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ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL ACTION MODELS FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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Abstract

This paper advocates for social justice and equality for children to protect them against all forms of abuse, specifically child marriage. It recommends advocacy and social action models to bring about structured change in the system, policy, and legislation to safeguard children's rights globally. Legal and systematic advocacy is emphasised as the most effective way to protect vulnerable children, implement new bills, and enact new ones. The Social Action Model complements legal advocacy by empowering victims and the public through awareness, information, and mobilisation. Efforts need to be made to expose perpetrators of child marriage and abuse and hold them accountable.

Keywords: Child marriage, abuse, advocacy, social action

Introduction

This paper highlights the influential models of advocacy and social action. Herein, it demonstrates the process that will enhance the implementation of bills that protect children's rights and initiate processes to enact new bills to protect children, who are the most vulnerable and voiceless people in our world. It also calls on the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to engage with governments that are signatories to the 1989 and 2003 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF Child's Rights Act to make sure the rights of children are protected through the implementation of extant laws.

Included in this submission is a background and overview of the cultural, religious, social, political, economic, gender inequality and ideological factors that contribute to the high rate of child marriage globally and the consequences.

The key recommendations are legal and systematic models of advocacy complemented by direct physical engagement and mobilisation. These Advocacy and Social Action models allow victims, the vulnerable and the public to have a voice and participate in the process of a structured social change. Moreover, with your organisation lobbying and engaging with the governments to implement existing laws and enact new ones to protect children, child marriage will be drastically reduced and eradicated in the foreseeable future. This will also enable legislative and policy change. As a result, children across the globe will be safe in their families and society and will be able to access education and skills that will empower them to overcome poverty, which is one of the driving factors of child marriage. This will also create societal awareness to address the underlying ideologies reinforcing child marriage, make the world a safer place for children, and, as such, provide an enabling environment for our children and youngsters to attain or accomplish their potential in life.



Background and Overview

There is consistent evidence that most victims of human rights violations are vulnerable. Factors such as sociocultural, economic, gender inequality, and poverty make women and children the most vulnerable in our society. Askola (2018) sums up the view by stating that victims of forced / child marriages are the most vulnerable. Relating to this is the definition of child marriage in Walker's words: "child marriage is a harmful traditional and cultural practice, it is a human rights violation, a public health challenge of our time, and a human security issue associated with disease burden, infant, child and maternal mortality, and extreme poverty" (2015,p.52). This definition affirms the fact that child marriage is deeply rooted in cultural and religious ideologies that are enormously strengthened and maintained (Saunders,2019). Shawki (2015) supports this idea by noting that child marriage is primarily rooted in social norms.

This submission is submitted to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). This is because they emphasise and continuously advocate for the rights and protection of children. They have used legal advocacy and the Elitist social action model to push for legislative change, but there has been a delay in passing the bill and inactive implementation. In the years 1989 and 2003, many nations jointly signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the UNICEF Child's Rights Act (Soylu et al.,2014). This is aimed at protecting the rights of children against any form of abuse. The United Nations Charter also sets 18 years as the legal age for a child to consent to issues, including marriage (Walker,2012).

Contrary to expectations, 43 per cent of Nigerian girls marry before 18 (Amodu et al., 2017). Since January 2017, the Australian Police has investigated 171 cases of child marriages (Huesch,2019). In countries like Ethiopia, girls are abducted and married to their abductors. In Ghana, traditional priests marry underage girls to appease the gods of their land. Girls are married to pay off debts in Cameroon (Migiro, 2014). Globally, records show that 36 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18 (Soylu et al., 2014). The victims of child marriage are mostly poor rural girls (and boys). Most of the evidence indicates that child marriage has been a cultural and religious practice throughout the history of humanity (Amodu et al., 2017). In line with predictions, consequences of child marriage include sexual and physical abuse, domestic violence, false imprisonment, economic dependence, social isolation, early/forced pregnancies and childbearing, poverty, lack of skill and education, sexually transmitted diseases, obstetric fistula and so on (Askola, 2018; Kljun, 2012; Amodu et al.,2017).

Numerous studies have been conducted, and the results show that the cost of not doing anything about child marriage will mean that more girls will be forced into child marriage before turning 18 years old. In addition, more girls will be disempowered, abused, and remain in poverty. Moreover, it means that in economically disadvantaged continents like Africa, 1 out of 3 children will marry before the age of 15 and 1 out of 9 girls will marry as a child. Furthermore, by 2050, Africa's number of victims of child marriage will be double that of South Asia number (Karibe,2016). Therefore, there is a need to consider other advocacy and social action models to achieve better results.

Comparative analysis and evaluation of two potential models of advocacy

To explain the origin of the word 'advocacy', Almong-Bar & Schmid (2013) speak of the root word 'ad *vocare*' as assisting someone. This assertion informs their definition of

advocacy as supporting, encouraging, assisting or the move to implore on behalf of someone. This could be for or against an ideology, practice, policy, or legislation, especially when they deprive one of basic human rights and protections.

Legal Advocacy

Most of the evidence in child marriage indicates that 'legal advocacy' is an effective advocacy model to be used in protecting the rights of children against sexual abuse under the guise of marriage. According to Wilks (2012), this advocacy efficiently battles human rights abuses. It will help affected children and their families to seek justice against cultural and religious ideologies that enhance gender inequality.

The strength of legal advocacy is that it will empower the vulnerable and the oppressed, giving them back their voices to seek redress (Jones, 2015). This means that families that give their children away in marriages and individuals who abuse children under the guise of marriage will be held responsible. This will deter families and individuals from perpetuating this practice of child abuse. Legal advocacy could also contribute to or lead to a push for legislative change.

According to Wilks (2012), the weakness of legal advocacy is that it is not practical in addressing community or collective issues but individuals. Child marriage is a cultural, economic, and religious issue. Hence, it is a community and societal issue (Walker, 2015). Another weakness of this advocacy is that the victims are minors who may not have access to information or are empowered to seek redress through the legal system. They still depend on their immediate families and society for survival and protection. Nevertheless, on the contrary, in many cases, shame, silence, powerlessness (lack of willpower) or being afraid of reporting family members (and/or adults) who are perpetrators defies the effects of legal advocacy.

Systematic (cause) advocacy

There is consistent evidence that some countries' constitutional laws still need to recognise and uphold the universal legal age of 18 years as the age of giving consent. Religious and cultural ideologies inform these constitutions. So far, Systematic advocacy seems to be most effective in fighting child marriage.

Systematic advocacy is a unified effort for systematic policy, practice, and legislation change. It is worth noting that individual cases (case advocacy) inform this unified effort for structured policy and legislative change. The effective tactics of using systematic advocacy in the fight against child marriage are through digital advocacy that informs and educates the people on the consequences of child marriage and calls on the government to protect children.

The strength of systematic advocacy in fighting child marriage is that resources will be efficiently used to draw public attention to the issue. This effort will result in change in individual (cases) and wider social structures. The weakness of systematic advocacy is that it takes a long process. It is also very challenging to reconcile the ideas of different groups of people for a common goal (Wilks, 2012). Moreover, sometimes, organisations campaigning for policy change build diplomatic ties and relationships with policymakers. (Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013).

Comparative Analysis and Evaluation of the Two Potential Models of Social Action

According to Cherian and Thomas (2018), social action aims to push for social justice and equality, address needs, and proffer solutions to issues. The direct physical model of social action should be considered in the fight against child marriage. It must be acknowledged that some international and local laws and bills have been passed to protect children against child marriage, but there have been inadequate implementations of these laws. These laws have not protected children. Hence, Antony and Kaushilk (2010) imply that the elites, organisations, and agencies working with children must run campaigns, rallies, protests, sit-ins, and marches, calling on governments to implement the bills and laws. These actions will see that perpetrators of child marriage are held responsible for these unbecoming actions and ought to face the legal consequences, as well.

The strength of this social action is that - there will be pressure in the system that will produce a systematic change in the social structure. Mendes, Allen-Kelly, Charikar, and Incerti (2015) support this view by arguing that this social action will gain public and media attention, educate the masses, and ultimately result in political pressure that will bring desired change. The weakness is that the public will not determine the goal or the process. The elites will determine the goal and outcome according to their values and standards, but this will not fully represent the views of the vulnerable in society (Antony & Kaushilk, 2010). Mendes et al. (2015) affirm this assertion by saying that organisations and agencies will have different motivations and agendas that will hinder a comprehensive joint grid, resulting in limited achievement.

In line with prediction, the direct mobilisation model or popular social action is another social action model that will effectively fight child marriage. According to Antony & Kaushilk (2010), this social action model will address issues like child marriage through mass mobilisation and protest by the masses by underscoring the concerns of the victims and the public. Public sectors may also go on strike for social justice, fairness, and protection of children. This model will help organisations and the elites address the populace's grievances and provide solutions by evaluating the issues, mobilising the masses and drafting policies.

Mendes et al. (2015) opine that this social action model takes advantage of the political process and digital technology to create massive awareness; an effect of this is international political and economic pressure on the government for social change. This has been seen in cases where social media platforms create awareness and inform the international communities of the issue of child marriage. This also often leads to international outcry that forces governments to take positive actions to redeem their image and maintain diplomatic ties. Centre for Community Health and Development (n.d) supports this view by saying it will empower the vulnerable, give voice to the voiceless and lead to long-term positive social change to unify the communities.

Mendes et al. (2015) pointed out that the weakness of this social action model is that victims may feel stigmatised, disempowered, and stressed to be actively involved in the activities. This is because the victims and perpetrators feel guilty and disempowered to fight any family member, and where the perpetrators feel they have cultural and religious obligations to enforce and maintain the ideologies. Centre for Community Health and Development (n.d) also argued that the weakness of this model is in the lack of adequate resources or capacity to mobilise large groups enough to wield any impressive power. It also means that poverty is one of the driving factors of child marriage. The vulnerable are

primarily people with low incomes and victims of child marriage. As one would quickly think, they (victims of child marriage) are not economically empowered to engage and fight the ills in society that may guarantee or catalyse immediate positive achievement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The aim of this submission is for social justice and equality for children to protect them from all abuses, especially sexual abuse, under the guise of child marriage. It addresses the systems of inequality and oppression by recommending advocacy and social action models for social and structured change in the system, policy, and legislation that will protect the rights of children globally against abuses and violations.

As a way of conclusion and recommendations, this submission underscores that legal and systematic (cause) advocacy will effectively protect the rights of these vulnerable children in our society.

Most of the pieces of evidence indicate that these models will enable your organisation to mutually engage with the legal system to protect children against abuses and consequences of child marriage. These will provide a process of implementing the bills and enacting new ones. The objectives are to empower children and their families, give voice to the voiceless, and protect the vulnerable through a collaborative systematic approach that will lead to social change.

The direct physical and direct mobilisation Social Action Models are recommended to strengthen this process because they complement legal and systematic advocacy by empowering victims and the public through awareness, information, and mobilisation. In addition, empowerment gives power and voice to the vulnerable, thus allowing the voices of the vulnerable and children to be heard and listened to. The issue of child marriage can be minimised and subsequently eradicated with your support by working with governments to implement the bills on the rights of children that they are signatories to.

Furthermore, concerted efforts need to be made by all to expose the perpetrators of child marriage in different societies/locations. All need to eschew a culture of silence and indifference to the plight of these helpless children and, as such, try all available means to make the perpetrators of child marriage and or abuse against (minors) face the law.

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