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**NATIONAL ASSEMBLY QUESTION FOR WRITTEN REPLY**

**QUESTION NUMBER: 3069**

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**3069. Ms L H Arries (EFF) to ask the Minister of Social Development:**

Whether her department has conducted any studies on the phenomenon of ukuthwala and its impacts on young girls in the Eastern Cape; if not, why not; if so, (a) how prevalent is the practice and (b) what measures has she put in place to protect young girls and/or young orphaned girls in particular? NW3899E

**REPLY:**

The department conducted the study on Ukuthwala: *Baseline Assessment on the Prevalence and Perceptions about Harmful Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children in the OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa (November 2011 and will be updated in 2020).*

**The study revealed the following impacts on young girls in the Eastern Cape:**

*Health*: Young girls may be married to an older more experienced partners and therefore get exposed to sexually transmitted infection including HIV – partners who are less likely to test for HIV before the incident of ukuthwala. Girls below the age of 18 have small pelvises and are not ready for child-bearing, this puts them at risk hence higher morbidity and mortality rates. There is poor access to sexual reproductive health services and delayed testing for HIV during pregnancy resulting to late enrolment to Prevention of Mother to Child HIV Prevention program.

*Education:* Early school dropout by child brides may lead to increased economic dependency to the male partner. Early school dropout further perpetuates discrimination and low status of women and girls.

*Emotional*: Isolation and depression as a result of unrealistic expectations from the family and the husband to assume makoti duties while she is physically and emotionally not ready for this responsibility.

**(a)** Ukuthwala was found to be amongst practices that are prevalent in OR Tambo district and widely practiced although respondents were not clear about its origins however they participated in the practice. The frequencies of occurrence of these practices vary with the practice some occurring daily others weekly and monthly while others occur every six months and yearly. The findings also show that the majority of the people in OR Tambo district do not know the decision makers on these cultural practices. Men were identified as key decision makers when it comes to Ukuthwala.

The research found that it is not clear how the decision makers got their powers but the findings seem to suggest that only a small proportion of the population have knowledge on how decision makers got the powers to determine when these practices should happen. Ukuthwala was identified as one of the practices that is mostly disliked by the communities. The findings suggest that cultural marriages are more commonly practiced than civil marriages.

**(b)** The following institutions have been engaged in public education:

Office of the Premier (OTP); the Chapter 9 Institutions: CRL Rights Commission; The Public Protector; Commission for Gender Commission and the SA Human Rights Commission.

Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders; the Civil Society Organizations; the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund; the Children’s Institute; South African Council for Educators; Traditional Leaders in the Province; Government Departments and a joint program implemented by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) that was funded by the Department for International Development was implemented and output three of this program focused on social change interventions conducted through community dialogues. The program also invested in building the capacity of traditional leaders on their role in gender based violence prevention efforts.

UNFPA also took a delegation from OR Tambo District led by the then Executive Mayor Zoleka Chapha with a provincial delegation from the House of Traditional leaders, OTP and COGTA to Amhara Region Ethiopia on a South-South learning exchange. Ethiopia had previously had a similar challenge but had been able to reverse this picture through social behavior change programs and social change program.

An integrated approach was used utilising key community leadership, government Departments, civil society organizations from 2009 in OR Tambo District. This involved door to door visits, community dialogues and focus groups discussions.

The purpose was to discuss the practice of ukuthwala and to find out how communities at different age groups feel about the practice.

Household profiling conducted in June 2012 reaching 396 households in the following sub-locations – Buthulo, Mathambo and Gqibelana Locations and Hlabathi J.S.S.

Awareness Campaign on promotion of safety and healthy lifestyle was conducted in June 2012 during June 16 Youth Celebrations.

A Family Resource Centre was established to educate women and families about Human Rights and Children’s rights and to address all gender and family issues.

There is after school program for orphaned and vulnerable children in the area. The program provides life skills to the children and the volunteers assist with homework and holiday programs.

**Conclusion**: During 2021-2022 this subject has emerged as the focus again and this will be dealt with through a social norms change program that will be technically supported by partners like UNFPA. This will also extend the focus districts to OR Tambo and Alfred Nzo. It is also worth noting that this practice is a hidden practice and it happens in the furthest and left behind populations, these are the populations that will be prioritized in the coming financial year.