

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN CURBING GIRL MARRIAGES: A FAMSA CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Girl marriage is a global problem and prominent in certain parts of the world, including Latin America, Central Asia, South Asia and Africa (Jongizulu, 2012:5; Mutyaba, 2011:340; Svanemyr, Chandra-Mouli, Raj, Travers & Sundaram, 2015:2, Yaya, Odusina & Bishwajit, 2019:8). In South Africa girl marriage is prevalent in the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape (Department of Social Development, 2015; Byrne, 2017). In 2016 4 664 girls in the age group of 12 to 17 were in a marriage relationship either legally, or in terms of custom or religion, in the Eastern Cape in the districts of OR Tambo, Amathole and Buffalo, and 3 928 in Gauteng, City of Tshwane District (Statistics SA, 2016).

In societies where girl marriage is prevalent, a girl is considered ready for marriage when she reaches puberty and in these countries an estimated 47 700 girls are married every day at the age of 17 or younger (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2016:32). Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that “every marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties” (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2008:16). As defined by UNICEF (2015:12), “Child marriage includes any legal or customary union involving a boy or a girl below the age of eighteen, or any marriage without the free and full consent of both intended spouses”. In a customary context, Maphanga (2011:33) defines traditional child marriage as a practice involving a union of a young girl married to an older man. In South Africa a child is defined as a person under the age of 18 (Children’s Act 38 of 2005:12, Republic of South Africa, 1996). This means that even if a girl has given consent, the definition of forced marriage still applies as a person under the age of 18 cannot give free and full consent. Girl marriage is a practice that fortifies gender inequality problems, leading to school dropout and affecting her decision-making capacities and human development (Jongizulu, 2012:5).

Girl marriage is recognised as a harmful practice in the *2030 Sustainable Development Agenda* (United Nations, 2015). Goal number 5, in particular, focuses on achieving gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, with specific emphasis on ending harmful practices, such as girl marriages (United Nations, 2015:22). This global problem is also prioritised by the African Union in the *Agenda 2063 for the Africa we want*, which emphasises that by 2063 Africa is expected to be a people-centred continent that puts children first and has full gender equality (African Union [AU], 2015a:8). South Africa is devoted to honouring international commitments that seek to ensure gender equality and girl empowerment (Jongizulu, 2012:9).

In South Africa, protecting children from violence, exploitation and abuse is not only a basic value, but also an obligation clearly set out in the Bill of Rights as enshrined in the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). As frontline workers in rendering social services to families and children, social workers have a key role to play in curbing and preventing girl marriages by protecting the rights of vulnerable populations, including girls (Becket, 2007:37; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2014:16), and challenging the structural injustices associated with risks in the field of girl marriages.

This paper reports on a case study of Families and Marriage Society of South Africa (FAMSA) (Salim, 2019) that explored and described the role of social workers in curbing girl marriages. FAMSA is a registered non-governmental organisation (NGO) which endeavours to promote social justice for those who are vulnerable. FAMSA social workers are given specialised training to support communities, offering programmes on themes such as youth mentorship, marriage preparation and enrichment, and domestic and gender-based violence (Families and Marriages Society of South Africa (FAMSA), 2018). The paper draws on the structural approach as theoretical framework to present four themes that emerged from the study: the reasons for girl marriage, the implications of girl marriage, the interventions and roles of social workers in curbing girl marriages, and the barriers to curbing girl marriage. The conclusion reflects on the findings of the study and on the way forward.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative, applied study had exploratory and descriptive research goals. Girl marriage is a persistent and hidden phenomenon which the study explored and analysed to describe its actual meaning (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321). A descriptive case study design (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321) was used to depict, analyse and understand the phenomenon of girl marriage and social workers' role at FAMSA in curbing this practice.

The study population was FAMSA social workers based in the Eastern Cape in the offices of East London, Mthatha and Stutterheim, and the Pretoria office in Gauteng. The sample included twelve social workers who were purposively selected based on all or most of the following criteria: having at least two years' experience in social work, working experience in poor communities and in an area where early marriage is prevalent, and having an understanding of the practice of early marriage involving aspects such as culture, religion and protection. The employment experience of participants as social workers ranged between 2 and 23 years, with an average of 5 years. The average experience of participants working with girl marriages was 4.6 years. To protect the identity of the participants, reference is made to the participants as P, followed by their pseudo number (e.g. P1).

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Fouché, 2015:112) and analysed thematically (Creswell, 2014:261). The trustworthiness and credibility of the findings were ensured through peer debriefing, confirmability and reflexivity (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:419; Creswell, 2014:201-202; Probst, 2015:46). The study was ethically cleared by the University of Pretoria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the structural approach, which connects distinctive obstructions to societal injustices with the dual purpose of lessening the harmful outcomes and to promote social change for isolated individuals such as girls who are susceptible to early marriage (George & Marlowe, 2005:7). It challenges the dominant, social and economic structures of patriarchal norms, imperialism, discrimination and ageism (Hicks & Murray, 2009:86). George and Marlowe (2005:7) state that the fundamental recognition of structural social work lies in the numerous and overlapping methods of oppression that transpire at cultural, personal and structural levels, with each level implying oppression of the others.

The structural approach emphasises that change is dynamic and that old forms are replaced by new forms, while conserving some older, sustainable elements (Hicks & Murray, 2009:89). In curbing girl marriages, social workers should confront the broader social, economic and cultural contexts within which girl marriage is prevalent and mobilise the role players, including girls who are at risk, to challenge the causes of girl marriage collectively to promote social justice.

The main concern of girl marriage is the fact that girls end up in their new homes with more responsibilities, without much authority or decision-making powers, resulting in isolation from their peer groups (UNICEF, 2008:46). Girls are vulnerable to domestic violence resulting from their lack of

involvement in decision making because of their immaturity and lower socio-economic level (Yaya et al., 2019:2). They are disempowered and do not take action and are unaware of the injustices done to them, as they accept the conditions in their circumstances. Empowerment through social change, as a principle of the structural social work approach, contributes to a positive client self-image by normalising fears and reactions, thus validating strengths to participate in decision making (Hicks & Murray, 2009:95). Social workers' contribution towards the empowerment of girls will lessen their future vulnerabilities, and thus result in empowerment of women, which will in turn strengthen families and contribute to sustainable communities.

REASONS FOR GIRL MARRIAGE

Reasons for girl marriage are embedded in self- and peer-pressure, patriarchal culture, religion and poverty.

Self- and peer pressure

Girls' attitudes and beliefs put them in a situation where they are exposed to the notion that growing up in a family or community where there is a history of intergenerational early marriages automatically puts them in a position where they expect to be married once they reach puberty.

... sometimes the child might feel, you know what, I am doing this for my family, so I need to do this thing you know. Those [ah umm] values and beliefs that people feel now, this is what our family is standing for. Participant 9)

The self-pressure does not necessarily come from parents' expectations. On the contrary, parents could be against such a marriage, as they would think it is not good for the girl to marry so young, or that the spouse is not suitable for the girl in view of the age difference. It is thus rather a case of girl children who overpower their parents by taking control over the decision, as opposed to waiting for parents to decide on what is inevitable for them. Furthermore, they do not always seek permission from the parents, as stated by P7:

So at this point in time, not parents are forcing this girl. This girl is getting to this relationship but the parents can see the dangers, you know, of this marriage because they could see the age difference. They could see that this person does not carry good values according to them and then this girl is still a child, you know ... the children deciding at an early age of 14 ... now the kids are controlling the parents ...hence I am saying that there is this lack of ... good parenting. (Participant 7)

Research confirming girls' self-pressure is limited to a study on the causes of girl marriage in Zimbabwe by Dzimiri, Chikunda and Ingwani (2017:75), stating that lack of parental supervision leads to girl marriages. However, pressure on girls to marry can also come directly or indirectly from peers. Peers show them goods that their spouses bought for them, which encourages them to marry at an early stage in the hope of attaining a better lifestyle, like their friends. In terms of indirect peer pressure, the girls are watching from a distance how their peers benefit from their marriages and they end up motivating themselves that if they get that kind of opportunity, it will put them in the same position as their peers. Mashayamombe (2016:3) corroborates that the girls influence one another and puts them under pressure to marry at an early age in order to experiment with marital life and benefit economically from their husbands. However, a girl under the age of 18 is a child, according to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, and a decision either through self- or peer pressure can still not be regarded as "free and full consent" (UNICEF, 2015:12), nor change the fact that it is a child marriage which is a harmful practice ((United Nations, 2015).

Culture and religion

Girls end up in marriage because of cultural values and societal gender stereotypes. Culture and religion are both powerful reasons for child marriage (African Union (AU), 2015b:10). The indigenous causes of girl marriage, 'Ukuthwala', 'Wrestling', 'Telefa' and 'Trokosi' have been, and are still,

customs contributing to the propagation of early marriage (Jongizulu, 2012:31; Haaland, 2017:15; Nahamya, 2017:116).

The practice of 'Wrestling' has been identified in Uganda in the Karamoja region as a custom that determines which girls will be the new brides and results in the entrapment and abduction of girls, ensuing in early marriage; and commonly, the 'Telefa' is mostly performed in Ethiopia, whereby a male secretly abducts and rapes a girl as young as 13 years to impregnate her in order to claim paternity of the unborn child, which then forces her to be trapped into marriage (AU, 2015b:11). The practice of 'Trokosi' is observed in countries such as Ghana, Benin and Togo and entails sending a virgin girl to a shrine as penitence for an actual or suspected crime committed by a male family member (AU, 2015b:11; Howusu, 2015:10). These girls are deemed to be the spouses of the deity (Howusu, 2015:35). 'Ukuthwala' is a custom that is common in South Africa, through which the girl is coerced into marriage without consent (Jongizulu, 2012:31). 'Ukuthwala' is mostly practised in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces (Wadesango, Rembe & Chabaya, 2011:123) as the study has confirmed. Hence situations occur where nothing is done when a girl had been abducted for marriage, because submissiveness to the tradition of girl marriage is believed to be a norm in the community.

There are lots of causes, one: there are cultural, yes ... you may call it abduction, but to conceptualise the term into our language, we call it 'Ukuthwalwa' yes. I believe most people in our region they still believe in that culture of Ukuthwala, yes. (Participant 5)

The findings resonate with a study by Mafhala (2015:14), who explains that in some traditional societies, for example Lusikisiki in the Eastern Cape province, the significance of marriage is instilled in the girl because she is socialised to regard it as a norm. Girls marry according to social expectations as they fear that upon reaching maturity without marriage, their chances of being married will be less, resulting in no marriage at all (AU, 2015b:10). In some communities girls are viewed as having little significance outside their roles as wives, whereas boys are given preference, because of the assurance that they will look after their parents (Delprato, Akyeampong & Dunne, 2017:174). This is evidently a fundamental socialisation of gender inequality.

Patriarchy is enmeshed in gender stereotypes. Autocratic fathers overrule their wives and girls in decision making and force girls into marrying the spouses of their choice. They often disguise this autocratic decision by claiming that they protect the girls' virginity when she enters puberty. Furthermore, his decision is often swayed by the girl's potential spouse:

... because what is in their [parents] head is that this child is 16 years old now breast yakhe [her] is fit she is still a virgin now she needs [to] go there [get married] ... The father is stubborn he has taken [the] decision ... and he feels that at this point in time this child needs to go for marriage.... (Participant 7)

We as women in our culture we don't have a say if the man agrees ... to take the child ... your girl child and ... exchange for a cow because I will call it an exchange, exchange for the cows or the money, they [fathers] think it's enough. (Participant 10)

It's either their [girls'] parents or the guy who is interested in marrying the girl. (Participant 3)

A study by Oxfam in South Sudan revealed that women and girls often feel powerless and isolated when faced with girl marriage owing to the father's autocratic power in decision making about a girl's marriage (Oxfam, 2019:20-23).

Values that uphold family dignity are also related to religion, as girls would submit to marriage, because some churches do not allow members to date before marriage, as this is regarded as immorality that can result in teenage pregnancy.

Religion, yes like sometimes in a Christian religion, children are not allowed to date..., they advise them to get married to avoid sexual intercourse before marriage. (Participant 2)

A similar finding derived from the study on the ‘Indaba about the girl’s voices on child marriage in Zimbabwe’, indicating that girls cannot go against their religious beliefs as they fear being ousted from the sect (Mashayamombe, 2016:2). This study’s findings concur with a study in the Eastern Cape by Jongizulu (2012:22) that the parents believe that family honour is increased when a girl is married while she is still a virgin. The amount of lobola (bride price and various kinds of gifts) will be higher.

Poverty

Poverty, which is coupled with economic insecurities, motivates and exacerbates the occurrence of girl marriages (Kyari & Ayodele, 2014:582; AU, 2015b:7; Kitson, 2016:726). In regions such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, families are driven by poverty to give their daughters in marriage as a strategy to alleviate their poverty, hoping that the family’s honour will be secured (UNICEF, 2008:32). The bride wealth that parents receive when a girl gets married “can help her family materially and socially” (Schaffnit, Urassa & Lawson, 2019:99). These findings were confirmed by this study:

Poverty, I think it’s the most prevailing issue of child marriages ... you can see that in the family you come from a family that’s poor and there comes a rich family and approaches your family and promises the family, ... they will see themselves better than the way before, so this is what will lead the ... child to end [up] marrying to the certain family not willingly. I don’t think it’s ... a choice, the circumstances are forcing our girls to indulge into this system. (Participant 8)

Parents, especially fathers, often accept goods from the potential spouse without the knowledge of other family members and then at a later stage agree to allow that marriage. Potential spouses would buy material goods for the girls’ families to soften their attitudes and hence uses his money to lure the family or the girl to agree on getting married to him. The parents’ or girl’s agreement to allow such a marriage is based on the assumption that she will be taken care of by the husband, especially as he is usually older than the girl.

... and then on the sides without even involving an entire family the father has accepted money from this man, you know. (Participant 7)

...the person who is marrying the girl is buying the girl, is doing good things for the family.... (Participant 1)

Delprato et al. (2017:179) point out that parents allow girl marriage to safeguard the girl’s future after accepting goods from the potential spouse. However, although vulnerable girls sometimes perceive marriage as a way out of their circumstances, such as poverty, their spouses are often relatively underprivileged (AU, 2015b:22), which leads to further entrapment in sustained poverty, confirming that poverty is both a cause and consequence of girl marriage. These girls will have children who will grow up in the same environments, with a high probability of also marrying at an early age, thus forming a vicious cycle, which becomes a “disorganisation of a social environment” (Hicks & Murray, 2009:91).

IMPLICATIONS OF GIRL MARRIAGE

The outcomes of girl marriages constrain girls’ human capital acquisition and results in premature motherhood, leading to an intergenerational cycle of poverty (Sekri & Debnath 2014:1670). Similar findings emerged from this study, revealing school dropout, early motherhood, health issues and continuing poverty as structural barriers to the girls’ human development and a better future. Furthermore, gender inequalities make girls more vulnerable to husbands’ bullying behaviour, leaving them angry, finding an escape in substance abuse and exposed to mental health challenges.

School dropout and constrained human capital

Lack of education is both a risk and consequence of girl marriage (McCleary-Sills, Hammer, Parsons & Klugman, 2015:71), limiting opportunities to learn and acquire skills that would enable girls to find sustainable employment (McCleary-Sills, *et al.*, 2015:71). Findings in this study show how the lack of education limits girls' opportunities to find employment of their choice. Others, upon fleeing from their marriages, opt for low-paying jobs like that of a domestic worker to get a basic salary for survival.

...they will drop out of school nè [you know] and then others when they got married, if maybe she was planning to go to further their education, they are not allowed because they have to take care of the home ... they have to be parents so they miss the opportunity, like, most of them miss the opportunity to further their education, they end up being housewives. (Participant 2)

A girl now she is 24 she got married at 16 in the Transkei area but now she is working ... as a domestic worker, you know, but in an old-age home set up. (Participant 7)

Early school dropout limits the girl's chances to establish social relations, resulting in lowered social status and constrained success (Ame, 2013:155). As Patel (2015:24) asserts, the advancement of human capital is fundamental in broadening people's choices and prospects to live the kind of life that they choose to live for themselves. Education is the key to empowerment of females, their strategic development and financial security (McCleary-Sills *et al.*, 2015:71). The long-term continuation of girl marriage is disadvantageous (AU, 2015b:24), as it can affect the next generation negatively, with consequences resulting in denial of schooling, as illiterate young mothers are particularly likely to have children who will also discontinue their schooling.

Health and mental health risks

The girl brides lack the autonomy to refuse sexual intercourse or suggest contraceptive use in marriage, and are subjected to increased health risks such as sexually transmitted diseases (Sibanda, 2011:13). This study found that girls are at risk of poor health relating to sexually transmitted infections and being infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) owing to lack of prior knowledge about their spouse's health condition.

... you are forced to marry someone and you don't even know where this person is coming from ... So the chances of you getting infected with some diseases is very high, you see. We are facing so much people complaining about being HIV+ two three months down in a relationship. (Participant 8)

Early motherhood is another major health risk for young girls as they could experience complications in pregnancy and short birth spacing (Delprato *et al.*, 2017:174). During their community outreach at local clinics, participants found that the girls did not cope with the pressures of marriage and being mothers. They not only face a higher risk of maternal illness and mortality (Psaki, 2015:6), but also greater recurrence of neonatal mortality, the primary causes of which are low birth weight and undernourishment, which are reinforced by parental illiteracy, poverty and denied participation in decision making and child health services (Kitson, 2016:722).

Regardless of reproductive health in general, Mtshali (2014:57) notes that when girls become pregnant too early, they give birth before they are psychologically ready for motherhood, culminating in psychological consequences such as depression and suicide. Although very little is known about the correlation between child marriage and suicide (AU, 2015b:31), Gage (2013:654) came to a similar conclusion in Ethiopia on the link between early marriage and increased probabilities of suicidal thoughts in girls aged 10 to 17 years. The findings of a study by Le Strat, Dubertret and Le Foll (2011:527) in the USA affirm that early marriage results in women having mental health problems. The wellbeing of girls is further affected when they marry into families as second or third wives, where they face competition, related pressures and stress at a very young age (Rembe, Chabaya, Wadesango &

Muhuro, 2011:68). Girl marriage is regarded as premature marriage, because it inhibits personal and psychological advancement and has risky health consequences (Ame, 2013:156).

... our children end up frustrated and committing suicide because of this [marriage].
(Participant 10)

Furthermore, early motherhood can restrain the educational and employment prospects of young girls and is likely to have enduring harsh effects on the quality of their lives and the lives of their offspring ((United Nations, 2007:29), which continues the cycle of poverty.

Continued poverty cycle

The propagation of girl marriage weakens global and national development agendas (Kyari & Ayodele, 2014:582), such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ((United Nations, 2015:22) and the 2030 National Development Plan (Republic of South Africa, 2012:14), which were developed to prioritise the fight against poverty. Parents do not realise that their belief to marry off girls for financial protection leads to ongoing vulnerability, as they can still experience poverty after marriage. The intergenerational occurrence of poverty was identified as a dynamic negative result that girls still experience during their married lives.

... then it means we have sort of more girls who are not going to be educated, more girls who are forced into marriage, more girls not empowered. Then it's just poverty again, sort of a poverty cycle, no empowerment, no education, yeah(Participant 4)

...they get children after they get married after [that] those guys leave them here and after that they are subject to the same poverty that they were trying to evade.... (Participant 6)

The poverty cycle, it just continues.... (Participant 9)

The AU (2015b:24) confirms that the long-term continuation of girl marriage can affect the next generation negatively, as the young mothers are particularly likely to have children who will also discontinue their schooling, marry at an early age and repeat the cycle of poverty.

Bullying and negative coping mechanisms

Several factors contribute to the bullying behaviour of husbands toward their girl wives, including jealousy, the age gap, the expected submissive role of the wife and gender-based violence. This behaviour triggers passive anger in girl wives which eventually culminates in negative coping mechanisms such as infidelity, divorce and substance abuse. In most cases the girl wife feels as if the husband is 'parenting' her, as his age is almost the same as that of her father. Some girl wives tend to be bullied by the husband to the extent that they are isolated from associating with other people (especially peers).

... the husband[s] they are jealous, they don't want them to associate with other people.
(Participant 3)

... the man is bullying this poor woman, is like he was parenting ... his wife because when they got married she was still young ... the anger is always there in the middle of [the] whole thing ... that has resulted in the gender-based violence.... Because when they are forced to this marriage, they are being oppressed [bullied] by this older man you know, age also is one of the elements. (Participant 7)

"They have to be submissive to those husbands and these in-laws so they are forced to grow up in [an] environment that is not suitable for a brighter future for them. (Participant 11)

The report by UNICEF (2008:46) states that economic dependency and lack of financial resources expose married girls to violence and abuse during their marriage. Girls forced into marriage are more likely to be faced with intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and rape (Sabbe, Temmerman, Brems & Leye, 2014:174). India is said to have the highest rate (67%) of gender-based violence in families

where women had been married by the age of 18 (United Nations Children's Fund & Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2006:4).

Participants pointed out that as anger builds up, the girl wife ends up having affairs outside marriage, with infidelity leading to divorce.

They cheat to each other ... because they are unhappy, the other thing they are divorcing....
(Participant 1)

A study on women who married under the age of 18 showed that 48% of marriages were dissolved within ten years, compared with 24% of marriages of women who were at least 25 years of age at the time of marriage (Schwartz & Scott, 2010:365).

Girl wives resort to drinking alcohol to numb their feelings, especially about sleeping with their husbands, as they would have no sexual desire to sleep with their spouses when sober.

Eh, if I can talk about the implications I will tell you that most of these girls are ending up ... abusing ... substance[s] ... because of this [marriage] (Participant 10)

Although there is inadequate research linking child marriage and alcohol abuse, Gibson's (2015:336) study about 'shame and guilt in child protection social work' confirms that adolescents use alcohol to 'numb' their feelings. However, findings from the study by Kheswa and Noho (2014:2810) clearly confirm that adolescent females who experienced 'Ukuthwala' resort to alcohol in order to cope with negative feelings.

Participants indicated that girl wives' anger not only affects them; they also transfer it to their children.

My main concern of this marriage is, I believe that if we speaking of a girl we are speaking of a woman tomorrow who will be a mother to someone, then if this girl got into marriage while she is still young, ..., she will be abused and she will grow up with that anger and she will possess that anger into her kids. (Participant 5)

Usually, girls who face early or forced marriage "feel miserable and angry all the time" (Oxfam, 2019:16). These findings contradict the belief in some societies that early marriage is seen as a form of security for girls. It rather adds to their vulnerability in terms of physical, psychological and social problems, because they are at high risk of abuse and emotional affliction (Shawki, 2015:58).

INTERVENTION STRATEGIES AND ROLES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN CURBING GIRL MARRIAGE

The developmental approach is embedded in human rights and therefore an appropriate framework for social workers to address the structural injustices through curbing girl marriage. Furthermore, the developmental approach embodies micro and macro practice, participation, partnerships and integrated social and economic development (Patel, 2015) as will be discussed next.

Human rights-based approach

South Africa has ratified various treaties that protect the rights of women and girls, namely the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR). The prohibition on marriage taking place without the free and full consent of both spouses is clearly stated in Article 6 of the ACHPR (2005:8), Article 23 of the ICCPR (1976:12) and Article 10 of the ICESCR (1976:3). Since culture, beliefs and societal norms form part of the fundamental causes leading to girl marriages, it is imperative to emphasise that Article 17 of the ACHPR (2005:16) states that women and girls have a right to live in a progressive cultural setting and to contribute at all levels to influence and develop cultural policies.

Although the Children's Act 38 of 2005 makes provision for the prohibition of marriage of a child below 18 years, it does not state the measures in place to prosecute those who promote such a marriage.

The civil and customary marriage of minors is recognised by law where parental consent is obtained in the Marriage Act 25 of 1961 (Sections 24 and 25) and the Recognition of Customary Marriage Act 120 of 1998, Section 3(a). In addition, sections (28) and (29) of the Constitution are explicit about children's rights, but section 15 unambiguously states that the law "does not prevent legislation recognising marriages concluded under any tradition, or a system of religious, personal or family law" (Republic of South Africa, 1996). These laws are contradictory, as they only specify the age of marriage and parental consent, but give no detailed elucidation on how child marriage should be prevented because it infringes girls' rights to dignity, education, health, protection, freedom of speech and equality. The human rights-based approach presents social workers with a platform to bring girls' personal adversities into the public domain through micro and macro interventions (Reisch, 2016:259).

Micro and macro practice

The study's findings confirm the relevance of micro and macro social work interventions with working with girls, families and the community in curbing girl marriage.

Working with girls and families

Interventions with girls include counselling, teaching life skills and house-to-house campaigns to educate parents about the rights of girls and the negative outcomes of girl marriages.

We at times we go house to house ... educate the girls, young girls that if the parents force them to get married, they must come to the social workers so that social workers can intervene between ... the child and the parents ... we also go an extra mile where we take a one-on-one session with the girls and empower them about their rights. (Participant 10)

Studies confirm the relevance of working with girls and families in preventing girl marriage (cf. International Planned Parenthood (IPPF) & the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2007:30; Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner & Glinski, 2012:293). Interventions in ending girl marriage start with endeavours to assist girls to improve their decision-making capacities through acquiring life skills (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016:6). Through awareness programmes, the duties of parents (families) are reinforced to protect vulnerable girls from the negative effects of child marriage (IPPF & the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2007:28).

The social work role of a counsellor is relevant in micro practice to aid the girls in developing coping skills. The lack of coping skills can give rise to depression and isolation (Healy, 2011:55). Findings indicate that girls in early marriage experience anger, hopelessness, isolation, neglect and stress to cope in the marital relationship.

Sometimes it's individual counselling or other times it is for the marriage ... but otherwise it's just the people they feel they need emotional support and how to really continue with this marriage as they don't want to walk out, because also where are they ... going to? That's also another scary part for the client. (Participant 9)

When the marriage has failed, the girl wife is often unable to return to her parents owing to societal stereotypes and preservation of family honour. Social workers can mediate conflicts between the girl and her family through interventions such as family group conferencing (Patel, 2015:144).

Working with communities

Social workers educate communities about the harmful effects of girl marriage through awareness campaigns, community dialogues and workshops. Channels for these interventions include ward councillors, clinics, churches, radio and schools.

...as social workers we do community dialogues; we do workshops in the communities. (Participant 5)

We have started with the community, the clinics; we have started with some of the churches. (Participant 7)

We do some activities in radio whereby we will be talking about different programmes on teenage parenting. (Participant 8)

Girls Not Brides (2014:4) emphasises the involvement of the local community in changing the attitudes of people regarding the practice of girl marriage. Dialogues with communities and radio presentations are viable ways to end girl marriages (IPPF & the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2007:28; Oxfam, 2019:27) and increase the community's knowledge about the harmful consequences of early marriage (Lee-Rife et al., 2012:293).

Findings reveal the important role that schools play to report cases of girl marriage. Schools identify incidents where girls do not resume their education after certain periods, such as Easter and the festive season, and refer them to social workers. School teachers also call social workers to intervene in situations where some girls have reported a possible marital arrangement by the family.

People who are working far there by in mines at Joburg [Johannesburg] ... they come back ready having money to get married in December. They come back in December so our parents are in need of money ... [the children] don't go to school and you know the teachers know so... So we [we] get referrals so that we can intervene. (Participant 12)

I will be told by the teachers that we got this two girls but coming from two families this one, the daddy, her daddy is forcing her to get married to this man. (Participant 7)

Social workers conduct prevention programmes in schools such as the Education for Living programme to educate learners about life skills and the consequences of teenage pregnancy.

We do Education for Living in the schools where we educate the children on the consequences of being pregnant at a young age, ah just to enlighten them on the outside world from school premises, you know. (Participant 8)

It is evident that support from school teachers can increase retention of girls in schools (IPPF & The Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2007:29) by referring them to social workers to intervene. As Reisch (2016:260) indicates, involvement of organisations (such as FAMSA), societies and groups is aimed at creating purposive social change. It is “on a macro level, [that] social workers represent dedication to social justice and social change by fostering structural solutions to systemic disparities and diverse forms of oppression that go beyond individual adaptation and resilience” (Reisch, 2016:261). In this regard, social workers' advocacy role is critical in the nexus of micro and macro practice to curb girl marriage.

The advocacy role of social workers contextualises the personal challenges of girls in relation to the structural injustices that underpin girl marriage, and hence they advocate for girls to develop agency and influence policy to curb girl marriages.

The social worker can challenge the structural causes by, eh, having programmes such as advice centres and influence policies whereby they review the [the-the] laws ... and by not allowing ... underage girls to get married. (Participant 1)

The social workers are working with these girls and they can see how unhappy they are, so they can get to change that by talking with them, by advocating on behalf of these girls so that it can be prevented ... and engage in topics such as disadvantages of girls getting married at an earlier age. ... girls being proud of being girls ... educate girls that they don't have to rush to get married even if the culture is forcing them to. (Participant 2)

Through advocacy girls can develop agency and gain power and control over their own lives (Patel, 2015:346).

Participation and partnerships

Participation is key to effecting structural change in society through engagement, open social dialogue and holding duty bearers accountable (Patel, 2015:91). In tackling the power structures causing girl

marriages, social workers have to encourage community participation to ensure that the benefits of economic and social development are equably distributed (Green, 2012:158). Direct consultation with girls gives them the opportunity to challenge power structures and influence decisions that affect them directly (Patel, 2015:91).

The services addressing girl marriage should be based on combined responsibility and mutual alliances between the public and private sectors and civil society, training institutions and research institutions (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2013:8). The literature confirms the study's findings on significant partners in curbing girl marriages, namely religious leaders, traditional leaders, courts, schools, health practitioners and civil society (cf. Centre for Human Rights, 2018:63; Girls Not Brides, 2016:5; Mohlakwana, 2013:17).

We are on the planning stage but we have started with the community, the clinics, we have started with some of the churches but ... we want to target also the universities and high schools ... the civil society and government integrated they mustn't stop to intervene you know. The faith-based organisations, integrated you know because not one institution can be able to do this so it needs the ... community leaders ... NGOs and ... government so that we can stop this. (Participant 7)

Broader coordination of services among key stakeholders, including the Department of Social Development, Department of Education, the South African Police Service, Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, Department of Health, Department of Home Affairs, faith-based organisations, civil society and community leaders is required.

If I mention other stakeholders I am talking about departments that [we] are working with, the Department of Home Affairs because you know if these marriage, let's say the girl is 17 years and this husband obviously they have to go to Home Affairs for marriage certificate and you will find out that ... the Department of Home Affairs [they] don't have a problem, they just issue these things, certificates of marriage, yes. And the SAPS, yes, those are the main departments that I feel like they need to [engage] with social workers. (Participant 5)

Partnerships highlight the role of social workers as collaborator, but also as broker. A broker role entails assessment of need, coordination of diverse services and recommendation to a service or facilitating access to resources (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2017:203; Cournoyer, 2014:252; Patel, 2015:144). Findings indicate that girls sometimes require advanced services and resources that FAMSA cannot provide. The resources include the Department of Social Development's intervention in respect of placing the girls in shelters and reporting matters to the police to ensure the protection of girls.

Then we look into referrals to probably shelters that can actually empower her, yes ... We have the Salvation Army which is at Pretoria West if I am not mistaken and a Mercy House, and also Fatima House, I don't know if it's still operational because we used to make some referral there from 12 to 18, the age group, it's at Pretoria North. (Participant 4)

The IPPF and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (2007:29) highlight that the provision of resources such as shelters for girls who escape marriage creates protection to deal with distress situations.

Integrating social and economic development

The harmful practice of girl marriage is entirely embedded in socio-economic and political structures (Maluleke, 2012:12). Girls are over-represented in the proportion of children who do not go to school owing to poverty and cultural norms (Midgley, 2014:93). If girls are educated, they will have more options in finding jobs, which will enable them to break out of the cycle of poverty, with more opportunities for themselves and their children (Levine, Lloyd, Greene & Grown, 2009:19). The connection between achievement of formal educational qualifications and consequent occupation and career success is extensively valued as a result of investment in formal education (Midgley, 2014:92).

A combination of investment strategies in human capital, social capital and asset building are required to integrate social and economic development (Patel, 2015:89). The integration of asset-based strategies involves building financial competencies such as financial literacy and increasing access to financial facilities such as bank accounts, savings and access to borrowing (Patel, 2015:89). Access to these kinds of services can assist families to survive financial shocks that affect their income-earning capacity (Patel, 2015:90). Strong social bonds in communities contribute to an enabling environment for a higher level of economic development in which people can prosper (Midgley, 2014:107; Patel, 2015:90).

BARRIERS TO CURBING GIRL MARRIAGE

Stereotypes and insufficient resources are prominent challenges that social workers face in curbing child marriage.

... being stereotyped ... this society or this community still believes in girl marriage ... as social workers we face challenges of rejection in some communities ... So the same with culture of child marriages you go to the community you try to educate people on that [and] they tell you no nana ..., let me tell you [about] our culture, this is our culture. So if people can be educated, it will be shifted a bit. (Participant 8)

The stereotyping relates to gender inequality where in some communities women and girls are considered to be responsible for marriage and childbirth, while men and boys supply families with finances (cf. Oxfam, 2019:11). The stereotypical views that perpetuate gender inequality for girls (cf. Centre for Human Rights, 2018:25; Jongizulu, 2012:26; Oxfam, 2019:12) emphasise the role of social workers in fighting structural injustices.

Findings in this study corroborate those of other studies that the lack of human resources and infrastructural resources impede effective service delivery (cf. Batti, 2014:57; Budlender & Proudlock, 2011:57; Strydom, Spolander, Engelbrecht & Martin, 2017:156).

... we don't have [a] lot of social workers in the areas ... And I believe that also the resources, we have limited resources in our region ... most of the areas are out there in the rural areas. And you will find that we can't even go there sometimes. And these things [girl marriages] you will find that [they] are mostly happening deep down in the rural areas. For example now, here in this office we have one car ... we are working in a broader area ... there are no resources, we can't even go to the communities. Yes. (Participant 5)

All provinces in South Africa depend on non-profit organisations (NPOs) to provide services, but the subsidies provided by the provincial department to NPOs do not cover the range of services they are expected to deliver (Budlender & Proudlock, 2011:57). Moreover, social welfare services and services to children receive insufficient subsidies (Budlender & Proudlock, 2011:61). The lack of both financial and non-material resources in NGOs hinders social workers from performing their duties to curb girl marriage (Batti, 2014: 57; Strydom *et al.*, 2017:156).

CONCLUSIONS AND WAY FORWARD

The proliferation of girl marriage disrupts the global, regional and national goals to end poverty and inequalities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development emphasises that the fundamental impact of development across all the aspirations and targets of the SDGs can be realised if gender parity and the liberation of girls are prioritised ((United Nations, 2015:10). Policy is required to assist social workers to challenge the structural causes of girl marriage and advocate for girl empowerment and agency.

In accordance with the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and the Convention on the rights of the child (2014:10), the successful prevention and elimination of girl marriages necessitate the formation of a distinct rights-based and all-inclusive policy. Article 1 of the UDHR stipulates that all human beings have a right to dignity, freedom and equality ((United Nations,

1948). The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, section 8(d) emphasises the need to curb unjust prejudice on the basis of gender, taking account of any practice, including conventional or religious methods, that undermines the dignity and wellbeing of the girl.

A rights-based policy should regard girl marriage as invalid even with parental consent. It is imperative to enforce the age limit definition of a child in accordance with the Children's Act 38 of 2005 (Section 12:23) as a point of departure to curb girl marriage. The joint Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage between United Nations Children's Fund and United Nations Population Fund emphasises strategies to implement laws that stipulate 18 years as the minimum age of marriage for girls (cf. United Nations Children's Fund & International Centre for Research on Women, 2017:6). This will support social workers in helping societies to understand that violation of one right leads to the infringement of other rights. In this way they can protect girls from early marriage and encourage them to complete their schooling to attain a better life for themselves and their families, and through a positive cycle of empowerment from generation to generation to contribute to sustainable communities. As Green (2012:23) states, human rights are central for inclusive human development.

The study found schools to be a good entry point to identify girls who are vulnerable to early marriage. Since girls are prone to peer pressure resulting in early marriage, a peer education programme similar to Girl Marriage Ambassadors (GMA) could be implemented in schools to empower girls to resist pressure to marry early for financial benefit, or any other reason. Such a programme will enhance the principle of 'teach a girl to support a girl'. Peer education supports the global goal to recognise girl empowerment and eliminate harmful practices, such as girl marriages, for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015:22). Furthermore, schools present a pathway to address gender inequality and programmes can be implemented to sensitise both girls and boys about socialisation of stereotyped gender roles.

The realisation of children's rights requires proper development and implementation of policies and programmes (Department of Social Development (DSD), 2008). The IPPF and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (2007:28) concur that to end girl marriages requires concerted efforts to ensure effective programme development and implementation. Policy monitoring by social workers and other stakeholders is important to indicate how effective strategies are to curb the practice of girl marriage. Therefore the duties of different stakeholders should be clarified in legislation and policies to enable efficient service delivery (South African Law Reform Commission (SALRC), 2015:29). This is in line with the study's findings on the need for more resources, coordination among stakeholders, and monitoring of programmes and interventions to curb girl marriage. In these initiatives the inclusion and participation of girls, and in particular girls in early marriages, are central.

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