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Viral photo prompts Indonesian government moves toward banning child marriage



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Photo Source: Thomson Reuters Foundation

A photo of two young teenagers trying to register their marriage on the island of Sulawesi has been shared widely online since last week

By Beh Lih Yi

Thomson Reuters Foundation (24.04.2018) - <https://tmsnrt.rs/2vEUtIa> - Indonesia is moving towards a ban on child marriage, officials said on Tuesday after a photo of a teenage couple who tried to tie the knot went viral on social media.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, is among 10 countries with the highest number of girls marrying before they turn 18, according to campaign group Girls Not Brides.

A photo of a 15-year-old boy and a girl, 14, trying to register their marriage on the island of Sulawesi has been shared widely online since last week, sparking renewed pressure on the government to end such underage unions.

President Joko Widodo has agreed to sign a decree that would ban child marriage, a spokeswoman at the Women Empowerment and Child Protection Ministry told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

No other details were available immediately, but the spokeswoman said public dialogues on the matter would be held.

The ministry has been pressing the government to raise the minimum age for marriage to 20 for girls, and 22 for boys.

Under Indonesian laws, girls can marry at the age of 16, and 19 for boys if parents give their consent. Girls can be married at an even younger age if religious courts agree.

Women's rights campaigners said a ban is long overdue.

"Child marriage is a form of sexual violence," said Ninik Rahayu, one of the female Islamic clerics who jointly issued an unprecedented fatwa against child marriage last year.

A fatwa, or religious edict, is influential among Muslims although it is not legally binding.

"Child marriage has reached an emergency level in Indonesia. If we don't take action quick enough, it will destroy the future of our children," Rahayu told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Andreas Harsono from campaign group Human Rights Watch said the Indonesian government's pledge is "bold" but action must be taken without delay.

Campaigners say poverty and tradition continue to drive underage marriage in Indonesia, a sprawling archipelago in Southeast Asia with a population of 250 million people.

One in four girls marry before they turn 18 in Indonesia, according to the United Nations' children agency, UNICEF. On average over 3,500 Indonesian girls are married off every day.

Globally, 12 million girls become child brides each year, the Girls Not Brides group says, exposing them to greater risks of exploitation, sexual violence, domestic abuse and death in childbirth.

Indonesia's Aceh orders female flight crews to wear hijab

Under Aceh's rules, non-Muslim females can opt to wear modest clothing instead

Gulf News (30.01.2018) - An Indonesian province said on Tuesday it is ordering Muslim female flight attendants landing in the region to don a hijab upon arrival — or face punishment by religious police.

Muslim women in Aceh, on the island of Sumatra, are required to wear the Islamic headscarf under religious law, while non-Muslim females can opt to wear modest clothing instead.

But some Muslim flight attendants who do not regularly wear the hijab were skipping the local practice during short layovers, forcing Aceh to issue the new regulations, said Mawardy Ali, head of Aceh Besar district which includes provincial capital Banda Aceh.

"I hope the airlines respect the uniqueness of Aceh where Sharia is implemented," he said, adding that he would aim to meet with some half dozen affected airlines this week.

"We are disseminating this regulation to the airlines through the end of this week. Later, we'll talk about punishment if we find there have been violations," Ali added.

"If a (Muslim) crew member fails to comply, we will reprimand her. If she does it repeatedly, I will order Sharia police to nab her."

He did not say what sort of punishment would apply to those who refused to comply, though hijab violations usually result in a stern reprimand.

Ali said any sanction would not include public flogging — a common punishment in Aceh for a host of crimes including selling alcohol and having gay sex.

It was unclear how many flight attendants could be affected.

Many women in Indonesia, the world's biggest Muslim-majority nation, do not wear the hair-covering scarf and Islamic law only applies in Aceh — the region won special autonomy in 2001 as part of a deal to end a long-running separatist insurgency.

Concern has been growing among rights activists about rising religious conservatism in Aceh, where police at the weekend forcibly cut the hair of a group of transgender women and made them wear male clothing to make them more "manly".

Indonesia's national carrier Garuda and its low-cost arm Citilink service Banda Aceh, which hosts the province's main airport.

Garuda said it would comply with the new regulations and may add a special uniform worn by its female staff on Middle-East bound flights — which includes the hijab — to Aceh flights.

"Garuda respects the local culture in Aceh," said company spokesman Ikhsan Rosan.

Citilink spokesman Benny Butarbutar, meanwhile, said the carrier has already been using an Islamic-compliant uniform for its attendants servicing Banda Aceh since 2015.

Other airlines affected include Indonesian budget carrier Lion Air and its full-service subsidiary Batik Air, which operate regular flights between Aceh and other parts of the Southeast Asian archipelago.

AirAsia and Firefly, both Malaysia-based, are the main foreign carriers that operate flights to Banda Aceh.

Female clerics declare fatwa on child marriage

By Beh Lih Yi

Reuters (27.04.2017) - <http://tmsnrt.rs/2p7RDne> - Female clerics on Thursday issued an unprecedented fatwa against child marriage in Indonesia in a bid to stop young girls becoming brides in the world's most populous Muslim country.

The fatwa - which is influential among Muslims but not legally binding - came at the end of an extraordinary three-day conference of female Islamic clerics: a rare example of women assuming a lead role in religious affairs in this mostly-Muslim country.

"Maternal mortality is very high in Indonesia. We - as female clerics - can play a role on the issue of child marriage," conference organiser Ninik Rahayu told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Female clerics know the issues and obstacles women face, we can take action and not just wait for the government to protect these children," she said by phone from Cirebon in the West Java province, where the congress was held.

Indonesia has one of the worst records for under-age marriage - its high number of child brides puts it among the top 10 countries worldwide - and it is common for girls to marry before they turn 18.

Thursday's fatwa, or religious edict, called underage marriage "harmful" and said its prevention was mandatory.

Fallout of early wedlock

One in six Indonesian girls marry before they turn 18, equal to 340,000 girls a year, according to the United Nations children's agency UNICEF. About 50,000 wed before they turn 15.

A government report last year showed almost a quarter of married women aged 20-24 had entered wedlock when they were under 18.

The Southeast Asian nation has a population of 250 million.

Under Indonesian laws, the minimum age of marriage for girls is 16, and 19 for boys.

In issuing the fatwa, the women clerics cited studies saying many Indonesian child brides could not continue their studies once wed and half their marriages ended in divorce.

They urged the government to raise the minimum marriage age for girls to 18, a demand activists have sought for years.

Early marriage not only makes it more likely that girls will quit school, campaigners say it also increases the risks of exploitation, sexual violence, domestic abuse and death in childbirth.

About 300 participants took part in the congress, which included Indonesian women clerics and women leaders from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Malaysia. Organisers billed the three-day conference as the first meeting of its kind in the world.

The congress also issued two other fatwa against environmental destruction and sexual violence, which the clerics said are against Islamic teaching and fundamental human rights.