

'Child marriages also affect other communities'

PETALING JAYA: Child marriages in Malaysia are not confined to rural areas or Muslim families but are rampant in other communities as well, says the Joint Action Group for Gender Equality.

JAG spokesman Lee Wei San said the minimum marriage age for non-Muslims girls was 18 but the law allowed girls aged 16 to marry with the consent of the Chief Minister or Mentri Besar of the state.

However, the extent of child marriages among non-Muslim girls is difficult to ascertain due to a lack of data.

While the 2000 Population and Housing Census revealed that 6,800 girls of all races under 15 were married, the 2010 survey recorded "zero" married girls of that age group.

The number of married girls aged between 15 and 19 in the 2010 Census increased to 82,382 from 55,915 in 2010. Under the Child Act and Convention of the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as below 18 years old.

JAG, which comprises seven women's human rights groups in the country, supports Malaysia's stand to end child marriages by adopting the UN Human Rights Council resolution recently.

In May, JAG launched a signature campaign to urge the Government to end child marriages in the country.

It has received 1,455 signatures to date. The positive response indicates that many want to see an end to such a practice. We also hope the petition can raise public awareness on this issue to change attitudes and perceptions towards such a practice," said Lee who is Senior Programme Officer with All Women's Action Society.

Lee said legal reforms were required to protect girls in the country, regardless of their ethnic or religious background.

"The Government must raise the minimum age for marriage to 18, without exception. This is the standard set by the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women, which Malaysia has ratified and is bound by," said Lee.

Other measures needed to address the issue included awareness programmes, especially at the ground level with communities that still think child marriage was acceptable based on culture or tradition, and comprehensive sex education, she added.

Supporting legal reforms, Malaysian Bar president Christopher Leong said women and girls should not be treated as objects or property to be given away in marriage.

"Parents must be educated to understand that child marriages are not acceptable," he said.

"Agreeing to allow their child to marry at such a young age is detrimental to her interests and development," he added.

"And where the groom is a much older man, the parents are putting their child into the hands of a paedophile."

Paediatric neurologist Dr Alex Khoo from Ipoh, Perak, who signed the petition, agrees that the responsibility for children lies with adults.

"Just like why people under-18 can't buy alcohol, cigarettes or even a ticket to certain movies and have to

attend school and be educated, their right to be protected, loved and cared for by their parents, society and our laws must be ensured," he said.

The petition will be online before it is submitted to the Prime Minister. To support the call to end child marriages in Malaysia, go to <http://www.change.org/en-GB/petitions/prime-minister-yab-dato-sri-mohd-najib-razak-end-child-marriage-in-malaysia>