

'CHILD MARRIAGES MAY GO UNNOTICED AMID LOCKDOWN'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Children - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Last year, as the pandemic took grip of the world and India went into a lockdown, child rights activists were alarmed to see a slew of child marriages being reported in Karnataka. Now, with another lockdown in place and weddings being restricted to houses because of tough guidelines, there are fears of child marriages going unnoticed.

Fr. Antony Sebastian, Chairperson of the Karnataka State Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (KSCPCR), told *The Hindu* that a total of 2,180 child marriage cases were reported in Karnataka as per reports of Childline (1098) from April 2020 to January 2021.

In December last year, of the 1,598 complaints, 365 were related to this category. The other complaints ranged from illegal adoptions, child trafficking and child labour to the need for medical help or shelter.

Last year, 579 complaints were received in May by Childline in Karnataka when India was observing the national lockdown imposed by the Central government. The number of complaints eased when lockdown restrictions were relaxed, but were still worrying. As many as 214 complaints were received in August and 111 in September 2020.

The number of such complaints for October 2020 was 190 and for November 321.

Number may go up

This year, in January alone (up to when data are available), 1,947 complaints were received overall in the State, of which 288 were related to child marriages.

Fr. Sebastian said with another lockdown in place and marriages being allowed in homes, the number of cases might go up.

Some activists and organisations have raised the issue with the Ministry and the Department of Women and Child Development (DWCD).

"Earlier, when child marriages happened at wedding halls, temples, etc., there were people who would alert the relevant authorities or activists who would be able to reach on time to stop them. But now, with marriages happening at homes, we may get fewer alerts and our going there could be treated as trespassing," said Nagasimha G. Rao from Child Rights Trust, who has written to Minister Shashikala Jolle, under whom the Department falls. However, she is yet to respond.

P. Lakshapathi, founder and executive director of APSA (Association for Promoting Social Action), which collaborates with Childline in Bengaluru, said during the last lockdown, many child marriages were reported in Bengaluru Urban, too, probably due to the high number of migrants living in the city. This year, between January and April 2021, APSA had received complaints of 14 child marriage cases.

"During the first lockdown, we saw child marriages for a variety of reasons, ranging from

insecurity for the girl, wherein the parents assume their responsibility is over with her marriage, to the fact that they could get away with a simple marriage without calling too many people, resulting in less expenditure. When we get information, we try and create awareness. Many people don't know what the punishment is for the offence. When they learn about it, they are surprised," he added.

He urged the people to alert Childline if they come across child marriages.

"If people get to know about such marriages, please inform Childline. Cases are booked even after the couple has a child if they are under-aged... To prevent more such cases, the key is awareness among people," Mr. Lakshapathi added.

Anuradha K.N., Director, DWCD, said every district had a committee to tackle child marriages and they had been activated to conduct regular inspections.

"In most cases, child marriage whistle-blowers are relatives or neighbours... Smaller marriage functions may not mean more cases going unnoticed," she said.

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