

Response of the Government to the Problems of the Girl Child

Sarala Gopalan and Vijay Bhaskar

India is among the first group of countries along with others in Africa to identify the "girl child" as the focus of attention for improving the social and economic status of women. This was recognized in the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995 and Section L of the Platform for Action is dedicated to the resolution of various issues relating to the girl child. Health, nutrition, education and rights of the girl child are carefully identified and, responsibilities of Governments and others pinpointed. There is a great deal of background to the emphasis brought on the girl child by India.

As early as 1987, two seminars, one at the national level and one at the SAARC regional level, were held to discuss issues relating to the "girl child", when the year 1990 was declared as the 'SAARC Year of the Girl Child'. The decade 1991-2000 A.D. was declared as the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child. In 1990, (as a part of the special action during the SAARC Year of the Girl Child) a nation-wide study on the "Girl child and the family" was sponsored through the Women Study Centres in 22 University Centres.

The World Summit on Children held in 1990 stressed on "Survival, Protection and Development" of children including the girl child.

The Government of India has raised the awareness of society through their intensive studies on the girl child and her status in the family. The process started from the Seventh Five Year Plan to treat the girl child as a special concern.

A data sheet on the girl child - 1992 was released highlighting statistically what the numbers revealed about the social status of the girl child. A report of the National Study on the Girl Child in the Family (both National and State profiles) was prepared. The declining sex ratio and the problem of infanticide in ten selected States got highlighted.

The major outcome of the action research project was:

- a. Adolescent girls did not have a forum for the process of socialisation in urban areas.

- b. Nutrition and health were areas of neglect, (mostly in rural areas) which hampered their development and ability to cope with their womanhood/motherhood.
- c. There was no opportunity for continuing education for school dropouts, and education for those deprived of schooling.
- d. There was no information channel to the adolescent girl child about her rights and opportunities for development, including Government initiatives.

Based on these findings a National Plan of Action exclusively for the girl child (1991-2000) was formulated in 1992 for the "Survival, Protection and Development of the Girl Children". The Plan recognised the rights of the girl child to equal opportunity, to be free from hunger, illiteracy, ignorance and exploitation.

Towards ensuring survival of the girl child, the objectives are to:

- Prevent cases of female foeticide and infanticide and ban the practice of amniocentesis for sex determination;
- End gender disparity in infant mortality rate; eliminate gender disparities in feeding practices, expand nutritional interventions to reduce severe malnourishment by half and provide supplementary nutrition to adolescent girls in need;
- Reduce deaths due to diarrhoea by 50% among girl children under 5 years and ensure immunization against all forms of serious illnesses; and
- Provide safe drinking water and ensure access to fodder and drinking water nearer home.

Protection of the girl child and fulfillment of the above mentioned objectives are to be ensured through the following:

- Relief for those girls who are economically and socially deprived and who belong to special groups;
- Intervention to sensitise various agencies on the need to protect the girl child and adolescent girls from exploitation, assault and physical abuse;

- Education and sensitisation of male members of the family to the special needs of the girl child;
- Equal treatment, dignity and respect for girl children in the family and community, as well as providing support and help in their day-to-day work so that they get time to avail of the opportunities for self-development;
- Rehabilitation services to reduce the growing instances of exploitation of girl children and adolescent girls.
- Protection of girl children and adolescent girls from prevalent social evils such as dowry, child marriage, prostitution, rape, incest, molestation etc., through appropriate legislation and proper enforcement.

For monitoring the implementation of the Plan of Action an Inter-Ministerial Co-ordination Committee of Secretaries has been constituted to meet regularly and review the progress.

In the draft National Policy for the Empowerment of Women a policy framework has been laid down for Elimination of Discrimination Against and Violation of the Rights of the Girl Child.

In order to make an assessment of the status of the Adolescent Girl, the nodal-Department of Women and Child Development has sponsored a baseline study in twelve major States in the country - Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Haryana, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Orissa. These studies have revealed that female foeticide and infanticide are practiced specifically among certain communities. The reasons for this are the patriarchal system of inheritance and family name, strong son preference, low status of women, cost of various ceremonies relating to events in a girl's life such as celebration of attainment of puberty, marriage, birth of first child, etc.

In the Eighth Plan, starting from 1992 an Adolescent Girls' scheme for breaking the inter-generational life cycle of nutritional disadvantage and for providing a supportive environment of self-development was initiated. For the first time in the country, a special intervention has been devised for adolescent girls using the ICDS infrastructure. This intervention focuses on school drop-outs/girls in the age group of 11-18 years to meet their needs of self-development, nutrition, health, education, illiteracy and skill formation.

This scheme attempts to mobilise and enhance the potential of adolescent girls as social animators. It also seeks to improve their capabilities in addressing nutrition and health issues through centre-based instructions, training camps and hands-on learning as well as sharing of experiences. This scheme has been sanctioned in 507 blocks covering all the States and UTs and about 3.51 lakh beneficiaries have been covered under this scheme. The concentration in the programme for adolescent girls has been on awareness generation, nutrition and health care and apart from many other social factors, skill development. The impact studies have shown positive results with a recommendation for expansion of these services.

The National Nutrition Policy (1993) has also recognised the stage of adolescence as a special period for a multi-sectoral nutrition intervention for the females.

A Task Force on micronutrients (Vitamin A and iron) was constituted to come out with specific recommendations. The final report of the Task Force on Micronutrients (Vitamin A and iron) was constituted in the Department with a view to accelerate the progress in prevention and control of these two micronutrient deficiencies. The Task Force met four times during 1995-96 and constituted three small working groups to provide working papers on different mandates of the Task Force. The final report of the Task Force brought out by Food and Nutrition Board (FNB) in October, 1996 provided detailed recommendations on four specific areas: Strategies for eliminating Vitamin A and iron deficiencies; Suggestions for improving existing interventions; Mass communication plan; and Inter-sectoral co-ordination and monitoring.

Female Foeticide & Infanticide

The Central Government enacted the-Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse)-Act, 1994 and enforced it from January 1, 1996. Under this Act, regulatory authorities can be appointed for registering and regulating the functioning of genetic counselling centres or genetic testing laboratories which can conduct tests like amniocentesis and ultra sonography. The Act lays down the medical circumstances under which sex-determination tests can be conducted. It makes the family members of the pregnant women, the concerned doctor and the testing clinic liable for punishment for conducting sex-determination tests which are not medically warranted.

A Central Supervisory Board has been set up under the chairpersonship of the Minister in-charge of Health and Family Welfare to review the implementation of the Act and to make suggestions on the steps to be taken for effective implementation and for creating awareness about the law.

Some State Governments have also taken legal steps to ban female foeticide. The Central Government has also been urging the concerned State Governments to intensify interventions for checking the criminal practice of female foeticide and infanticide and for punishing the guilty through utmost vigilance and effective implementation of law.

The launching of the Balika Samriddhi Yojana in 1997 is a major initiative of Government to raise the overall status of the girl child. It intends to change family and community attitudes towards her and her mother. Under this scheme about 25 lakh girl children born every year in families below the poverty line are to be benefited. The first component of the scheme which has already been launched is to provide Rs.500/- as a post-delivery grant to the mother of the girl child as a symbolic gift from Government. The other components proposed under the scheme are provision of annual scholarships to the beneficiaries when they go to school and assistance for taking upon income generating activity when they attain the age of maturity.

Girl Child's Education

The efforts towards universalisation of primary education have resulted in increased enrollment of girls even in the remotest parts of the country. The National Policy on Education, 1986 directly addresses the question of setting right the traditional gender imbalances in education. It makes a strong commitment in favour of education for women's equality.

The initiatives of the NPE, followed by India's reaffirmation of its commitment in the E (9) summit on 'Education for all' (1993), resulted in the decision to increase the allocation for education to 6% of GDP.

Special features have been incorporated into existing schemes in favour of women. Under the Operation Black Board scheme, at least 50% of teachers should be women. Under the scheme of Non Formal Education, the NFE centres exclusively meant for girls have been increased from 25% to 40%. Similarly women are the special focus of and the majority of the beneficiaries under the Total Literacy Campaigns. The launching of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP), in low female literacy districts, with a strong gender focus is a major step in this direction. The Mahila Samakhya Programme seeks to work for women's equality by mobilising and organising women for education. Girls are provided free schooling, text books, uniforms and scholarships in many States.

Under the Kasturba Gandhi Shiksha Yojana launched in 1997, residential schools are to be set up for girls belonging to SC/ST and economically weaker sections in low SC female literacy districts.

The major initiative of Government to raise the over- all status of the girl child is the Balika Samriddhi Yojana. As already mentioned, providing annual scholarships from Class I to X to girl children born in families below the poverty line is one of the components proposed under this scheme.

In some States, quotas have been given for girls for admission to vocational, technical and professional courses.

The Central Government is also considering a proposal to make the right to primary education an enforceable fundamental right under the Constitution.

Girl Child Labour

The labour of the girl child at home and outside, is disproportionately high and denies her opportunities for development. Recognition of the girl child's burden consisting of labour and sibling care has resulted in Government evolving innovative programmes to free -the girl child from their traditional fetters. Strategies like raising awareness of parents and society, non-formal education, open school, creche services, coverage of adolescent girls in ICDS programme and vocational training have contributed to their educational development.

The National Policy on Child Labour (1986) proposes special part time education and vocational courses for children who work. Effective implementation of the provisions of Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986, Factories Act, Mines Act etc. is an important strategy to prevent child labour from exploitative, demanding work and free them for education and for vocational training.

The National Authority for Elimination of Child Labour has been constituted in 1994 to lay down policies and programmes, review their implementation and co-ordinate child related programmes.

National Child Labour Projects (NCLP) are under implementation in many States. A major activity under the NCLP is establishment of special schools to provide basic needs like supplementary education, non- formal education, vocational education etc. to the children withdrawn from employment. Voluntary agencies are also being financially assisted to the extent of 75% for taking up welfare projects for working children under a grant-in-aid scheme.

On the Independence Day of 1994, the Prime Minister gave a call to eliminate child labour in hazardous employments altogether by the year 2000 AD largely by activities modelled on the NCLP.

Girl Child Victims of Prostitution

The Indian Penal Code and the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) make offences of child trafficking, prostitution of children and sexually abusing them, liable for higher punishments than those against adults. The ITPA also contains a provision for presumption of guilt on the part of a person under certain circumstances when the victim is a child who has been sexually abused.

Following an order of the Supreme Court in a public interest litigation, the Central and State Governments have set up Advisory Committees for recommending measures to eradicate child prostitution. The Central Advisory Committee studied the problem and came out with its recommendations which were sent to the State Governments.

In accordance with another order of the Supreme Court in a public interest writ petition *Gaurav Jain vs Union of India*, a Committee on Prostitution, Child Prostitutes and Children of Prostitutes was constituted. The Committee drew up a Plan of Action to combat trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children, containing action points grouped under prevention of trafficking, health services, education, awareness generation and social mobilisation, economic empowerment programmes, setting up of institutional machinery, legal reforms and law enforcement and monitoring.

The Plan of Action has been approved in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister. It has been sent to all Central Ministries/ Departments and to State Governments for implementation. Action has been initiated to set up the Central Prevention & Rehabilitation Committee as laid down in the Plan of Action.

Child Marriage

The Child Marriage Restraint Act makes marriage of a girl under 18 years of age illegal and punishable. The mean age of marriage is now about 19.3 years compared to around 13 years at the beginning of the century.

Some States have introduced schemes for the girl child to give lump sum incentives to girls who are married after 18 years of age.

Multi-media campaigns have also been conducted in States like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to create public opinion against child marriages and to mobilise social forces to prevent them.

Health and Nutrition

Health and nutrition are the major components of interventions for improvement in the growth and development of children. The initiatives in this direction are multifarious. The Integrated Child Development Services scheme, the largest of its kind in the world, covers nearly 80% of the blocks in the country and provides, inter alia, health check-up, referral services and health and nutrition education to pregnant and lactating mothers and to children in the age group 0- 6 years.

Other initiatives include the Adolescent Girls Scheme, a sub-scheme of the ICDS, the Child Survival and Safe Motherhood Programme, the Universal Immunization Programme, special health check up schemes for primary school students, introduction of health cards in selected areas, evaluation of health programmes, the Mid-day Meal Scheme for primary school children, nutrition education. etc.

In this context, the International Conference on Population and Development, 1994 has given a call for a comprehensive approach to population stabilization wherein reproductive and child health services are seen as major components. These services along with other interventions like safe motherhood, maternal and child nutrition, provision of micronutrients, integration with ICDS are aiming at improvement of the health and nutrition status of children. Nationwide reproductive and child health pilot projects have been initiated from April '96.

At the same time constant efforts through various mass media, folk media etc. are being made to raise the awareness of people/society for improvement of health, nutritional and educational status of the girl and to project positive images of the girl child and remove biases against her.

Government Departments and official statistics have increasingly started enumerating gender specific information in recent years.