Child Rights and Environment

Why in news?

For the first time, the United Nations has recognised and affirmed children's rights to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in a new guidance on children's rights and the environment.

What is UN guidance on children's rights and environment?

- The UN guidance, formally known as ***General Comment No. 26***, was adopted in *2023*.
- It provides a legal framework to address the adverse effects of environmental degradation and climate change on the enjoyment of children's rights.
- It is to ensure a clean, healthy, and sustainable world now and to preserve it for future generation
- It encompasses their rights to information and participation.
- It allows access to justice to protect and receive remedies for the harms caused by environmental degradation and climate change.
- It details member states' obligations under the ***Child Rights Convention (UNCRC)*** to address environmental harms and guarantee that children are able to exercise their rights.

What about the UNCRC?

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was approved by the United Nation General Assembly (UNGA) in ***1989***.
- It outlined *children's rights*, which include the right to life, health, clean drinking water and survival and development.
- It has been *ratified by **196 countries*** including ***India.***

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Fundamental Rights

Right to Survival – to life, health, nutrition, name, nationality

Right to Development – to education, care, leisure, recreation, cultural activities

Right to Protection – from exploitation, abuse, neglect

Right to Participation – to expression, information, thought, religion

Core Principles

Non-discrimination

Right to life, survival and development

Best interests of the child

Respect for the child's views

What are the impacts of climate change on children?

- Children, including adolescents under the age of 18, are often more vulnerable than the general population to the health impacts of climate change.
- **Displacement of children** – According to UNICEF report, extreme weather reports around the world lead to 12 million displacements of children in 2022.
- **Increases child mortality** – According to a study, Heat-related child mortality due to high emissions is projected to double in the continent by 2049, compared with 2005–2014.
- **Separation from family** – Climate change induced migration makes children highly vulnerable as they may get separated from their families or caregivers.
- **Increases child labour** – Climate change related industries like agriculture and mining contribute to child labour which can expose children to exploitation and violence.
- **Accelerates hidden hunger** – Infants will bear the increased burden of malnutrition as the temperature increases.
- **Increases disease Burden** – Children will suffer more from the rise of infectious diseases.
- **Less focus on human development** – Climate affected children are denied access to education and healthcare.

What is the relationship between extreme weather events and child marriage?

- Extreme weather events intensifies elements of structural oppression such as _gender inequality and poverty._
- Gender-based violence and inequities have adverse impacts on girls' resilience leading to higher incidences of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) in low and middle-income countries.

- **Reasons for child marriages -** It is often seen as a coping strategy to reduce *economic vulnerability and food insecurity.*
  - In Bangladesh, daughters were married early after *Cyclone Aila* in 2009.
- Parents resorted to child marriages to *protect daughters from sexual violence and avoid family dishonour.*
  - Rates of sexual assault often escalate during times of crisis, particularly in evacuation camps or temporary shelters.
- **Linkage with bride price/dowry -** Girls in sub-Saharan Africa or Vietnam have a local custom of bride price which had increased probability of CEFM during extreme events.
- But, in regions where *dowry is common such as India, girls were less likely to get married* during a drought year, because the bride's family could not afford dowry payment.

Bride price is the material or money entitlement that the groom's family is paying to the bride's family during marriage.

Dowry is the material or money entitlement that the bride's family is paying to the groom's family during marriage.

- **Other findings-** *Education and financial control* are key to empowering women and girls and allowing them to take their own decisions.
- *Educational attainment and CEFM were inversely associated* for girls in India and Malawi.
- Also, the incidence of *CEFM decreased as parental education increased* was observed in India and Vietnam.

Status of Child Marriages

- **Global level** - Every year, *12 million girls get married* before adulthood.
- COVID-19 as well as poverty have spurred child marriages in India.
- The *Global Slavery Index 2023* has said that climate change, along with other environmental factors, has exacerbated modern slavery in Africa.
- More than 3.1 million Africans are in forced marriage and more than 3.8 million in forced labour.
- **India** - In the last five years, it declined to 23.3% in 2020-21, according to the latest National Family Health Survey-5 data.
- Among the bigger States, West Bengal and Bihar have the highest prevalence of girl child marriage.

International Conventions that address Child Marriage

- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women covers the rights to protection from child marriage in Article 16.
- The Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages

- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
- The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

To know more about child marriages in India, click here

References

1. Down to Earth| UN guidance call on climate action
2. Down to Earth| Climate change and Child Marriage
3. PIB| Child Marriages in India