



**NALSA (ASHA- Awareness, Support, Help and Action)
Standard Operating Procedure-Towards Eliminating
CHILD MARRIAGE, 2025**

NATIONAL LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITY



राष्ट्रीय विधिक सेवा प्राधिकरण
NATIONAL LEGAL SERVICES AUTHORITY
(Constituted under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987)

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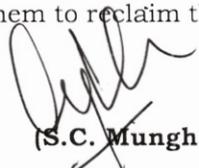
MESSAGE

Children are the foundation of our future. India is home to nearly 19% of the world's children, making the protection of their rights not just a responsibility but a necessity for a better tomorrow. However, Children globally face numerous challenges, one prominent challenge is the challenge of child marriage.

Child marriage in India is a serious social problem as well as a criminal offence. A report by a leading global agency reveals that India is home to one-third of the world's child brides, making it the country with the highest number of women and girls married in childhood. Child marriage significantly impacts the well-being and health of children.

Acknowledging the urgency of addressing the issue of child marriage, the Supreme Court has deliberated on the issue in its judgment. Recently, in *Society of Enlightenment and Voluntary Action & Anr. v. Union of India*, (2024 INSC 790) the Supreme Court issued comprehensive guidelines and directives aimed at preventing child marriages, rehabilitating victims, and facilitating their reintegration into society. In compliance with this judgment, the National Legal Services Authority of India (NALSA) prepared this Standard Operating Procedure *NALSA ASHA (Awareness, Support, Help, and Action) Standard Operating Procedure-Towards Eliminating Child Marriage, 2025*. This SOP aims to create an institutional framework to tackle the issue of child marriage. It establishes a standardized, effective, and legally robust approach to preventing child marriages, safeguarding children's rights, and raising awareness within communities. Enhancing accountability and coordination among stakeholders, it ensures the efficient enforcement of laws and provides comprehensive support to those affected.

May 'ASHA' truly bring hope to those affected, empowering them to reclaim their future.


(S.C. Munghate)

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1. **Background**

1. Child Marriage in India is a social menace as well as a criminal offence. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) report of 2023¹ reveals that India accounts for one in three of the world’s child brides. India is home to the largest number of girls and women who married in childhood. According to UNICEF, about 23% of women between 20 and 24 were married before they turned 18 (27% in rural areas and 14% in urban areas).²
2. The UNICEF report further highlights that child brides include girls who marry before 18 and women who were married as children. The prevalence of child marriage varies across states and union territories in India, influenced by local customs and community structure. For instance, at least 40 percent of young women were married before turning 18 in West Bengal, Bihar, and Tripura, compared to 1% in Lakshadweep.³
3. Child marriage has several implications for the life and health of the children. The World Health Organisation, in a report dealing with the issue of child brides, found that though 11 % of the births worldwide are amongst adolescents, they account for 23% of the overall burden of diseases. Therefore, a child bride is doubly prone to health problems than a grown-up woman.⁴ Furthermore, another leading global body, the World Bank, reveals that child marriage is the main factor leading to early childbirth, with one assessment of 25 countries showing that an estimated 84 percent of mothers under the age of 18 had been married as children.⁵
4. The 2011 Census estimated that nearly 17 million children in the age group of 10–19 years were married in India. The National Family Health Survey 2019-21 (NHFS) estimates that 23.3 percent of women aged 20-24 were married before the age of 18 years.⁶ A recent report by the National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) has identified that more than 11.4 lakh children are vulnerable to child marriage.⁷

¹ Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in India (UNICEF 2023) <https://data.unicef.org/resources/ending-child-marriage-a-profile-of-progress-in-india-2023/> (Last accessed 20.12.2024)

² Ibid

³ Ibid

⁴ World Health Organisation Report on “Early Marriages, Adolescent and Young Pregnancies”, Sixty-Fifth World Health Assembly (https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/wha65/a65_13-en.pdf (Last accessed 20.12.2024)

⁵ Helene Gayle, John Hammergren, Her Health, Her Lifetime, Her World Unlocking the Potential of Adolescent Girls and Young Women Centre for Strategic & International Studies https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170317_Gayle_UnlockingThePotential_Web.pdf (Last accessed 20.12.2024)

⁶ Sandeep Chachra & Ghasiram Panda Ending Child Marriage in India- Reflections on the Recent Supreme Court Judgement <https://www.actionaidindia.org/ending-child-marriage-in-india-reflections-on-the-recent-supreme-court-judgement/> (Last accessed 20.12.2024)

⁷ Ibid

5. Recognizing this as an urgent area of intervention, the Supreme Court discussed the issue of child marriage in its judgments. In *Independent Thought v. Union of India*⁸, the Supreme Court recognized the evil of Child Marriage and held that child marriage denies girls equality in all aspects of their lives, including health, education, and economic self-sufficiency.
6. Recently, the Supreme Court in the *Society of Enlightenment and Voluntary Action & Anr. v. Union of India*⁹ has issued comprehensive guidelines and directives for the prevention, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims of child marriages in India. The Supreme Court in part IX directed NALSA as under:

“The National Legal Services Authority is directed to formulate a Standard Operating Procedure that provides comprehensive guidelines for legal support services, and long-term rehabilitation plans related to the prevention, protection, and rehabilitation of victims of child marriage for lawyers and law enforcement officers. NALSA is further directed to dispatch this SOP to all States and District Legal Services Authority where it may assist aggrieved victims.” (emphasis supplied)

7. In view of the aforesaid mandate of the Apex Court, the NALSA has devised this Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the Prevention, Protection, & Rehabilitation of Child Marriages. This SOP creates an institutional framework and a mechanism to tackle child marriage by involving legal services institutions and strengthening inter-institution collaboration.
8. Therefore, a structured SOP is an imminent need to ensure a uniform, efficient, and legally sound response to prevent child marriages, protect child rights, and promote awareness at the community level. It fosters accountability and coordination among stakeholders, enabling effective enforcement of laws and support for affected individuals.

1. Objectives of the Standard Operating Procedure

- 1.1 This SOP aims to raise awareness about the legal framework of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 and the Juvenile Justice (Care and protection of children) ACT, 2015.

⁸ 2017 INSC 1030)

⁹ 2024 INSC 790

- 1.2 It also intends to empower vulnerable groups and equip girls, boys, parents, guardians, and all stakeholders with the knowledge and resources to withstand societal and family pressure to engage in child marriage.
- 1.3 To promote an alternate strategy, including imparting vocational training and skill development to eliminate early marriage.
- 1.4 To create an institutional framework and strengthen coordination between the Government and non-government bodies and to create a platform for like-minded people and institutions to put an end to child marriages.
- 1.5 To initiate proactive steps and a multifaceted approach by stakeholders to tackle the issue of child marriage.
- 1.6 The SOP intends to take steps for the rehabilitation of victims of child marriage.

2. Definitions

- 2.1 “Child” means a person who, if a male, has not completed twenty-one years of age, and if a female, has not completed eighteen years of age.
- 2.2 “Child Marriage” means a marriage to which either of the contracting parties is a child.
- 2.3 “Contracting party”, in relation to a marriage, means either of the parties whose marriage is or is about to be thereby solemnised.
- 2.4 “Child Marriage Prohibition Officer” includes the Child Marriage Prohibition Officer appointed under subsection (1) of section 16 of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006.
- 2.5 “Child Welfare Committee” - the state government shall by notification in the official gazette constitute for every district, one or more Child Welfare Committees for exercising the powers and to discharge the duties conferred on such Committees in relation to children in need of care and protection under this Act and ensure that induction training and sensitization of all members of the committee is provided within two months from the date of notification.

- 2.6 “Child Welfare Police Officer” - In every Police Station, at least one officer, not below the rank of assistant sub-inspector, with aptitude, appropriate training and orientation may be designed as the child welfare police officer to exclusively deal with children either as victims or perpetrators, in coordination with the police, voluntary and non-governmental organisations.
- 2.7 “District court” means, in any area for which a Family Court established under section 3 of the Family Courts Act, 1984 (66 of 1984) exists, such as Family Court, and in any area for which there is no Family Court but a city civil court exists, that court and in any other area, the principal civil court of original jurisdiction and includes any other civil court which may be specified by the State. Government, by notification in the Official Gazette, as having jurisdiction in respect of the matters dealt with in this Act.
- 2.8 “minor” means a person who, under the provisions of the Majority Act, of 1875 (9 of 1875), is to be deemed not to have attained his majority.
- 2.9 In this, Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 unless the context otherwise requires, –
- (14) “child in need of care and protection” means a child–
- (xii) who is at imminent risk of marriage before attaining the age of marriage and whose parents, family members, guardians, and any other persons are likely to be responsible for the solemnization of such marriage.¹⁰
3. A victim of Child Marriage is any person who has been or was forced to marry before the age of marriage or the person whose marriage has been solemnised and the person whose marriage is likely to be attempted to be solemnized.
- 4. ASHA (Awareness, Support, Help, and Action) Unit.**
- 4.1. The Chairperson, DLSA shall, within one month of launching of this SOP, constitute a Special Unit to be called ASHA (Awareness, Support, Help, and Action) unit including:
- Principal District & Sessions Judge/Chairperson, DLSA,
 - Judicial officer in charge of family court in the district.
 - Secretary DLSA as secretary of the unit.

¹⁰ Section 2 (14) (xii) Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

- d. Ex-officio Chairman, TLSC as Member,
 - e. Chief Legal Aid Defense Counsel of the District.
 - f. Two panel lawyers to be nominated by the Chairman, DLSA as Members,
 - g. Four para legal volunteers to be nominated by the Chairman, DLSA as Members.
- 4.2. The ASHA unit may consist of the following members to be nominated by the Principal District & Sessions Judge/Chairperson, DLSA, including:
- a. District Magistrate or any other officer nominated by him, not below the rank of Additional District Magistrate (ADM),
 - b. District Education Officer (DEO),
 - c. District Child Protection Officer (DCPO),
 - d. Special Juvenile Police Unit (SJPU)
 - e. District Social Welfare Officer (DSWO)
 - f. Chief District Medical Officer (CDMO) or any other medical officer not below the rank of resident medical officer.
 - g. Superintendent of Police or an officer nominated by him, not below the rank of Sub-divisional police officer (SDPO) or Assistant commissioner of Police (ACP)
 - h. Child Marriage Prohibition Officer (CMPO)
- 4.3. If, due to exceptional circumstances, the Chairman, DLSA, is unable to constitute the ASHA unit with the prescribed number of members in accordance with the specified criteria, the Chairman may, with prior intimation to the Member Secretary, SLSA, appoint an alternative member deemed suitable.
- 5. Guidelines for Panel Lawyers & Para-legal Volunteers**
- 5.1. The Chairperson DLSA shall appoint two Panel lawyers in each taluk; preferably, at least one must be female to provide legal assistance to victims of child marriages, their families, and stakeholders.
 - 5.2. Panel lawyers and PLVs shall assist the complainant, with prior consent of the complainant, in obtaining protection orders, restraining orders, injunctions against Child Marriage, or any other ancillary or incidental orders as per the provisions of Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 or any other provision of law for the time being in force, upon receiving the information of the child marriage.
 - 5.3. In the case where victim of child marriage is pregnant and wish to abort the child, the panel lawyer, preferably female lawyer and in case the victim is not legally

represented and with her prior written consent of the victim, DLSAs shall assist the victim in filing the petition before the competent court. During this process, the panel lawyer shall maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the victims.

- 5.4. ASHA unit shall assist the victim of child marriage in matters pertaining to abortion/termination of pregnancy, adhering to the court orders, if any, and as per the provisions of the law for the time being in force.
- 5.5. ASHA unit shall nominate a government appointed child counsellor for the mental well-being of the child born out of child marriage above the age of 3 if required and necessary depending upon the fact and circumstances. and provide the necessary support to the child, In case the government appointed child counsellor is not available, then the ASHA unit, in coordination with the Chief Medical Officer and Child Marriage Prohibition officer, shall facilitate the appointment of a private child counsellor. The remuneration of the private counselor may be decided by the ASHA unit.
- 5.6. Panel lawyers and PLVs shall also facilitate shelter home accommodation in coordination with the Child Marriage Prohibition officer and CWC if the victim faces threats from her family or community.
- 5.7. The Chairman of the DLSA shall appoint two lawyers to offer legal counselling to help the child marriage victims and their families to understand the laws and procedures related to the prevention of Child Marriage.
- 5.8. ASHA unit to identify and facilitate the victims of child marriage who can be put in family foster care running under Mission Vatsalya, run by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development.¹¹

6. Prevention of Child Marriages

- 6.1. ASHA unit shall ensure that complaints on child marriage cases are received and processed immediately to Child Marriage Prohibition officers, Superintendent of Police (SP), Secretary DLSA, and the Chief Medical officer of the district from where the complaint has been received.
- 6.2. ASHA unit shall also maintain the annual database of the cases of child marriages and the action taken on each complaint received to the unit in Bal Vivah

¹¹ See Clause 4 of the Model Foster Care Guidelines 2024 ([https://cara.wcd.gov.in/pdf/MODEL%20FOSTER CARE%20GUIDELINES,%202024.pdf](https://cara.wcd.gov.in/pdf/MODEL%20FOSTER%20CARE%20GUIDELINES,%202024.pdf))

- Mukt Bharat Portal, run by Union Ministry of Women and Child Development, upon receiving the access of the above-mentioned portal from the ministry. The identity of the informant shall also not be disclosed and the confidentiality shall be maintained.
- 6.3. ASHA unit shall prepare their annual intervention plan for effective and targeted redressal of the child marriage cases and proper implementation of the present sop thereof.
 - 6.4. ASHA unit shall communicate to all government servants, upon receiving information of the child marriage, immediately inform the concerned police station to rescue and rehabilitate the child.
 - 6.5. ASHA unit shall create Awareness of (i) Helpline number -1098 by Ministry of Women & Child Development, Government of India
 - (ii) Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat Portal for registering child marriage
 - (iii) Helpline number 15100 for legal services assistance.
 - 6.6 ASHA unit shall convene training programs for para-legal volunteers (PLVs), Anganwadi Workers, ASHA Workers, NGO workers, and other volunteers, if any to conduct special drives and awareness programs, especially in those areas where a high incidence of child marriage is reported.
 - 6.7 ASHA unit shall appoint/ identify and train one PLV in each village to sensitize and keep an eye on the issue of child marriage. PLVs, in coordination with the Gram Pradhan/ Sarpanch/ Gram Sevak shall keep an intelligent check on the child marriages happening or likely to happen in the village. They shall maintain the confidentiality of the complainant/ informant and victim.
 - 6.8 In case of Child Marriage, as soon as the PLVs receive information, they shall inform the DLSA secretary, Child Welfare Committee (CWC), and Station House officer (SHO) of the concerned police Station for prevention and rescue of the child.
 - 6.9 ASHA unit shall also involve law students, law professors, and Students from social subjects, e.g., Master's in Social Work (MSW), in organizing awareness camps every month in the area with a high reported incidence of child marriage or quarterly in the other areas with a moderate number of cases of child marriage. Law students shall assist PLVs in community outreach and awareness works.

- 6.10. ASHA unit shall conduct awareness camps in schools and colleges. ASHA unit shall conduct at least one awareness camp per month in one school or college within their respective local jurisdiction.
- 6.11. ASHA unit shall devise an Education Program based on prevalent local customs, traditions, and usages to educate the masses on child marriage.
- 6.12. ASHA unit shall conduct awareness programs through local radio, Doordarshan channels, social media platforms, print and digital media, and nukkad natak (Street Plays) to educate the masses on the harmful impact of child marriage. These programmes shall be run by experts on child marriage involving lawyers, counsellors, medical practitioners, and local artists.
- 6.13. ASHA unit shall endeavor towards child marriage-free village initiative and shall organize targeted programs in coordination with the District Child Protection Officer, Sarpanch (local body), and law colleges.
- 6.14. ASHA unit shall regularly inspect places where child marriages are usually performed.
- 6.15. Research reveals that investment in education and awareness reduces the number of cases of child marriages.¹² The ASHA unit shall ensure that beneficiary schemes for the women and the provisions under the flagship scheme of Women & Child Development, i.e., Mission Vatsalya, and other relevant schemes of various government departments are being spread out to the victims of child marriages.
- 6.16. Furthering the Spirit of the Judgment in the Society of Enlightenment and Voluntary Action & Anr case. VS Union of India¹³, ASHA unit shall take steps to strengthen the coordination between the different Governmental bodies, working on the prevention and rehabilitation of child marriage at the district level.

¹² Vijendra Kumar “ A decade of Progress: Child Marriages drop fivefold over the past decade in Khapland district of Haryana available at (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/a-decade-of-progress-child-marriages-drop-fivefold-over-the-past-decade-in-khapland-district-of-haryana/articleshow/116738813.cms>) 25.2.2025, See also Madhumita Paul Secondary Education can reduce Child Marriages by 66%: UNICEF available at (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/governance/secondary-education-can-reduce-child-marriage-by-66-unicef-85205>)

¹³ Society of Enlightenment and Voluntary Action & Anr case. VS Union of Indi 2024 INSC 790

7. Rehabilitation

- 7.1. For the purpose of rehabilitation, the following methods can be adopted:
- 7.2 ASHA unit in collaboration with the Principal, Government Schools & District Education officer shall conduct monthly Child Counselling to address underlying issues and develop coping skills.
- 7.3 ASHA unit shall appoint two counsellors to conduct counseling. The Counsellor shall also conduct Group Therapy to promote social Support.
- 7.4 ASHA unit shall appoint a counsellor to conduct Family Therapy to educate and involve family members in ensuring recovery from the trauma of child marriages.
- 7.5 With the guidance of a medical expert and psychological counsellor, Motivational interviewing enhances recovery by involving a career therapist and child psychologist.
- 7.6 ASHA unit shall organize Art, music, or recreational activities to promote creative expression and relaxation once a month by ensuring the participation of victims of child marriage in such programs.
- 7.7 ASHA unit shall create a **Monitoring and Mentorship body** in the district to follow up with the victims regularly and redress their concerns. The body shall include the DLSA Secretary, Child Marriage Prohibition Officer (CMPO), psychological counsellor, social workers, educationists, and a member from CWC, vocational trainers to impart necessary skills and ensure the continuity of education of victims of child marriages.
- 7.8 The members of this body shall be appointed by the ASHA unit.
- 7.9 The vocational training shall, among other things, include carpet making, embroidery, stitching, tailoring, computer courses, beautician courses, etc, and other courses that can make the victims of child marriage economically self-sufficient. Courses shall be in such nature which can offer employment at later stage.

- 7.10 ASHA unit and the Mentorship and Monitoring body shall organize monthly training programs under the National Skill Development for providing training to the victims of child marriage above the age of 16.
- 7.11 The Mentorship and Monitoring body shall collaborate with vocational training institutes at the regional level and with women's industrial training institutes to impart training to women. The Units shall also ensure that child marriage victims are provided with vocational training opportunities, linking them with skill development centers, apprenticeship programs, and government-backed employment schemes.
- 7.12 ASHA unit and the Mentorship and Monitoring body shall collaborate with the nationalized bank to offer preferably credit-free loans to support the entrepreneurship and individual venture of the victim of child marriage for economic self-sufficiency.
- 7.13 ASHA unit and monitoring and Mentorship body shall also popularise and connect the girl child with the financial incentive schemes that encourage education.
- 7.14 ASHA unit to provide financial assistance for educational needs and vocational training of victims of child marriage and children born out of child marriages. The amount of money to be given and the frequency of such help may be decided on the basis of facts and circumstances of each case, with prior approval from the respective SLSA. ASHA unit, in collaboration with the District Education officer, shall consider the possibility of offering scholarships or monthly stipends to the victims who escape or annul child marriages.
- 7.15 ASHA unit shall conduct monthly meetings at the end of each month to assess the mentorship needs of victims of child marriage and monitor the rehabilitation and action taken on the cases of child marriage within that month.
- 7.16 The Minutes of the Meeting shall be recorded for record purposes.

8. Compliance Mechanism & Impact Assessment:

- 8.1. The Member Secretary of SLSA shall conduct half-yearly assessments of the legal services, assistance, help, and support provided by the ASHA units in the respective state to the child marriage victims.

8.2. The ASHA unit shall maintain a record in the following format:

8.2.1 Name of the ASHA unit:

8.2.2 Legal Services:

Number of Victims identified or approached.	Number of Victims who were assisted/ helped by the ASHA unit	Kind of Assistance / help Provided.

8.2.3. Rehabilitation

The number of victims who are provided counselling.	Number of victims who are provided vocational or skills training	Kind of Training/whether vocational/regular provided to the victims.	Number of victims who were provided safe space/ rescue centres	Number of victims who were dropped from school/ who were admitted later with the intervention of ASHA unit.

8.2.4 Awareness

Number of awareness camps organized	The number of Awareness Camps organized in schools/ educational institutions/religious institutions.	The number of programs conducted through Radio/ Television and other digital means.	Number of Special drives conducted:

- 8.3. ASHA unit shall half-yearly submit the records maintained to their respective SLSAs.
- 8.4. SLSA, after receiving data from the ASHA unit, shall submit the report to NALSA at the end of every year in the format mentioned above.
- 8.5. All expenditures to be incurred for implementing the SOP shall be borne from the grants in aid funds after the approval of the Hon. Executive Chairperson of the respective SLSA.
- 8.6. ASHA unit, in consultation with SLSA and intimation to SLSA, may fix the honorarium of the members of different units to be made functional under the SOP.
- 8.7. ASHA unit to also provide for the travel and other miscellaneous expenses to the PLVs and other members as per the specified state government rates, as and when required.

Child marriage is totally unacceptable. It is a practice that robs millions of girls of their childhood, education, and opportunities.

Desmond Tutu,
the South African human right activist and Nobel Laureate

"When you educate a girl, you educate a family, a community, and a nation. Child marriage denies girls that chance."

Kofi Annan
(Former Secretary General of the United Nation)

