

Involving Men as Fathers in Protection of Children's rights

A Concept Note for the National Consultation

Introduction to work with Men –Over the years there has been a growing acknowledgement of the need to work with men for addressing violence against women and for promoting gender equality. This is important because otherwise the issue gets framed as a women's issue and men's culpability as a 'gender' (group) gets ignored and many men who personally may not use 'violence' get disassociated from this larger gendered social problem. A small but growing body of work has emerged around work with men on violence against women, women's reproductive health and around HIV/AIDS. There is also a growing understanding that men's relationship to power is not limited to gender (female-male) issues and needs to be situated within a more nuanced understanding of masculinities or men's relationship and experience of power, privilege and subordination along different social axes and cultural domains. In India, the work with men on gender issues has thus slowly drawn upon the lessons from the feminist movement as well as from the academic disciplines related to gender studies.

The Centre for Health and Social Justice (CHSJ) and its leadership have been working on issues related to men and gender equality for the last decade or more. In the course of this work CHSJ has generated a large range of associations, experiences and lessons. Some of these lessons are as follows:

- Men can and do get associated with initiatives aimed towards gender equality at the family and community level
- Men also gain from such changes through better relationships at the family level with their spouse and children
- Men are able to experience and express a larger range of emotions, including the ability to deal with the negative aspects of 'anger', and express 'caring' in more positive ways
- This change may not be universally applicable to all men, but those men who are part of this change process also take leadership and mentoring roles in their communities
- The change in understanding on gender-power relations and male privilege in the context of violence against women leads to a better appreciation of discrimination along other social axes including sexual identity and caste based discriminations as well as social issues like son preference and dowry.

Protection of Child Rights in India – India is a signatory of the Child Rights Convention of the UN and also adopted a National Charter for Children in 2003 to reiterate its commitment to the cause of the child in order to see that no child remains hungry, illiterate or sick. In 2002 it made the right to education a fundamental right for all children, in the age group of 6 to 14 years. In February 2007 the National Commission for Protection of Child's Rights was set up to provide speedy trial of offence against children or of violation of child's rights. There are laws on child labour and very recently the Parliament also passed a law protecting children from sexual abuse. Despite an impressive range of protective measures the overall situation of children in India is precarious. On the one hand Indian children suffer from early death, range of morbidities, chronic malnutrition while on the other schooling is not universal and there are huge gender differentials from early life onwards. Girls also bear added burdens of child marriage and early (teenage) pregnancies. To this already precarious situation there is increasing evidence

that they are trafficked, physically abused in schools, sexually abused at homes and outside, and emotionally abused wherever they may be.

There are a large number of civil society efforts for the protection of child rights in India. The Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save Childhood Campaign) has been an iconic civil society effort. An incomplete summary of other interventions would include the rescue and rehabilitation of thousands of child-labour from bonded and semi-bonded conditions in the carpet industry which started in the 80's as some of the early efforts. In more recent time civil society organizations have been part of helping children in distress through the Childline (Government sponsored telephone helpline) mechanism. Some organizations provide shelter and support to children who have been rescued from trafficking or other forms of child abuse. The constitutional amendment for the Right to Education was a result of civil society activism as was the recently passed law on child sex abuse.

Child Protection: Is there a role for Fathers? - Clearly the efforts of state institutions have not been enough to protect the rights and security of children, and high rates of infant mortality or chronic malnutrition are not results of parental neglect or lack of support. But at the same time there are a range of other areas where children do need support, protection and encouragement at home to achieve their potential. There is evidence that shows that a huge proportion of children face emotional abuse at home. Early marriage and pregnancy, differential opportunities for nutrition, education or healthcare, corporal punishment for not following parental instructions are issues that require families to take ownership of the problem and corrective action.

The feminist movement has taught us that the personal is political, and the lack of security and opportunities that children face is not just an issue of state provisioning and accountability. If children are insecure at home then families must take some form of accountability and in families there is disproportionate power in the hands of 'men' in a patriarchal social set up. This same patriarchal set up also creates a situation where men are concerned for their children and show this concern as 'disciplining' which leads to control and corporal punishment. The feminist movement has also taught us to challenge patriarchy and we feel that one way to challenge it is to create a new way to express concern for children through 'caring' and creating opportunities. The work within the family and with fathers does not mean that the work to secure adequate provisions and protection from the state should stop. It only means that 'Fathers' (along with mothers) become the first champion and activist for child rights in the public domain.

The need for this consultation - Our work with men teaches us that men can be involved in the 'welfare' of their families and show their concern for their children through creative and caring ways. They can challenge the preexisting social templates which they otherwise want their children to conform through often intense acts of 'disciplining'. However there is little work which we can identify in India which children's protection has been approached from this perspective. Through this consultation and a continuing engagement with colleagues we hope to create an understanding on whether this provides a sufficiently robust argument for a new operational framework to work with men within a human right and social justice framework. We have invited leading academics, activists and practitioners from gender studies, women's organizations, child rights and those who work with men and others to deliberate on these issues. We hope these discussions will be useful for all participants.