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## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 5.3: IMPLEMENTATION, EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES TO CURB CHILD MARRIAGES IN SANGAREDDY DISTRICT OF TELANGANA

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**Abstract:** The Sustainable Development Goals is a step forward towards fighting the various challenges facing the world today. It includes Goal 5 which is focussing on Gender Equality. A sub goal under the same i.e. 5.3 focuses on eliminating child marriages by 2030. The researcher conducted an empirical study in Sangareddy district of Telangana State to review the status of child marriages. The paper focuses on how the Sustainable Development Goals are being implemented, experiences as well as the challenges being faced in Sangareddy district. Certain key observations and recommendations follow which can aid in a more effective implementation mechanism being adopted for the achievement of the said goal.

**Keywords:** child, child marriage, sustainability, sustainable development goals

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**Introduction:** The world is moving from Development towards sustainability. The Millennium Development Goals were centred more upon how the economically instable and poor countries could develop and the role that the strong economic powers of the world could play in assisting this development. However, the Sustainable Development Goals are not specific to poor economic nations or developing economic nations but encompasses every nation of the world. The goals are more comprehensive as they focus on development which is also sustainable for the future generations to enjoy. To fight the different challenges posed to the world today, there is a greater need or rather an urgency felt to work on the parameters of developing a sustainable society [1]. Every society in this world does aim for economic development, social integration and inclusion as well as environmental sustainability [2]. Sustainable Development Goals therefore offer a platform for each member state of the United Nations to really deepen and reassess their understandings of a sustainable society. Through furthering these goals within their local jurisdictions these member states have the opportunity to create a global society which is developed while also meeting the needs for sustainability. While looking at the goals set out it is worth noticing that almost each one is linked with one or the other goals. For example, Goal 1 talks about ending poverty while goal 2 talks about ending hunger. If poverty is ended, hunger problem will also automatically get taken care of. These inter-linkages will act as important milestones as the fulfilment of even one of the goals would automatically contribute towards fulfilling another one. The United Nations at its High Level Political Forum [3] held every year pressing forward towards 2030 gives member states an occasion to participate in the Voluntary National Review processes. The last one was held in 2016 wherein 22 nations participated [4]. The one coming up in 2017 will include participation from 40 nations

amongst which India will also be one [5]. Goals 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 14 will be the central focus of this meeting. The outcome of this meeting is worth looking forward to, as it will work to reflect each of these member states' commitment, their challenges and their response mechanisms in working towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals within their local societies.

**Sustainable Development Goal 5.3:** Sustainable Development Goal 5 focuses on Gender Equality and empowerment of all girls and women. Rights of women and girls have always been an important component in the development of a society in all spheres. Where women are educated and empowered they tend to contribute positively towards the social, political and economic growth of their nations. However, it is a well known fact that though this ideal goal is imperative to achieve, the ground realities are very different and women are unable to display their potentials on account of regressive social norms, lack of education and a thorough ignorance that exists in certain societies. Women over a period have gotten accustomed to these social norms and wish to only further them rather than unleashing from them. Governments and civil society groups in many countries have worked very hard over a period of time to be able to empower women by making them aware of their rights and uplifting their status. Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 is one that focuses primarily on ending all forms of harmful practices such as early, child and forced marriages as well as genital mutilation [6]. It very specifically lays out the ending of child marriages. South Asia is the forerunner in child marriages in the world accounting for the highest in the world [7]. India is also one of the major countries within this region who account for this practise in prevalence. Child marriage is also a major contributor for new born deaths besides also being used as a means for trafficking [8]. The National Policy for Children 2013 [9] highlights as one

of its objectives while recognizing that *“A long term, sustainable, multi-sectoral, integrated and inclusive approach is necessary for the overall and harmonious development and protection of children.[10]”* With the best interest of the child as its guiding star the Policy aims at the active involvement of all stakeholders to promote the overall and harmonious development of children in India. The word sustainable is praiseworthy as it is a key component for aiming towards this development and in-line with the commitments of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Draft National Plan of Action for Children 2016 with its theme as *“Putting the Last Child First”* is an improvement over the National Plan of Action for Children 2005. This is another piece of policy document which specifically targets at various issues relating to children including the exploitative vulnerabilities they are exposed to. There are 12 broad priority areas laid out within the NPAC 2016 [11]. One of the priority areas focuses on complete abolition of child marriages and on the development of the girl child. Some of the key programmes and schemes of the Government have also been linked to the priorities laid out under the NPAC 2016. This is again in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 as well as an effective linkage between the policy and actionable steps that can be taken with the aid of the government schemes and programmes. This policy however is currently only at its Draft stage and it is hoped that it will soon be finalised for the purpose of effective implementation by the respective State Governments with assistance from civil society groups and other stakeholders.

#### **Sangareddy District:**

#### **Implementation, Experiences and Challenges:**

Sangareddy is a district located in the northern part of Telangana state having a population of nearly 11,86,280 people. It has 43,878 adolescent girls currently living in the district [12]. There are many child marriages that still continue to take place in this district despite the great number of awareness programs. The officials have been able to stop 54 marriages so far in the year 2016 [13]. However, there were still more cases coming in. The district Women and Child Welfare Department adopted the practise of taking consent letters from parents and the girl child as soon as the marriage was stopped so that they would not engage in this practise again and would first educate the girl till she turns 18 years old. However, there have been many people too who have broken these promises and taken the girl to a far off temple away from Sangareddy district and got the girl married. It was however noticed that the department was unable to provide a definite number of prosecutions that were underway against these parents who broke or violated these consents. Conversations with some of the officials revealed that

they were only partially aware of provisions under law. In some of these cases the district officials have been extremely proactive and taken these to-be-brides or even married girls to shelter homes as there was a great apprehension against the parents on repetition of them getting the girl married or against the husband and in-laws for violence within the domestic household for girls already married. However, it is worth noticing and taking into account that there are very few cases of the latter. This means thereby that many girls are suffering within the marriages but cannot and do not opt to come and speak. They are not aware of the laws in most cases and even if they know of them, they are incarcerated within an extremely well fortified patriarchal society that it is felt almost impossible to move out and speak up for themselves. Sangareddy district officials have planned a two months Action Plan to work on the issue of Child marriage in a much more fortified way by organising sensitization programmes, awareness programmes, orientation programmes for all stakeholders involved and use alternate means too for spreading awareness, for example by putting up hoardings at all bus stands in the district, Kalajatha and IEC [14]. A word with the Child Welfare Officer and District Child Protection Officer however revealed that these marriages are much more prominent in Tribal areas within the district. They also revealed that most marriages take place under the parent's fear that the girl may choose a boy of her choice and may run away with him. Besides this fear, poverty was a great contributor to this issue too from which emerged various issues like dowry etc. which propelled these marriages to take place. Most families that engaged in this practise were from Below Poverty Line. Interviews with 5 rescued girls also revealed the same. One of them wanted to continue studying but was married to a man because of conditions of poverty within the family. Officials also added that it is extremely challenging for them to revolutionise the thought processes of many of these communities. Although there has been a decrease in the number of cases of child marriages over the years but they feel that a lot has to be done still to eliminate this practise.

**Recommendations:** The empirical research conducted was very fruitful and engaging as it revealed different aspects of the problems. Some of the key things that are felt needed to be worked upon include the awareness of the SDGs within the district officials. They're implementing plans but they will not be able to concretise goals until and unless they're made aware of the goals set at a global level. Awareness of penalties and punishments within the Act in all the district officials as well as timely initiations of prosecutions against the people concerned engaging in child marriages must be

ensured. The rescue homes for girls also need to be better maintained and managed. Anganwadi centres serve as a good example for maintenance of rescue centres too.

**Conclusion:** Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 is a strong proof of the commitment to end child marriage and well structured efforts towards 2030 can certainly help in eliminating this human rights violation. India is certainly moving in this direction too. For India the High Level Political Forum every year can serve as a milestone towards making great improvements in all areas and help becoming the forerunner in ensuring that the motto of the

Sustainable Development Goals i.e. “Leave no one behind” is achieved.

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