

Focus must be on creating social awareness about women's reproductive health and rights

Good intent does not guarantee favourable outcomes. Coercive laws without wide societal support often fail to deliver even when their statement of objects and reasons aims for the larger public good. Within days of the Union Cabinet approving a proposal to raise the age of marriage for women from 18 to 21 years, the same age as for men, the Government listed it for legislative business in Parliament this week.

If passed, various personal and faith-based laws which govern marriages in India now, including The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955, the Special Marriage Act, 1954, and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, will have to be amended. In her Budget speech last year, Finance Nirmala Sitharaman had announced that the Government would set up a task force to look into the age of a girl entering motherhood with an aim to lower maternal mortality rates, improve nutrition levels as well as ensure opportunities to women to pursue higher education and careers. With these targets in mind, a panel headed by former Samata Party chief Jaya Jaitly was set up in June last year.

The panel submitted its report in December 2020. Though the objective looks good on paper, merely raising the age of marriage without creating social awareness and improving access to health care is unlikely to benefit the community it wants to serve: young women not yet financially independent, who are unable to exercise their rights and freedoms while still under the yoke of familial and societal pressures.

According to Ms. Jaitly, raising the age of marriage is one of its recommendations, which include a strong campaign to reform patriarchal mindsets, and improved access to education. As per the National Family Health Survey (2019-2021), 23.3% of women aged 20-24 years married before 18, which shows that the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, has not been wholly successful in preventing child marriages, especially among the poor.

Women's rights activists point out that parents often use this Act to punish their daughters who marry against their wishes or elope to evade forced marriages, domestic abuse, and lack of education facilities. Hence, within a patriarchal setting, it is more likely that the change in the age limit will increase parents' authority over young adults. A good, but not easy, way to achieve the stated objective is to take steps to counsel girls on early pregnancies, and provide them the network to improve their health.

The focus must be on creating social awareness about women's sexual and reproductive health and rights, and ensuring girls are not forced to drop out of school or college. Laws cannot be a short cut in the path to social reform.

Expected Question (Prelims Exams)

- Q. Under whose chairmanship the committee was constituted to raise the minimum age limit for marriage of girls?**
- (a) Jaya Jaitley
 - (b) Jaya Bachchan
 - (c) Smriti Irani
 - (d) Nirmala Sitharaman

Expected Question (Mains Exams)

- Q. Recently, there is a consideration to increase the minimum limit of marriage of girls. What are the reasons behind this proposal? Is this proposal logical? Examine.**

(250 Words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.