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An overview of child marriage as a social problem: The role of primary health care professionals

Sosyal bir sorun olarak çocuk evliliklere genel bakış: Birinci basamak sağlık profesyonellerinin rolü

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ABSTRACT

Öz

In many cultures, children are attributed as the future of the country however mostly they do not benefit from basic rights. Nowadays, children face serious deficiencies and differences in many areas, including basic needs such as nutrition, shelter, security, and education. Additional problems like gender inequality put girls in an even more disadvantaged situation. One of the most concerning issues is the phenomenon of child marriages and as a result motherhood where girls give birth before the age of 18. Reflecting this as "normal" in connection with some religious, social, and cultural labelings is an important barrier. This review study aims to draw attention to this problem and emphasize the importance of primary healthcare centers in this context. As part of the Turkish healthcare system, primary healthcare centers can notice the region's social changes and dynamics at the earliest. In this context, it is thought that family physicians, midwives, and nurses working in primary care have important roles from a public health perspective. However, practices in this field should be carried out with social workers, lawyers, educators, and regional, and local security forces in line with the needs. Therefore, it is among the issues requiring institutional, public, and social cooperation.

Key Words: child marriage, gender inequality, primary health care, public health, child health

Birçok kültürde, çocuklar ülkenin geleceği olarak nitelendirilir ancak çoğu zaman temel haklardan dahi yararlanamazlar. Günümüzde çocuklar, beslenme, barınma, güvenlik ve eğitim gibi temel ihtiyaçlar da dahil olmak üzere birçok alanda ciddi eksiklikler ve farklılıklarla karşı karşıyadır. En ciddi konulardan biri ise kız çocuklarının 18 yaşından önce evlenmesi ve bunun sonucunda anne olmasıdır. Bu sorunu bazı dinsel, toplumsal ve kültürel etiketlemelerle birlikte "normal" olarak yansıtmak önemli bir engeldir. Bu derleme çalışması bu soruna dikkat çekmeyi ve bu kapsamda birincil sağlık merkezlerinin önemini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Türk sağlık sisteminin bir parçası olarak birincil sağlık merkezleri bölgenin toplumsal değişimlerini ve dinamiklerini en erken fark edebilmektedir. Bu bağlamda birincil bakımda çalışan aile hekimleri, ebeler ve hemşirelerin halk sağlığı açısından önemli rolleri olduğu düşünülmektedir. Ancak bu alandaki uygulamalar ihtiyaçlar doğrultusunda sosyal hizmet uzmanları, avukatlar, eğitimciler ve bölgesel ve yerel güvenlik güçleriyle birlikte yürütülmelidir. Bu nedenle kurumsal, kamusal ve toplumsal işbirliği gerektiren konular arasındadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: çocuk evlilik, cinsiyet eşitsizliği, birinci basamak sağlık bakımı, halk sağlığı, çocuk sağlığı

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Introduction

Worldwide individuals under the age of 18 are defined as "children" and under the protection of family, society, state, and state system. Basic needs like security, shelter, nutrition, education, etc. are basic must needs. However, especially in developing countries, sub-communities children confront difficulties in meeting these needs. From a gender perspective girls suffer more from these inequalities in comparison to boys. Early-age marriage is among the most serious problems in low socio-economic environments, which is mostly also reason for early motherhood. Despite the idea that this is more common problem in some eastern, rural, and low-educated areas of Türkiye, recent data shows that it is becoming more widespread in all segments of the community. It is not legally approved but with so-called imam or religious marriages and culturally and socially normalized in some communities (1,2). In Türkiye, these health and social problems became more visible in obstetrics and gynecology clinics, especially with the increasing immigration from Syria, Afghanistan, and other non-developed countries (3,4). This review aims to draw attention to the "child marriage" phenomenon. In this context, family physicians, midwives, and nurses working at primary health care centers have important roles in determining public, and social changes and dynamics at an early stage and reaching individuals. A multidisciplinary approach is essential. All medical staff at primary centers doctors, nurses, midwives and also social workers, lawyers, educators, regional religious, local leaders, police forces, as well as all political institutions and non-governmental organizations must address the problem within the framework of universal law and children's rights, along with legal regulations.

Prevalence of "Child Marriage"

Childhood is a biological period in which the individual is not an adult yet (1). It is reduced to a temporary and incomplete state. It emerges an unqualified system that does not yet have an independent existence. However, motherhood is a special situation and requires readiness for this role and also physical, spiritual, and emotional maturity and strength. "Child mothers" try to overcome childhood-specific problems and also face the necessity of adapting to a hard role such as "motherhood" (2,3). Calling this situation child marriage, early marriage portrays it in an image of joy and celebration. Glorifying it as a traditional, even boastful, practice is an important sociological problem. With this approach, the situation is "normalized" at community level. These "marriages" are often pushed with the influence of parents especially in girls and these girls rarely meet their future "husbands" before the wedding (4). Worldwide it is reported that 650 million girls and women are married in childhood. According to countries half of these "marriages" originate from Bangladesh, India, Nigeria Ethiopia, and sub-Saharan Africa. In general, it is reported that 1/3 of child marriages are from countries like South Africa or sub-Saharan African countries such as Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda (5,6). UNICEF's 2018 report child age marriages have decreased in the last decade but still are not at the desired level worldwide, especially in South Asian countries. Under the leadership of the United Nations Children's Fund, all these are a result of supporting girls' education, positive actions including governmental efforts, accepting child marriage as "illegal", and public message efforts regarding its harms have been effective in this trend (5). Child marriages, as well as early birth rates, vary between countries and even regions within countries. In Uganda, 34.8% of the population are adolescents, and teenage pregnancy rate is 25%. In the Kibuku region, 17.6% of adolescents aged 12-19 have experienced childbirth (7). In South Africa, 39% of 10 million

adolescents experienced pregnancy between the ages of 15-19, and 1.1% even gave birth under the age of fifteen (8). However, this problem is also noticeable in developed countries like the USA (United States). According to 2002-2003 data child marriage among women is 8.9% (9). Another study draws attention to racial differences along with health inequalities and draws attention to the differences between black and white communities. Among these Hispanics, black mothers were followed by white mothers (10). According to the 2021 data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), marriage age is increasing in Türkiye. Average first-time marriage is stated as 28.1 years for men and 25.4 years for women (11). Women's increasing participation in work life and urban lifestyle are also related to the increase in the marriage age for women. Especially determining factor is the prolongation of the education process and the postponement of the marriage decision (12). However, due to family pressure and patriarchal structure early marriages continue in many provinces of Türkiye. Nirengi Association, which has been working together with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) on child, early, and forced marriages in Türkiye since July 2021, draws attention to the importance of the issue. According to the association reports, TUIK 2019 official marriage data shows that there are 940 children married to boys aged 16-17, and the number of girls married is 17,058. These data are reported as 726 boys and 13,014 girls for 2020. In the Nirengi Association report a special part is also separated for weddings, engagements, etc. under shutdown during the Covid-19 outbreak. By drawing attention to the impact of the decision to limit mass events, it is emphasized that the figures do not reflect the realities in Türkiye. It is difficult to obtain data from young people under 18 forced to marry religious unofficially. Another important data that gives a sense that TUIK numbers do not reflect the truth is the results of the Türkiye Population and Health Survey Report prepared by Hacettepe University Population Studies Institute as a result of interviews with a total of 7,345 women and girls between the ages of 15-49 in 2018. According to this data, 14.7% of women aged 20-24 in Türkiye were married younger than 18, and 2% were married younger than 15 years of age. 44.8% of Syrian women living in Türkiye in the same age group were married under the age of 18, and 9.2% were younger than 15 years of age. 21% of women between the ages of 25-49 were married under the age of 18, and 4% were married under fifteen (13). In the same age group, 38% of Syrian women living in Türkiye were married under the age of 18, and 12% under the age of 15 (13). Burcu et al. (2015), found in an in-depth interview with eight women who married at younger ages, representing different regions, ethnicities that the entire study group was "married" through a religious marriage and emphasized that traditional practices play a dominant role in maintaining young age "marriage" (14).

Child Marriage And Law Perspective

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, every individual up to eighteen years of age is considered a child. Every child's education, health, and shelter needs must be met and protected against all kinds of physical, psychological, and sexual exploitation. The fundamental rights of children are guaranteed by the Geneva Convention on the Rights of the Child, published in 1924 (15). According to the Turkish Civil Code (TCC) which is based on the Swiss Civil Law in 1926 everyone younger than 18 years is a child and not allowed to marry. However according to article 124 of the TCC, anyone with 17 can marry with parent's permission. In exceptional cases, vital reasons marriage at 16 years of age can be done with court permission. In this way, marriage age lowers down to 16 years for both genders. In practice, these regulations affect mostly girls than boys. Losing their virginity or pregnancy are

shown as special situations for marriage among young girls. This allows a misuse of laws against girls. It is also a part of gender discrimination and results in a sexist mentality (16). Children are experts in their own lives and experiences. They have the right to express their feelings and thoughts. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) established UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund). First in 1989 with the unanimous consent of 190 countries, to defend children's rights, to help meet their basic needs, to pave the way for opportunities for children, to realize their potential, and support the necessary conditions for every child to grow up healthy and receive proper care. Following the Children's Aid Fund was established (17). UNICEF provides services related to children's malnutrition, shelter, security, etc. It carries out universal messages and public service announcements against child marriages as well as many other problems. These messages describe the negative effects of early marriage on children. The importance of meeting children's basic needs and education in healthy child development is emphasized (18). In a study conducted to investigate the legal provisions that form the basis for child marriage, the 1995-2013 data of 193 countries that are members of the United Nations (UN) were analyzed (19). Accordingly, although the rate of children marrying with parental consent before the age of 18 decreased from 80% to 50% the problem remains among low- and middle-income countries. In a study from Eastern Europe conducted on child marriages among Romani girls in Serbia stated that these marriages mostly affect girls living in rural areas, with low education, and from poor households (20). Although child marriage is illegal, it continues to be a human rights violation in many countries. Despite the policies, programs, and interventions carried out for solution purposes, the desired targets have not been achieved (21). United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that if effective work is not done the number of women married at child age will reach 1.2 billion by the year 2050. Also considering migration factors in recent years, it is estimated that this will be more common in refugee families. Within this context, awareness programs are carried out in many provinces in Türkiye by the UNFPA center for refugee women and men. With main purpose to raise awareness on this issue and prevent this human rights violation against children (18). Those who allow or force child marriage, for any reason like money, etc., are subject to punishment under the law. However, despite criminal sanctions, this problem continues and the law seems insufficient to solve the problem worldwide (19). Handling these situations in more difficult times like social chaos, wars, crises, and even health crises like epidemics is not easy. In this respect, it is thought that the Covid-19 epidemic and the ongoing wars, which have recently affected the whole world, should be addressed separately.

Causes Of Child Marriage

There are diverse reasons that cause marriage in child age in some communities like normal acceptance of early-age marriages in the region, social pressure, traditions, and customs support the continuity of young-age marriages. However, control of women's sexuality, associating this with honor, and the dominance of the patriarchal society remain among the main reasons (16). The reasons mentioned above plus maintaining a healthy generation with young mothers, continuation of the lineage, and increasing the population are basic views, and beliefs of the Syrian society and play an important role (22-23). Lack of education and poverty stand out as the most important reasons for child marriage. A study from India reported uneducated girls who do not have access to education are more likely to marry at an early age. It is stated that especially in the Warangal region of India, poor communities consist of nuclear families, they are engaged in farming, and most girls are exposed to domestic violence, face

maternal deaths, and also physical and sexual abuse (24).

Due to traditional gender roles in some parts of the country, many girls face the risk of a young age or forced marriage in Türkiye. The total marriage age is increasing but still, marriages under the age of 18 are not at the desired level. All negativities factors enabling girls to reach education also affect their health. They become open to violence and poverty. Orçan and Kar (2008) reported strong social acceptance as an important factor for young-age marriage and motherhood (25). These traditional trends continue determinedly, especially among uneducated, poor groups. Although the preferred ideal marriage is 19-21 years of age, still young age marriage is high in girls. In another study, Evgin et al. reported the opinions of health science students at Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, on early marriage and child marriage. Results indicate that 71.5% of a total of 477 students (77.6% girls/22.4% boys) report that women should consider religious rules and traditions. 90.1% report that doing housework and taking care of children is a woman's duty in the family. However, 88.1% define early marriage as a type of abuse. According to the students, the reasons for early marriage were family structure, education level, and culture. 83.2% emphasize the importance of family education to prevent this issue (26). Cultural expectations towards women and girls within the patriarchal structure turn women and girls into "social victims". Cultural acceptances and expectations for women, such as that they should not study, should not work, should get married and protect their honor, lead women to marry at an early age against their will. In these climate environments, women do not have the right to make their own decisions. The decision of the men in the family plays an important role in the acceptance of girls' marriage instead of supporting their continuing education life (15). A study from Southeast Türkiye Mardin province known as a more patriarchal region reports the decrease of marriage age to 12 years in girls, especially in those who were taken away from school and 50% of the girl's families marry their girls in exchange for bride price. It is reported that in most marriages, religious marriage takes place immediately, while official marriage usually takes place after birth or even in cases of necessity such as the child before school age for registration. Frequently, these "marriages" are a result of elderly family members' decisions, without any speaking right for the girl (27). With different social and cultural practices, and celebrations these normally illegal marriages became legal in the community which defines marriages as very important for the continuity of society. This covers diverse pre-marriage ceremonies and customs. Customs such as bride price, breast milk money for the mother, dowry money, survival wealth, father's rights, and mother's rights continue today with different intensity at the community level. In another study from Türkiye which is more developed in comparison to Mardin province, it was determined that girls who migrated to the rural area of Eskişehir province were married through the mediation of certain people to live in better conditions in exchange for money and economic conditions (28). According to UNICEF's 2021 analysis, child marriages are expected to increase by 10 million in the next ten years. According to the evaluations made by region, this increase is expected to be especially in regions where vital and social crises (economic, social, migration, war, etc.) are more intense (6). For this purpose, crisis environments and child marriage are discussed under a separate headline.

Child Marriage in Crisis Situations

Worldwide communities confront different types of crises like wars, natural disasters, diseases, etc. The last global crisis was the COVID-19 pandemic starting in March 2020, defined as the most important vital crisis period in recent history. This

pandemic has affected the whole world. At all community levels, it caused serious health problems including death but also economic, social, and psychological problems. Experiences show that especially girls are more negatively affected by this crisis. Lockdowns, closing schools, economic problems, service interruptions, and barriers in accessing official institutions' services for help requests were stopped in this term. It is stated that during the pandemic term, pregnancy and parental deaths increased the risk of child marriage for girls the most vulnerable group. Young age married girls are at high risk of domestic violence and low chance of attending and finishing school (22). High-risk pregnancy, problematical pregnancy term, and physical and psychological problems after birth are also more common in this group birth (6). Some COVID-19 studies from Bangladesh, Brazil, Ethiopia, India, and Nigeria, where child marriages are common focused on the reasons. Study results reporting that escaping from home, getting rid of it in one's way, leaving school, getting rid of boredom, and being able to go out are some of the reasons why marriage is preferred in young girls. The fact that the laws of some countries support young age marriage many other factors predisposing and supporting early age marriage. These factors are low awareness of this negative issue on children and community, economic problems, poverty, finding support in society, and even the peer circle itself (21-22).

War is another present crisis nowadays in different parts of the World. Due to its location, Türkiye is under different effects. Especially women and children are most negatively affected by this situation. Till recently the wars were mostly limited in the Arabic region and Middle East. But this location has changed with the Russia-Ukraine war starting in 2022. A new war starts in the eastern part of the European region. Although Türkiye does not have any border directly with these two countries, Türkiye is affected by all developments directly in this region including migration from these areas (29-30). Türkiye has its longest border with Syria. This war continues for more than ten years. Today, millions of Syrian immigrants of all ages live in Türkiye, registered or unregistered. This situation has brought and still brings many new problems for both countries, especially for Türkiye (31). Migrations; especially forced migrations become a dangerous process for children, especially girls, who do not have a say or are known as passive subjects. Early marriage is one of the most important problems for girls in this process. This situation has become more visible, especially with the Syrian migration to Türkiye in recent years. Human trafficking is also among the problems affecting children during forced migrations (32). Harunoğulları (2021) reported that Syrian female refugees who lost their families or spouses in the war, and those in bad life situations due to war and alone prefer to marry Turkish men. The main purpose is to hold on to life, ensure their security, relax economically, and for belonging (33). These marriages are commonly under religious imam marriages. The bureaucratic problems in getting legal documents from Syrian institutions makes also official marriages in Türkiye not possible. In another study from Lebanon about Syrian immigrants, Mourtada et al. reported reasons for young age marriage among Syrians who immigrated to Lebanon as increasing security problems, humanitarian needs, and bad economic conditions (34). Although social crises such as wars and epidemics negatively affect all dynamics, information about the reflections of these situations on child marriage is limited. It is thought that current experiences will contribute to this dimension in the future.

Consequences of Child Marriage

The consequences of child marriage are presented in some studies. In a qualitative study from Türkiye by Boğucu in

the eastern part of the country in Ağrı province, covering a total of 17 child marriages under the age of 18, child marriages were analyzed within the scope of neglect and abuse. As a result of the interviews, neglect, abuse, violence, etc. negativities are defined as "a consequence result of child marriage. Therefore, early marriage increases the risk of the girl child encountering these negativities (16).

Severe couple conflicts, physical violence, neglect of newborn children, mother and child death, low socio-economic status, and related problems (nutrition problems, access to health care, etc.) are more common in the young married than in the general society (17). Additionally, psychiatric and mental problems are also more seen in comparison to the older married group (9). Early marriage not only affects mothers but also affects the child's health negatively. A study from the Sub-Saharan Africa region, where underage "marriages" are highest in the world indicated that the rate of premature birth was higher in girls who married before the age of 18 (35-36). A study of data from 34 countries analyzing child marriage and intimate partner violence shows young age married girls are at greater risk compared to adult age married (35). Among the analyzed countries in the same study, it was determined that the highest risk was in Sub-Saharan African countries. In another study from Africa, Apolot et al. reported maternal health problems of adolescents in the Kibuki region, Uganda. In this in-depth, interview study including 15 expectant mothers abuse, maltreatment, lack of legal and cultural protection, and inadequacy in the birth preparation process were identified as the main problems (7).

Soylu and Ayaz (2013) from Türkiye reported that 48 girls "married" under the age of 15, 45.8% were diagnosed with at least one mental disorder, and diagnoses like major depressive disorder and adjustment disorder were ranked first. 22.9% reported being forced to marriage against their will, 14.6% experienced physical, and 27.1% emotional violence and abuse by their partners. However, 29.2% had suicidal thoughts and 20.8% attempted suicide (37). In another qualitative study with 6 women married under the age of 18 from Türkiye Cevheroğlu and Kışlak (2022) reported that young women were exposed to physical, and sexual violence by their husbands, no husband support any kind of problems, and lack of communication. They also reported a lack of knowledge about the maternal role, postpartum strain, and issues in bonding with the baby and establishing relationships. In the same study, young women stated that their own families were not with them and did not help them to get support from them regarding their marital problems (38).

A significant portion of the problems experienced by women and girls around the world are related to gender inequality. Various calls are being made to remedy the situation. One of these is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 and consists of 17 items. The main purpose is to end poverty in the world, protect the environment, take precautions against the climate crisis, and aim for a fair sharing of prosperity and peace. The fifth article of the SDGs is defined as "Gender Equality" (SDG 5). The aim of SDG 5 is to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Some of the items among the global targets determined to achieve this goal are directly related to the study title. Accordingly, target 5.1- Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and girls, 5.2- Eliminating all forms of violence and abuse against women and girls, and 5.3- There are goals to eliminate harmful practices such as child marriage and forced marriage at an early age. Strong cooperation within and between countries is required to achieve these important goals, which Türkiye has also signed (39,40).

The Role of Primary Healthcare Professionals

Primary health care services play an important role in the health care system. Individuals from all socio-economic levels have the opportunity to access these community-based healthcare centers. In Türkiye, these centers are mostly within walking distance of their homes. Since the service covers the entire society, healthcare professionals have the opportunity to observe and determine community dynamics a team of physicians, midwives, and nurses working in collaboration at the family health centers. These healthcare professionals have closer contact with the community members, especially in smaller cities, towns, and even villages. This is an important advantage, in identifying the population and diagnosing all social problems, including domestic violence (39). All healthcare professionals, physicians, nurses, and midwives have important responsibilities in preventing and dealing with unwanted results of forced marriage, sexual violence, ignorance of contraception, the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, and also social-health problems related to pregnancy and birth (40).

According to the Ministry of Health follow-up protocols, adolescent follow-ups in primary care should be at least three follow-ups. In this context, adolescents need to undergo systemic examination, ensure confidentiality, and take a psychosocial history. During follow-up, it is important to follow a respectful and non-judgmental approach. However, with parental consent, a history including physical, psychological, and social evaluation should be taken. To prevent underage marriages, it is important to inform especially young girls and their parents about the risks that may arise as a result of early marriage. Although these sharings are based on family health, they can also be carried out effectively within the scope of home visits. In this respect, all primary health care professionals, especially midwives, and nurses, are in an important position to determine the dynamics of society. They are also in a perfect position to reach adolescent girls and within their education and consult roles support public awareness through health education and consultancy programs. Use their advocator role to help and support young girls who are under social pressure for unwanted forced marriage (41-43).

Conclusion and Suggestions

Child marriage is explained with arguments associated with social structure, social events, traditions, customs, culture, and even religious motifs. These are used as an element of social pressure that contributes to the normalization of the process. The principles and provisions regarding international fundamental child rights and human rights are clear. Developments in this field are of great importance in protecting and improving children's health, women's health, as well as public health. In solving and improving this issue community touching programs, especially among high-risk groups, are of great importance. Family health centers and all health workers, which are at the center of society within the health care system in Türkiye, are thought to be in a key position in this regard. However, the issue requires a multifaceted approach since it is intertwined with many institutions and systems. For this reason, even social leaders such as the law, police, educational institutions, religious institutions, headmen, imams, etc. should be included in the issue. The leadership of state institutions is essential against possible obstacles and conflicts of interest. Programs should be carried out to solve the problems in light of international child and human rights conventions. In addition, to carry out effective work at the regional level, cooperation between local institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is important. Especially local NGOs can define regional, and cultural features and make programs according to regional needs. The following

should be done to deal with early age marriages;

- Society should be informed about the individual and social consequences of young age marriage.
- Legal sanctions against marriage under the age of 18 should be a deterrent.
- Care should be taken with the language of expression to avoid verbal manipulations.
- Public awareness activities should be carried out against the abuse of traditions, customs, culture, and religious motifs.
- Training should be carried out, especially for young women, on the fact that practices such as "imam marriage", which does not give women rights under civil law, are illegal and do not go beyond "fake acceptance and religious sanctification of the relationship" in the social sense.
- Early school leave must be avoided, therefore high school degree must be in compulsory education. This will prevent early school leave among girls.
- Children not going to school must be identified.
- State support should be provided to families who have financial problems in sending their children to school, multisectoral support should be encouraged under the leadership of state institutions.
- Free and supportive systems for children and families who need support.
- Free hotlines for children in need.
- Children should be taught about children's rights starting from primary school level.
- Training and consultancy programs should be carried out in Turkish, Kurdish, and Arabic, in languages that the public can understand, in line with regional needs, in cooperation with local governments and social services units.
- Teachers at the guidance units in schools should provide training to students on this subject.
- Individuals who own entertainment venues such as wedding halls should be held legally responsible for reporting, and penalties should be deterrents.
- Hodjas who perform imam marriages should be held legally responsible for the notification, and penalties should be deterrent.
- Mothers, fathers, and second-degree relatives should be held legally responsible for notification, and penalties should be deterrent.
- Primary healthcare professionals especially midwives and nurses, which are predominantly female professions in Türkiye, should be at the forefront with their roles as educators, consultants, advocates, researchers, and case managers.
- Studies in this field should be supported by provincial health directorates, social service units, provincial/district police units, and legal units.
- Support should be taken from the local press along with the national press in informing the society.
- Immigrant-focused programs can be effective in reaching different cultural groups.
- Medical staff should be supported with education programs.

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