

Empowering the Community to Foster Early Child Care

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Question 1: Despite existing national legislation and India ratification of international instruments, what is the present status of child rights in your country?

Indeed, India is a State party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) since 1990 and adopted several Acts to implement it at the national level. The most prominent ones cover topics such as: child labor, juvenile justice, child marriage, free and compulsory education, and protection from sexual offences.

Despite this progressive legislation, we can only regret its little impact on the ground due to challenges in implementation by the concerned authorities.

An alarming data indicates the rapid decline of girl child ratio. It ranges from 826 to 976 births of girls across the different states of India for 1000 birth of male children. It means that girl child negligence resulting in early death, female infanticide, antenatal sex determination and female feticide is increasing. There is a massive effort to be made to save the girl child and to overcome this systemic discrimination.

More generally, if you ever came to India, you know that there are children on the streets starving, not going to school and begging for their survival.

Child labor is still persistent. The 2011 national census of India found the total number of child labourers, aged 5–14, to be at 4.35 million, out of 259.64 million children in that age group. It represents less than 2% but India, with its larger population, still has the highest number of labourers under 14 years of age in the world.

According to a UNICEF report, India stands in 3rd position among countries in the world where child marriages are mostly practiced. Out of 720 million child marriages in the world, India has witnessed 240 million child marriages.

Furthermore, education is a dream for the majority of children, especially girls. Only 33% of the girls in rural areas of the Karnataka state complete their secondary school and about 67% of them do not continue their education after this stage (15-16 years old). Also during the year 2014-15, 175'000 children below 14 years were out of the school in Karnataka.

In addition, it is a challenge for the parents and the State to protect children from sexual offences. The National Crime Records Bureau reported that atrocities against children in India increased by 5.3% in 2015, totalling to 94,172 cases including 37% involving sexual harassment.

Question 2: Would you please briefly describe what are the main activities that Aina Trust carry out to protect child rights? In particular, we are much interested in learning more about its Early Child Care project and the collaboration with BICE in implementing it?

Aina Trust, in partnership with BICE works in the Chickballapur district of Karnataka and has many success stories in supporting children from the age of 0-18 years. As its founding action, Aina has been able to relieve 1,500 child labourers from the silk industries, and rehabilitate them with education, health care and counselling. Their families, especially their mothers have been provided opportunities for income earning and awareness on the need to ensure their children's rights.

After that, Aina observed that young mothers (who replaced the children in the silk factories) often had to carry their children along in the absence of a child care system. Something had to be done to save little children from the hazards of their mothers' workplace. Children were exposed to dust and smoke and lacked attention and stimulation which left them with physical and mental retardation. In order to give them appropriate care, restore their childhood and to prepare them for school, Aina partnered with BICE and, since 2012, it has been providing early child care for now 150 children from 0 to 3 years old annually

Aina identified and trained 30 caregivers so far to welcome and stimulate the children. The caregivers propose a variety of activities to the children: storytelling, songs, outdoor physical exercises, drawing, group games (puzzle, ball games, hide and seek, etc.), educational activities (familiarization with the name of objects, colours, vegetables, fruits, numbers, letters, etc.). The 150 children and their families are also benefitting from dietary supplements and a paediatrician biweekly visit and from free health care in case of emergency.

The whole community is regularly invited to educational sessions on adequate health and nutrition habits, child rights, positive parenting, social and emotional development of children, and environmental sanitation. Prevention sessions are also organized on topics such as: child marriage, abuses and exploitation of children and women, child trafficking, etc.

During the second phase of the project (2015-2018), Aina started to train Anganwadi teachers at cluster and taluk level and have trained about 1200 of them so far on legal issues, child rights, child protection, child development milestones, child care and stimulation, positive discipline, etc. Anganwadi are the early child care centres supposed to provide care for children from 4 to 6 years old but most of the centres are defunct due to lack of motivation, skills and supervision of the Anganwadi caregivers / teachers. The objective of the trainings is to have functioning Anganwadies so Aina could transfer the children from 4 to 6 years old and only care for the 0-3. So far 44 children were transferred. Aina has also played a pre-dominant role in creating awareness among the community on the role of Anganwadies.

In terms of advocacy, Aina works with other NGOs and child rights forums for the advocacy on child rights in general and more specifically on the right to education and early child care. Aina also collaborates on a regular basis with different schemes of the government such as the District Child Welfare Committee and the Juvenile Justice Board. I was for example the Chairperson of the CWC for the Chickballapur district and have been able to influence government policies and programs in favour of child protection.

Recently the Women & Child Development Department of the Government officially assigned Aina to train the government caregivers. Since the last two years, Aina has become a prominent actor in every ICDS activity contrary to the earlier situation.

Question 3: Can you tell us briefly about Aina Trust future strategies in implementing its early child care projects?

To progress towards a 'child-violence-free-state', Aina will scale up its current projects. The organization plans to extend the coverage of its early child care centres in order to take care of more children from 0 to 3 years old. Aina will also continue to work with the government to ensure that the children can be transferred from its centres to the government Anganwadi centres. It will also have to ensure that the Anganwadi centres work well so the children are taken care of adequately and prepared for school. This means that Aina has to continue and multiply the training of the Anganwadies teachers and caregivers in collaboration with the government. We have several ideas of teaching materials that we could develop for the trainings.

Aina's work cannot be done without the local communities. Through its constant presence, regular meetings and discussions on early child care, child rights and their violations, the organization has generated a great level of public support. This close collaboration is essential to ensure the public monitoring of the early child care centres.

Considering the scale of the needs in the targeted region, Aina is willing to share its good practices with other civil society actors. We have started to develop a publication that describes our experiences in setting up child care centres with all our challenges and success. We hope to share this publication with a large number of NGOs and government representatives in a regional seminar at the end of this year.

Aina is also interested in disseminating more awareness material on local and national legislations to inform people about their rights. We also believe that child rights must be part of the school curriculum and we are thinking about developing supporting material on child rights in general and on child abuse/trafficking and child marriage prevention. Aina was already successful in stopping many child marriages and trained a core group of women to prevent girl child trafficking from the railway station.

A particular effort should be made to ensure that rescued children from traffic, abuse or child marriage receive appropriate care. Their reintegration in school should be a priority. Re-establishing a stimulating routine for the children will help them overcome the hardship they faced.