



Raising women's marriage age to 21 is a move towards empowerment

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Women Empowerment and Gender Equality:

1. India has taken a progressive step to realise Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 5 categorically asks nation-states to formulate policies to achieve gender equality.

2. The Centre recently gave a final shape to this goal by ensuring equality in marriage age by raising the marriageable age for women to 21 years.



3. India had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1993. Article 16 of the Convention strictly forbids child marriage and asks governments to identify and enforce the minimum marriage age for women.

4. Since 1998, India has had national legislation exclusively on human rights protections drafted in consonance with international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948.

5. Protection of women against early and child marriage is a protection of their basic rights and this monumental step will lead to changes in related legislative frameworks to provide a comprehensive rights-based framework for significant half of the population.

Marriage as an institution for social protection to women:

1. The regressive perception that marriage provides women with social protections and recognition needs to change.



2. It has been established that child marriage exposes women to early pregnancy, malnutrition, and violence (mental, emotional, and physical). Such marriages have, therefore, been brought under the ambit of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006.
3. However, Section 2(a) of the Act declares women under the age of 18 to be children while for men this age is 21. This difference seems to have no justifiable logic.
4. The age of voting can be equal for men and women under the Representation of Peoples Act, and the age to consensually, wilfully, and validly enter into a contract is the same for men and women.
5. This difference in criteria was more social than biological. The general arguments based on local value judgments that women should be younger in a marriage union have faded with time. Today, women stand on equal footing to men in all possible spheres of life.
6. Equality emanates from equal laws and social transformations are both the precursors of laws and a consequence of them. A change in law also fundamentally changes social perceptions in progressive societies.

Higher education and employment:

1. The equality in marriage age brought about by the government will add to its many initiatives to promote women's education.
2. As per the All-India Survey on Higher Education, the enrolment of female students in higher education has increased from 46.2 per cent in 2015-16 to 49 per cent in 2019-20.
3. The overall growth of female student enrolment between 2015-2020 has increased by 18.2 per cent. It is notable that from Ujjwala to Mudra to Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana, the largest section of beneficiaries of government schemes has been the women.
4. For the first time in Indian politics, we are witnessing remarkable levels of representation of women at crucial decision-making positions from the Union Council of Ministers to party structures.
5. Women's empowerment will get a further fillip with equality in marriage age.

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