

# Child marriage rampant in state

Pooja Kashyap | TNN

**Patna:** Child marriages are illegal. But marriages of more than half of the girls in Bihar are solemnised before they turn 18.

The mean age for girls being married off in the state is 17.4 years as against 19.5 years across the country. And 68.3% of the married women in Bihar are anaemic. Infant mortality rate is as high as 61, sex ratio 919 and institutional births account for a mere 22%.

"Child marriage is a violation of child rights whether it happens to a girl or a boy. It denies the child the basic right to good health, nutrition, education and freedom from violence, abuse and exploitation," said Bihar minister for social welfare Damodar Rawat.

Speaking at a workshop on Bihar State Consultation on Prevention of Child Marriage, organized jointly by the state Women Development Corporation (WDC) and UNICEF here on Wednesday, the min-



A girl child at the workshop on 'prevention of child marriage' in Patna on Wednesday

ister said the incidence of child marriages in Madhepura and Motihari is as high as 70% to 80%. Even in Patna district, it is around 40%.

"It is unfortunate that Bihar tops the dubious list of states where child marriages are rampant," WDC managing director N Vijayalakshmi said.

She said she was surprised to find many male children in the state being abducted for marriage.

According to her, the WDC along with UNICEF is planning to start a pilot project to check child marriages in Nawada, Gaya and Vaishali districts.

To begin with, the project would cover 853 villages of 240 panchayats in 20 blocks of these districts.

Most of the cases of child marriage go unreported and the rate of registration of marriages in the state is also poor. "There's, therefore, a dearth of data on the issue," UNICEF state representative Yamin Majumdar said and added the practice of child marriage is an obstacle to

nearly every Millennium Development Goal — be it poverty eradication, universal primary education, gender equality or health.

"Child marriage is both a protection and rights issue," said Sushmita Mukherji, a technical expert with the International Centre for Research on Women. While poor families may see early marriage as a protection from sexual harassment, in reality it might lead to more violence, she said.

Some hope has been rekindled with the enactment of the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, 2006 under which such marriages can be declared null and void and the violation can attract two years of rigorous imprisonment or a fine of Rs 1 lakh.

There is a Childline functioning in five districts of Bihar which can be contacted for any child-related issue.

Bal Kalyan Samitis are also functional in 21 districts where such complaints can be registered.