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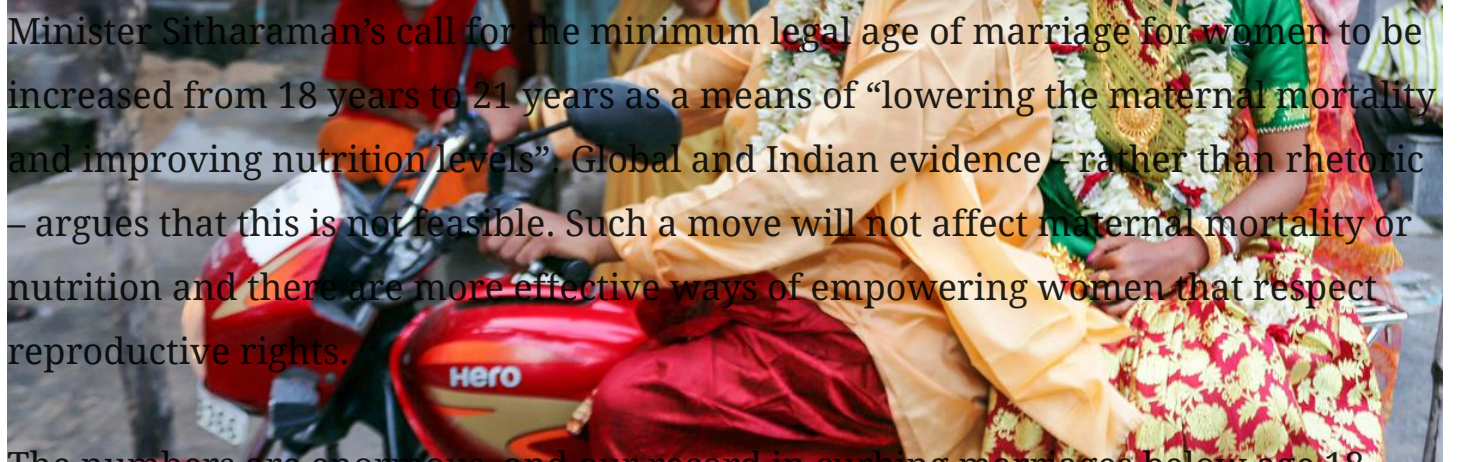
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Minister Sitharaman’s call for the minimum legal age of marriage for women to be increased from 18 years to 21 years as a means of “lowering the maternal mortality and improving nutrition levels”. Global and Indian evidence – rather than rhetoric – argues that this is not feasible. Such a move will not affect maternal mortality or nutrition and there are more effective ways of empowering women that respect reproductive rights.

The numbers are enormous, and our record in curbing marriages below age 18 years (the current legal minimum age for marriage) has been abysmal, even 40 years after the enactment of the current Prohibition of Child Marriage Act.

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## Persistent norms

Social scientists and programme implementers know that persisting norms in intimate spheres pertaining to the family have been difficult to change, as obvious from the fact that despite a longstanding law.

Child marriage showed an impressive decline only recently. Marriage decisions in India are often guided by factors such as dowry considerations (a younger bride would mean a lower dowry), a fear of loss of family honour (the stigma of an unmarried woman losing her virginity) and fear of “what will people say” if the woman remains unmarried. All these considerations are strong deterrents to conforming to the current child marriage law.

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But the mortality experienced by the cohort aged 20 years to 24 years (roughly those marrying at ages 18 years and higher) is by far the lowest of all age groups, and maternal mortality ratios rise among women in their 30s and beyond. Raising the minimum legal age of marriage for women to 21 years would deny many young women from experiencing pregnancy at these safest ages.

### Not comparable groups

Many will say that those who marry at ages 21 years and above are better off than those who marry younger. This is undoubtedly true, many studies have shown that



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Likewise, half (49%) of those with no education, among just 4% of those who had completed secondary education had married in childhood. And after statistically adjusting for various indicators, age played a relatively smaller role in affecting nutrition levels than did wealth status or education. Again, the point is, the two



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opportunities in education, health and poverty alleviation.

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The irony is that the Prime Minister’s Independence Day call came when Covid-19 pandemic-related poverty has led families to marry off daughters even below the age of 16. Individual stories of “one less mouth to feed” and lower dowry demands



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