

The Elders support efforts to address high child marriage rates in Bihar, India

Patna, Bihar, India

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A delegation of The Elders is visiting the Indian state of Bihar today to meet young people who are trying to stop the practice of child marriage, and to encourage the state government's efforts to tackle the issue.

This morning Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mrs Ela Bhatt, Dr Gro Brundtland and Mrs Mary Robinson met a group of approximately 20 young people from a new youth-led social change campaign called Jagriti.

The teenagers told the Elders that they want to raise awareness about the law in India which prohibits marriage before the age of 18 for girls and 21 for boys. The teenagers want to mobilise young people across Bihar to end child marriage, but also said that they cannot succeed without the support of adults.

The Elders also met parents, teachers, law enforcement officers and community leaders, to better understand the causes of child marriage in India, especially in Bihar where rates of early marriage are the highest in the country.

Later today they will meet the Honourable Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, as well as Panchayat leaders (India's local self-governments) from across the state, and senior health officials.

The state of Bihar has the highest rate of child marriage of girls in India with 69 per cent of women married before the age of 18, and almost half (48 per cent) married by 15. Nationally, 47 per cent of women in India marry before the age of 18.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Chair of The Elders, said: *"Child marriage is a traditional practice that is not particular to any religion. It occurs in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. I want to draw particular attention to the impact it has on girls, and to encourage men in leadership positions to see that it is in the interests of all of us that we work together to tackle the issue of child marriage."*

Ela Bhatt, founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association of India (SEWA), said: *"The Elders wanted to hear directly from the girls and boys affected by child marriage - and also their*

families. We know that parents often face difficult decisions and they try to act in the best interests of their children.”

Dr Gro Brundtland, who was the first woman Prime Minister of Norway and is also a doctor, said: *“The health effects of child marriage are very serious. Girls who become pregnant and give birth when they are very young are at far higher risk of death and injury than women who give birth in their twenties. Their babies are also more likely to become ill and to die in infancy. Increasing the age of marriage is essential to prevent tragic deaths in this vulnerable age group and to improve the health of the population as a whole.”*

Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland, emphasised the development benefits of tackling child marriage, and said she believes change is possible: *“Once a girl has the chance to go to school and delay marriage until she is over 18, it is hard to imagine that she would allow her daughters to marry young. We believe that by listening to young people addressing child marriage and supporting their communities, we can make a huge difference in one generation – this is the message we want to share with parents, young people, community leaders and the Chief Minister on our visit to Bihar.”*

After their visit to Bihar, the Elders will return to New Delhi, where they will meet political and business leaders as well as representatives of the media. They will also speak at the opening session of a South Asia regional meeting of [Girls Not Brides](#), a new global partnership that brings together over 80 civil society organisations committed to ending 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.

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