



The Elders



Eminent Indian leaders champion efforts to end child marriage in India

“Change is possible” - Sharmila Tagore
“Let girls be girls, not brides” – Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A group of eminent Indians from all sectors committed today to support efforts to end child marriage in India. Leaders from government, law, business, the arts and civil society have agreed to champion the cause of ending child marriage at a meeting in New Delhi co-hosted by [The Elders](#) and the [Population Foundation of India \(PFI\)](#).

The Indian leaders discussed the importance of addressing child marriage with the Chair of The Elders, Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, SEWA founder Ela Bhatt, former Norwegian Prime Minister, Dr Gro Brundtland and former Irish President Mary Robinson, who are currently visiting India as part of The Elders’ work to promote equality for girls and women around the world.

Those who have agreed to become champions for an end to child marriage in India include Leila Seth, former Chief Justice; Mrinal Pandey, Chairperson, Prasar Bharati Secretariat; Naina Lal Kidwai, Country Head of the HSBC Group; P. D. Rai, Member of Parliament; Sharmila Tagore, actor and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador; Shantha Sinha, Chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights; and Dr Syeda Hameed, Planning Commission member.

The Elders and PFI warmly welcomed this support for raising awareness about the negative impact of child marriage on development and human rights, and for promoting solutions to end the practice.

“Child marriage is entrenched in tradition and culture,” said actress and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Sharmila Tagore. “But change is possible. Very often, girls and their parents want to delay marriage but lack options. We must focus on giving girls viable alternatives to early marriage. Give adolescent girls knowledge and skills to negotiate with their parents and reject offers for marriage. Girls’ education and economic independence are key solutions.”

Shantha Sinha, Chairperson of the National Commission on Protection of Child Rights, said: “When children know that they have allies in the adults willing to vouch for them, they pick up courage to defy authority. They need an enabling environment and a ray of hope to anchor on and take courage to say ‘no’ to child marriage or forced labour. It is a defining moment for them.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Chair of The Elders, said: “I have been touched and encouraged by my conversations in Delhi and in Bihar, especially with young people who want to end child marriage and are looking for adults to support them. It is wonderful to now meet this group of eminent persons who want to play their part in this cause. India is a great nation and will only benefit from enabling girls and women to play their full part in building the future of the country. Let girls be girls, not brides.”

Poonam Muttreja, the Executive Director of Population Foundation of India, said: “PFI wants to bring greater focus on the need to end the practice that robs millions of Indian girls of their childhood, their education and a healthy future. Many of them die in childbirth as they are physically and mentally not ready for childbearing”.

While they are in India, the four Elders will attend a regional meeting of [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 Elders hope that the membership will continue to grow and enjoy the support of these eminent Indians.

Child marriage in India

About 10 million girls are married each year before the age of 18 worldwide; one third of them live in India. Child marriage is prohibited by law in India, with the minimum age of marriage being 18 for girls and 21 for boys. However the latest available survey found 48 per cent of women aged 20-24 were married or are in union before the age of 18, and almost one in five were married or in union before the age of 15.* While rates of child marriage are declining, the pace of change is slow, and in some states prevalence rates remain well over 60 per cent. Bihar, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh have the highest rates of child marriage of girls in India.

* National Family Health Survey (2005-6)

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ABOUT PFI

The [Population Foundation of India](#) (PFI) is a national non-government organization at the forefront of policy advocacy and research on population issues in the country.

PFI was established in 1970 by a group of socially committed industrialists led by Mr J.R.D. Tata and Dr Bharat Ram. PFI supports governmental and non-governmental organisations in programmes that focus on Reproductive and Child Health (RCH), Family Planning, Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health (ARSH), HIV/AIDS and Urban Health. (www.populationfoundation.in)

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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