

CHILD SEXUAL CRIME ACT

Protecting children from underage marriages

AS the government goes ahead with the proposed Child Sexual Crime Act, it should also consider addressing underage marriages under the proposed act.

The act is a good step to protect children from harm.

It would also ensure that action would be taken against culprits and justice would prevail.

Complaints involving sexual crimes against children have been on the rise, judging from the number of police reports lodged.

But, at the same time, the number of cases brought to court is lower.

The proposed act will introduce new offences against children, namely child grooming and child pornography.

It will take into consideration children giving evidence and the establishment of a court to deal with child sex offenders.

Under our law, the marriageable age for Muslim women is lower than that for Muslim men.

Section 8 of Malaysian Islamic Family Law (Federal Territories) Act of 1984 (Act 303) states that the minimum legal age for Muslim boys to marry is 18, and for a Muslim girl, 16.

They are allowed to marry with the written permission from the Syariah Court after both sets of parents put in an application to formalise their union.

Without having such permission from the court, couples commit an offence and shall be punished with a fine not exceeding RM1,000 or with imprisonment not exceeding six months, or both.

For non-Muslims, the legal age of marriage is 18.

Non-Muslim females are permitted to marry between the ages of 16 and 18 with the consent of the chief minister.

This is stipulated under Section 10 Law Reform (Marriage and Divorce) Act 1976 (Act 164).

Although the law on this issue seems clear, it can be open to abuse.

To prevent abuse, addressing the issue under the proposed act would further guarantee the child's protection.

Underage marriages have lasting consequences, especially for girls, as the trauma will go beyond their adolescent years.

Women married in their teens struggle with the health effects of getting pregnant at a young age.

Underage marriages can also open the door to domestic violence, child sexual abuse and marital rape if no steps are taken.

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