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Raise Awareness to End Under 18s Child Marriage to Achieve SDGs' Goal of Gender Equality

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Abstract:

Child marriage persists globally, hindering SDG achievement. Target 5.3 under SDG 5 seeks to end harmful practices like child marriage by 2030. Despite laws, 1 in 5 girls marry before 18. Child Marriage Prevention Act (1929) reflects past struggles. Education empowers girls, breaking poverty cycles. Focus on under 18s aids family planning and society's development.

Key Terms - Awareness; Child Marriage; Child Abuse; Health and Well -being; Gender Equality

Introduction The more voices that are raised in the fight to eliminate the outdated practice of child marriage once and for all, to achieve the better lifestyle. Yes since the time of passing the Child Marriage Restrained Act 1929 and before that, this issue had brought into light for solution, Though there are barriers, it overcame all such barriers as well and reached to the meagre level with all the efforts taken both at the levels of Government and NGOs. Nowadays the scenario of child marriages which are most common in all communities is being changed due to increasing awareness of the next generation parents who started sending their children to schools. However, child marriages continued among those who ignorant of the complications of child marriages. But it is still important to raise awareness against Child Marriage, as Child Marriage denies girls their childhood and crucial education and employment opportunities. It makes them vulnerable to sexual and other forms of physical violence and abuse in the domestic setting. Despite these adverse consequences, the practice persists with impunity or freedom from the injurious consequences of an action. 'Parents must sit and talk with their daughters to understand their needs and aspirations.'

Child Marriage still happens. All UN Member States came together to adopt the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and stated that We will not achieve the Sustainable Development Goals without ending child marriage. 193 countries have agreed to end child marriage by 2030 under the SDGs. Hence one of the SDGs is exclusively for empowerment, accordingly SDG 5 is to be achieved with an enormous effort which is cited as ‘Sustainable Development Goal 05: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ have certain proposed indicators under Target 5.3 which aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations” by 2030. The reasons why much attention is being paid dealt on various studies done on this issue. Despite laws against it, the practice remains widespread: Globally, *one in every five girls is formally married or in an informal union, before reaching age 18*. The Child Marriage Prevention Act is passed in 1929 after untold crisis and struggles, but still the issue is in need of a big full stop to save under 18s. Because child marriage ends childhood. Child marriage threatens girls’ lives and health, and it limits their future prospects. It negatively influences children's rights to education, health and protection. Going to school give girls choices and opportunities in life, allowing them to play an active role in their communities and break the cycle of poverty. Girls who are married are unlikely to be in school. Education, including comprehensive sexuality education, is essential for girls to be able to make informed decisions about their sexual health and well-being.

Hence an attempt is taken to study and work to support the needs of under 18s particularly for well -planned family and psychological well -being as per the saying ‘Family planning is the best contraceptive’ for the development of entire society.

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Research Methodology

Sources of Data Collection: Primary and Secondary

Duration :2021-2022

Tool and Techniques of Data Collection: Focus Group Discussion and Observation

Operational Definitions:

Child Marriage: Any marriage where either boy or a girl to be married below legal age at marriage.

Child Bride: A child of under the age who is married, or is to be married, to a considerably older man; generally, child brides' marriages are arranged by their families for the girls' financial safety or to take the financial burden off the family

Violator: a person or organization that acts against something, especially a law, agreement, and policy

NGO: Non -Government Organization serves to eradicate child marriage

DCPU: District Child Protection Unit a Govt office serves for child protection.

Awareness: the state or condition of being aware; having knowledge; consciousness of the information drive to raise awareness of what causes child marriage.

Social Welfare: A social welfare system provides assistance to needy individuals and families.

Well- Being: a state of being healthy and happy. It includes having good mental health, high life satisfaction, a sense of meaning and the ability to manage stress.

Gender Equality: the state of having the same rights, status, and opportunities as others, regardless of one's gender.

Empowerment: ability or the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights.

Muttrupulli: A Tamil word refers campaign for public awareness key to put full stop or prohibit child marriage. More stress on awareness among family members and children.

Review of Literature on awareness to prevent Child Marriage

The Tamil Nadu Social Welfare department is launching awareness programmes in each of the state's 38 districts in response to the alarmingly high number of child weddings that have been recorded in the state. Data from the Social Welfare and Women Empowerment department show that the state has seen an average of 10 child weddings per day so far this year.

Poverty and lack of awareness are some of the reasons for conducting child marriages said Integrated Child Development Scheme officials who have stopped child marriages whenever they receive the information. The parents used to marry off their daughters soon after they mature due to illiteracy and also to relieve of their responsibility. They gave counselling to the parents about the complication of child marriages. During the first and second phases of COVID -19, the number of child marriages have increased. Most of the families, who marry off their daughters at early age, are from poor financial background. According to ICDS officials, illegal contacts are also leading to child marriages. ICDS officials told 'The Hans India' that recently they stopped a marriage in Korangi village of Tallarevu mandal, where the bride was just 15 years old and the groom was 25 years old. She said that they gave counselling and explained about the adverse effects of child marriage, rules and punishments for child marriage. Without knowing the effects of child marriage and without any knowledge of how they are risking their own child's life, the parents are marrying off their minor

daughters under social and financial pressure, they added. Another well-wisher said that during COVID-19 pandemic, child marriages increased, especially in tribal and rural areas. They said that they are conducting awareness programmes. and appealed to the people to inform the officials if child marriages are taking place in their localities. They too stated that they have taken precautionary measures to prevent child marriages. (Source: The HANS India-19th October,2022)

Concerned by the surge in child weddings, Tamil Nadu's Social Welfare Department is implementing awareness campaigns all around the State. In order to raise awareness in movie theatres and in-between popular television programmes, the department is now filming brief videos with actors and television personalities. Furthermore, in order to stop child weddings, the department also intended to collaborate with the rural department and the state department of education as school reporting can stop the majority of marriages. Rural departments may be useful in identifying people who are preparing to marry their minor children.

“Imposing law alone cannot prohibit child marriage. Awareness among the public is necessary,” said District Principal Sub-Judge at the launch of ‘Muttrupulli,’ a campaign against child marriage.

“Child marriage is a cognizable and non-bailable offence. The law gives complete protection, rehabilitation and support to the children through Child Marriage Prohibition Officers,” said by the judge.

Sundar.S said that (The Hindu, November 16, 2021) ‘Child bride, development nipped in the bud’. Due to child bride, it leads to halt something in the early stage itself. By arresting with all the possible ways of eradication, this practice can be nipped in the bud. Marrying off a minor girl is against the law and has major ramifications. In general, almost all of the most auspicious days as per the Hindu calendar, many marriages took place in all places across the country. However, as many as eight weddings were stopped by the police on the same auspicious day due to the reason behind the brides were minors.

The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 defines a ‘child’ as a person who has not completed 21 years of age, if male, and 18 years, if female. And marrying off a ‘child’ is illegal. Data available with the District Social Welfare Office shows as many as 41 child marriages have been stopped since 2010. “These are a few of the marriages they were able to stop. More marriages involving children below 18 years may have taken place because local people did not alert us,” said by the then Superintendent of Police.

The Director of Childline, an NGO, feels a section of society does not perceive child marriage as being unlawful. For many parents, a girl child remains a burden till she is married off. The Child Line also said “The parents think that once the daughter gets married, they can rest easy. This is a primary reason why girls are given off in marriage at a young age.”

Changing social trends due to increased use of android phones compound their worries and the parents feel that “A girl talking over phone or being very friendly with a boy are seen as dangers by parents. They become anxious and try to marry her off to someone else at the earliest”.

When the Social Welfare Officer lists out issues that lead to child marriage, Poverty takes the top position. “When the parents have to take care of more than one girl child, they try to marry her off early. The sense of insecurity in bringing them up forces the parents to take such a decision.”

Marriages between children of close relatives are conducted to revive or perpetuate family ties. “Girls aged under 18 are married off to an over-aged maternal uncle or cousin,” revealed by those who also works in the Social Welfare Department. Such marriages are also aimed at protecting the family wealth. But the parents fail to realize that before the age of 18, the girl is neither physically nor mentally prepared for conjugal relations.

“The hormonal changes in the girl are completed only between 18 and 21 years. This is true with her physical growth too. The hip bone, which is an important aspect in pregnancy, is not fully developed before 18 years,” said by the Health Officials.

At 16, most girls are playful. The Health Official clearly pointed out that how a child can become a mother at that age. The Health Official said that a girl at a tender age will not have the mental make-up to consummate marriage and also to adjust with the in-laws. The worst impact of child marriage for girls is that they lose the opportunity for education. “This will have a cascading effect on the upbringing of her children too.”

Further they told clearly that “Such marriages tend to break up early only because of lack of maturity in the girls,” Given that the responsibility of running the family usually falls to the daughter-in-law, young girls cannot shoulder such a huge responsibility.

High Awareness

Officials say that awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage has risen in recent years.

People are ready to alert the officials to prevent such marriages. Among them are friends of the girl and her relatives. In some cases, the enemies of the family also report the authorities. The love affair that leads to forced child marriage often becomes the source of information for officials. “The lover boy informs the officials.” Officials proceed to verify the allegation. They visit the girl’s home and scan documents such as birth certificates to verify her age. “If the family members fail to cooperate, they try to get it through the school where the girl last studied. When the allegation turns out to be true, the family members are made to give an assurance that they will give up the marriage plan. The officials keep a vigil till the wedding date. If they fail to honour their promise, those who arrange the child marriage will be in trouble,” the official says with determination. The Act envisages a fine of up to Rs. one lakh and rigorous imprisonment of up to two years for the organizers of the marriage. The list of violators does not stop just with the family members.

Intimation to warning for violators

A circular issued by District Collectorate in June, 2012 insisted ‘to those who run marriage and community halls to verify the age of the bride and the bridegroom before allowing their premises to be used for marriages’. The temple authorities were also cautioned not to conduct marriages without verifying the age of the bride and the groom. The higher officials had warned violators that they are liable to be booked under non-bailable sections of the law. In addition, the license of the halls will be cancelled. The Superintendent of Police has appealed to school teachers to keep a vigil on their girl students who abruptly absent themselves from classes. “The teachers can give information the police without fear in order to prevent child marriages from taking place. Even in the event of a marriage having taken place, we can initiate steps for the legal separation of the child from the groom. This is an emotional and complex problem, but they can deal with it by means of the

law,” said by the authorities. The cultural aspect of marrying their daughters within their families is still rampant, says researchers. they said that “The right of the girl child to choose her career and age of marriage is not taken into consideration by these families,”. Hence the District Collectorate along with the departments of Social Welfare, Child Welfare, Police, Legal, Health, Education and NGOs collectively work together to see the positive change in the society.

Research Method of Study-Focus Group Discussion

Aim of the study: To promote an effective monitoring and implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5: To achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, particularly by addressing target 5.3 on ending all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage.

The District Education office in Dindigul was contacted to get permission to organize a Focus Group Discussion among High School Teachers from Dindigul District. About 50 teachers were contacted and those Teachers participated in the Focus Group Discussion at Dindigul. Both male and female teachers equally participated in it.

Focus Group Discussion is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population. Focus group discussion requires a team consisting of a skilled facilitator and an assistant (Burrows & Kendall, 1997; Krueger, 1994). The facilitator is central to the discussion not only by managing existing relationships but also by creating a relaxed and comfortable environment for unfamiliar participants. Similarly, the assistant's role includes observing non-verbal interactions and the impact of the group dynamics, and documenting the general content of the discussion, thereby supplementing the data (Kitzinger, 1994, 1995). One of the key requirements for a successful focus group discussion is a skilled and well-trained group facilitator and team members. It reflected the extent of facilitator engagement or involvement, since facilitation is central to unbiased data collection.

The discussion was about how education contributed as a powerful tool to stop the practice of child marriage. In order to motivate the group, a brainstorming in depth sessions by experts were organized to interact with them on significance of Adolescent children and health, psychological impact of health and impact on human resource development.

Discussion and Results

Once all the collected data are analyzed, the researcher consolidated the results into a report. Teachers' have played an important role in everyone's life. But for school going children, these teachers hold an even more important position as the drive is there to stop the practice of child marriage. In this regard, key decisions regarding the audience had been made to tailor the report to meet the needs of the target audience.

It is inferred from the Focus Group Discussion that

- Dissemination of this type of programme should reach all teachers.
- More attention to be paid for Children's education. Apart from awareness creation among Girl children, the message should reach both boys and girls.
- They too Insisted about statistical information on the status of child marriage.

-The solution is a time-consuming process which requires quite a long term, however achieve the goal of child marriage free society is the need of the hour.

-Enough effort is to be taken to stop the practice of drop out students from studies.

-Able to aware of all legal measures taken for child protection.

-Able to know how to take care of child health and adolescent health.

-The message conveyed through students' cultural programmes, skit, street play and folk arts was quite useful and effective mechanism to reach the society.

-They commented the messages shared on Child marriage, how this barrier can be tackled to visualize positive human resource development

-They impressed with all the relevant topics such as empowering the adolescents through education, health education, legal awareness and child empowerment as take home messages especially for the welfare of school going children.

-They also suggested to give awareness programme on POCSO especially for boys. The students should be counselled not to touch liquor or drugs which are the main sources for child marriage. The students are also influenced by Cinema and used to behave like heroes in front of teenage girls. They too revealed that as schools were shut in view of the pandemic, parents were marrying off their girl children, without considering their age. They said and warned of stringent legal action against those involved in the offence.

-The alleviation of sex discrimination, strict in legal age at marriage and periodical motivational campaign should be the essential strategies to eradicate child marriage and to visualize the vision of dream India in this 75th independent India.

-Interactive sessions are the best to know the mindset of tween and teen students.

-Able to list out the causes and consequences of child marriage. In the villages, education is hardly a challenge for the children, since their parents did not have much exposure on it.

To conclude, Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary base for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. There was progress in the previous years, more girls are going to school, fewer girls are forced into early marriage, more women are able to get employment opportunities, and laws are there to protect and advance gender equality in spite of many challenges remain still at all levels.

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