marriage is wrong, why do they allow it to happen?’ Children have every right to demand that their parents, teachers, political leaders abide by the laws that they have made and by the international agreements to which the Indian government is signatory. As a doctor, I want to emphasise the serious dangers associated with early pregnancy and childbirth. The health of the entire community – girls, women and children – will improve if girls are educated and women begin child-rearing when they are physically and psychologically ready for it.”*

Ela Bhatt emphasised the links between the empowerment of girls and women, economic development, and peace: *“Peace, human rights and human development go hand in hand. I am encouraged by what we have heard from the grassroots to the highest levels of government in India, on the need to support the development of girls and women, and to tackle the practice of child marriage. If we can build communities where women and girls are empowered economically and can be leaders at all levels, then peace will follow. I strongly believe that peace is not a political issue, it’s a human one, and will only be achieved when everyone has the freedom to grow at their own pace and to fulfil their potential.”*

#### Details of The Elders’ visit

In Bihar, the four Elders met the Honourable Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, senior government officials and representatives of Panchayats (India’s local self governments) from across the state. They also met about 20 young people from [‘Jagriti’](#) – My Life My Decision: Stop Child Marriage. Jagriti is an initiative created and supported by [Pathfinder International](#), India.

In New Delhi, the Elders met the Speaker of Lok Sabha Meira Kumar, the Minister for Human Resource Development Kapil Sibal, and the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha, Sushama Swaraj. They were delighted to take part in a special event co-hosted by the Population Foundation of India and The Elders, bringing together a group of eminent Indians who have agreed to champion efforts to end to child marriage.

The Elders also took part in a regional meeting hosted by [Girls Not Brides: The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage](#). Created by The Elders, Girls Not Brides has already brought together more than 80 organisations from around the world, including 15 from India. The meeting in New Delhi on 9 and 10 February is bringing together more than 70 civil society representatives from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to share knowledge and coordinate activities to help end child marriage.

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## **ABOUT THE ELDERS**

The Elders are independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights. The group was founded by Nelson Mandela in 2007.

The Elders are **Martti Ahtisaari, Kofi Annan, Ela Bhatt, Lakhdar Brahimi, Gro Brundtland, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Jimmy Carter, Graça Machel, Mary Robinson** and **Desmond Tutu** (Chair). **Nelson Mandela** and **Aung San Suu Kyi** are honorary Elders.

For biographies of the Elders, blogs, photos, videos and more information about their work please go to [www.theElders.org](http://www.theElders.org)

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