**Iraq considering men to marry girls as young as nine years old.**

Iraq is on the verge of a setback in the fight against child marriage as a new proposed law seeks to lower the legal age of consent from 18 to 9, potentially allowing men to marry young girls. As reported by [Times of India](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/iraq-set-to-amend-marriage-law-allowing-men-to-marry-9-year-old-girls/articleshow/115183913.cms), the conservative Shia Muslim-dominated parliament is pushing to amend the country’s “personal status law” that would not only lower the marriage age but also strip women of their rights to divorce, child custody, and inheritance.

**Women losing all protection**

Iraq’s 1959 “personal status law,” praised as one of the Middle East’s most progressive family codes, set a unified legal framework for families across all sects. However, new amendments propose allowing Muslim citizens to choose between the current secular-based law or religious law—depending on their sect—for handling personal matters. Crucially, the power to decide lies solely with men.

Sarah Sanbar, Iraq researcher at Human Rights Watch [highlighted the implications:](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/women-and-girls/iraq-poised-to-lower-the-age-of-consent-for-girls-to-nine/)

“It’s explicitly written in the draft that when there’s a dispute between the couple, the sect of the husband takes priority,” … “This is going to remove a lot of protections for women … it will undermine the principle of equality before the law.”

**Child marriage persists despite current law**

Child marriage is already prevalent in Iraq, with roughly 28 percent of women marrying before 18, according to UNICEF. A loophole in the personal status law allows religious leaders to officiate marriages outside court jurisdiction with the father’s consent. These unregistered marriages, common in economically disadvantaged, conservative Shia communities, deny women and their children key rights. Hospitals, for example, can refuse admission for childbirth if women lack a marriage certificate.

Dr Renad Mansour, a senior research fellow at Chatham House

“Stressing the religious side is a way for them to try and regain some of the ideological legitimacy that has been waning over the last few years,”

This isn’t the first time Iraq’s Shia parties have attempted to amend the personal status law. Similar efforts were blocked in 2014 and 2017 due to backlash from Iraqi women. But with religious groups now holding a stronger majority in parliament, female representatives are struggling to prevent a second vote that could approve the bill.

Mansour added:

*“It’s the closest it’s ever been,” …. “It has more momentum than it’s ever had, primarily because of the Shia parties,”*

Human rights advocates contend that this bill exposes young girls to increased risks of sexual and physical violence and could lead to more girls being pulled out of school, denying them their right to an education.

Freedom United joins activists and human rights organizations in opposing this amendment of Iraq’s personal status law. Child marriage is a violation of children’s rights, stealing childhoods and often condemning young girls to a life of suffering.