



Mains Practice Question

Q. The government's recent proposal to raise the legal age of marriage to 21 years for women is a step towards women empowerment. Critically analyse. (150 words)

25 Aug, 2020 GS Paper 2 Social Justice

Approach

- Start by discussing the recent proposal of the government to raise the legal age of marriage to 21 years for women.
- Highlight the link between age of marriage and overall development of the women.
- Discuss the merits of increasing the legal age of marriage for women and arguments against the proposal.
- Conclude with suitable solutions.

Introduction

- The Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 prescribe 18 and 21 years as the minimum age of consent for marriage for women and men respectively.
- Recently, the central government has set up a committee to reconsider the minimum age of marriage for women. This is seen as a step towards gender equality.

Body

Link Between Age of Marriage and Overall Development of the Women

- A study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which was published in 2019, showed that children born to adolescent mothers (10-19 years) were 5 percentage points more likely to be stunted than those born to young adults (20-24 years), and 11 percentage points more stunted than children born to adult mothers (25 years or older).
- Children born to adolescent mothers also had 10 percentage points higher prevalence of low weight as adult mothers.
- It also highlighted other factors, such as lower education among teenage mothers and their poor economic status, which had the strongest links with a child's height and weight measurements.

Merits of Increasing the Legal Age of Marriage

- **Education:** Increasing the legal age of marriage would enable the girl child to get more formal education and as education increases, awareness among people will also increase leading to decrease in child marriages.
- **Nutrition:** It is recommended that increasing age at first marriage, age at first birth, and girl's education are a promising approach to improve maternal and child nutrition.
- **Gender equality:** Girls are more prone to child marriage due to society's perceptions and expectations of girls in domestic roles. Increasing the legal age of marriage would help in ending the evil of inequality between the sexes.
- **Sex education:** With a rise in legal age of marriage women will be able to know more about their bodies and will be able to plan their family in a better way.

Argument against the legal age of marriage against women

- **The National Coalition Advocating for Adolescent Concerns** asserts that increasing the legal age of marriage for girls will only “**artificially expand the numbers of married persons deemed underage and criminalise them and render underage married girls without legal protection**”.
- Instead, transformative, well resourced measures that increase girls’ access to **education and health**, create enabling **opportunities** and place girl’s **empowerment** at the centre will not just delay marriage but lead to long term, positive health and education outcomes.
- It recommended bringing education for three-to-five year-olds and 15-to-18 years under the **Right to Education**, instead of confining the law to children between 6 years to 14 years.
- To bring genuine change, we need free education beyond schooling for girls, coupled with job guarantees, especially for those from rural areas and vulnerable social locations.

Conclusion

- Early pregnancy is associated with increased child mortality rates and affects the health of the mother. Thus, there is a need to **focus on a mother’s health** and **readiness to carry a child** instead of just increasing the legal age of marriage.
- The government needs to emphasize upon **economic and social empowerment** of women and girls, as well as targeted **social and behaviour change communication** (SBCC) campaigns.

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