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Children Speak

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A Newsletter of the Organization for the Protection of Children's Rights

Message from the President

It might sound outlandish to discuss female sex vulnerability in a developed country or even in developed agglomerations of the underdeveloped and developing countries where women not only manage large multinational corporations and enterprises but also nurture their family with respect and dignity. But the discrimination of the female child, particularly in the developing world, is a story which statistics cannot deny.

In the emerging economies of India and China, the sex-ratio evidently weighs heavy on the male side. As per the All India Education Survey, India has a female to male ratio of 927:1000 in the 0-6 age group with some states like Punjab heading towards a demographic catastrophe having a ratio of 874: 1000*. The Chinese government has already begun to recognize and grapple with the problem emanating from the region's age-old bias for boys along with the government's draconian one-child policy. It has provided incentives like free education as well as other benefits with families bringing up girl children. The article titled 'Silent Crime against Girls in India' by CRY vividly describes the grim scenario in the country.

Sadly, discrimination of the female child is not restricted to sex-determination and female infanticide but also to denial of nutrition, education and health care. Further, the UNICEF's latest annual

report indicates that more than half a million women die each year because of complications related to pregnancy and childbirth. Of the estimated 536,000 maternal deaths worldwide in 2005, developing countries accounted for more than 99 per cent. About half the maternal deaths (265,000) occurred in sub-Saharan Africa alone and one third took place in South Asia (187,000). **

The report on 'Maternal Mortality – Progress for Children', published by the UNICEF, provides facts and figures which can be downloaded from the UNICEF website. It further estimates that of the 93 million children of primary school age who were not in school in 2006, 48 million were girls.

Girl children are also uniquely vulnerable to sex trafficking – exploited mostly unknown to their economically weak families who send them off to cities to 'earn a living'. The story of the NGO Prajwala in Karnataka, India, particularly that of its founder, Dr. Sunitha Krishnan, provides a peek into the multi-faceted nature of the problem and the institutionalized mechanism that one has to deal with in rehabilitating and protecting destitute girls. We are proud of the



Riccardo Di Done

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September 24 - International Day Of

The Girl Child

Silent Crime Against Girls in India

Over six decades past Independence, India continues to struggle with preference for a male child and severe social restrictions for the girl child. Little has been done to protect the Constitutional rights of the girl child and provide her the level playing field that is being denied to her by an accident of birth. Today girls from middle-class India are shattering glass ceilings with impunity and overtaking boys in every walk of life but there is a vast, silent majority whose lives are fraught with discrimination, denial, and quiet despair. That is if they are allowed to be born at all!

Discrimination takes many forms – sex determination and foeticide even before birth to denial of education, nutrition, health care as the girl child is growing up to

be a woman. This denial also means that only one out of every six girls lives to celebrate her 15th birthday. The other statistic that reflects the dismal state of affairs is the declining female to male ratio which is 927:1000 in the 0-6 age group. While the government has tried to combat this by launching various development and welfare schemes, the situation on the ground provides a different picture. It remains a matter of concern on how far these schemes have been successful in ensuring the rights and privileges of the girl child.

Statistics ought to get everybody very concerned. Every 6th girl child death is due to gender discrimination; every year the number of deaths of the girl child compared to the boy exceeds

300,000; female mortality exceeds male in 224 out of the 402 districts in India.

In terms of basic nourishment, one in every five adolescent boys is malnourished and one in every two adolescent girls in India is undernourished.

While the Indian Constitution declares that "*the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age of 6-14 yrs*" less than 50% of children (6-14 yrs) attend school and over 50 % girls fail to even enrol. Far more girls fail to complete primary school and 53% of girls in the age group of 5-9 years are illiterate. The national literacy rate of girls over seven years is 54% against 75% for boys.

(Source: 7th All India Education Survey, UNICEF & CRY- Child Rights & You)

Programme to Increase School Enrolment for girls in Mauritania

By Roshni Karwal

Mariem Saidou Sall, 11, is in sixth grade at the Sarandougou School in the remote and poor Brakna Region of Mauritania. Like most of her friends and neighbors in the village, she rides the bus to school every morning. The bus is provided as part of a UNICEF-backed programme that supports quality basic education for all, with an emphasis on girls' education.



Mariem Saidou Sall, 11, with her sixth-grade class in Mauritania, where a UNICEF-backed education programme is working to improve enrolment

The long distances from home to school, which are often unsafe to walk alone, can prevent girls from going to school.

The programme

has vastly improved the learning environment by helping to provide separate

Message of the President

untiring efforts of such volunteers who have dedicated their life for the rights of children. Let us hope that next year on September 24 – the International Day of the Girl Child – we would have achieved many more milestones towards sustaining and bettering the future of all our children. ■

**Skewed Sex Ratio In Punjab-A Demographic Catastrophe By Singh D, Kumar A, Vij K,*

Department of Forensic Medicine, Govt. Medical College, Sector 32, Chandigarh

***Progress for Children: A Report card on maternal mortality, UNICEF*

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A Lone Battle Against Sex-Trafficking

By Ashok Mahadevan

As applause erupts around her, 16-year old Seema, dressed in white salwar-kameez, accepts a box containing a pair of gold earrings. Beaming, the slender, elegant girl bends down and touches the feet of the petite woman beside me.

I'm in the courtyard of Astha Nivas, a children's home in the old part of Hyderabad, watching Sunitha Krishnan felicitate students who've done well in their 10th standard exams. Going by the cheerful hubbub, it could be prize-giving day at any girl's school. In fact, most of the 120 children here – some as young as three – are victims of sexual exploitation whom Sunitha has rescued. Many, like Seema, were subjected to ; nearly all are HIV positive. But thanks to the love and attention they receive at Astha Nivas, they have a good chance of overcoming their dark pasts.

Opening a drawer of her office desk, Sunitha pulls out an iron rod with a hook at one end. "This is to protect myself," she says. "If necessary, I'll use it."

She's not joking. Sunitha's actions hurt criminal interests – and they regularly strike back. Since she started her crusade in 1991, Sunitha has been beaten up more than a dozen times. That's why she can't straighten her left arm or hear in her right ear. A Sumo van once deliberately rammed her autorickshaw, but she escaped serious injury. She's had acid flung at her (fortunately it missed), and there's even been a poisoning attempt on her.

Far from being intimidated by all this, Sunitha, 36, has even refused police



NGO Prajwala won the prestigious Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND) International Prize on 15 April 2008. It was adjudged the best project in the world for its outstanding efforts and pioneering work on 'Combating Trafficking of Women and Children through Community Partnership'

protection. She says attacks on her are to be expected given her mission.

Sunitha has always wanted to help other people: as a child, she'd return home from school and teach the neighbourhood children what she'd learned. By her teens, she'd decided to work for the underprivileged, especially women victimized and

disdained by society. She plunged into a number of causes and also got a master's degree in psychiatric social work.

In 1996, Sunitha, an ardent feminist was arrested – along with more than a dozen other activists – for protesting against the staging of the Miss World competition in Bangalore, her hometown. By now her radical views had estranged her from her family, so later she decided to move to Hyderabad where she could make a fresh start.

She soon became involved with the housing problems of slum dwellers. When the homes of people living by the city's Musi River were slated to be bulldozed for a 'beautification'



Dr. Sunitha Krishnan the chief functionary and co-founder of Prajwala

Profile

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Mini-Marathon for Minors near Mumbai



The Shivai Balak Mandar, an educational trust based in Dombivili, a satellite town off the economic capital of India, Mumbai, organized its annual 'Mini Marathon' this year on 27 July 2008.

Meant for children aged 5-14 years, the event this year saw more than 6000 children from different age groups and economic classes in society including designated backward classes from surrounding villages in Kalyan taluka.. The Trust has been unique in that it has been providing free primary and secondary education to children for the past nearly 17

years in the city. The Trust raises funds by organizing an annual agriculture exhibition, 'Hirvai' (meaning greenery) and other such events.

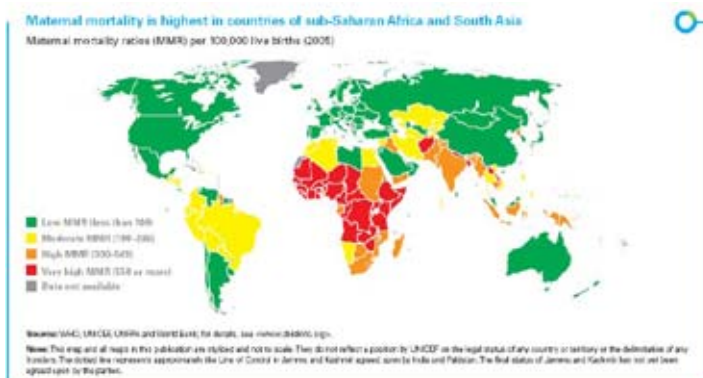
The event is supported by several individual as well as corporate donors and includes special prizes such as bicycles, running shoes, and t-shirts under different categories. . Distances ranged from between 1 km to 15 km based on age group. Some of the sponsors of the event include Hamilton cycles, Rotary Club of Dombivili industrial area, Chidanand Charitable Trust and Shivai Balak Mandir Educational Trust.■



Progress for Children Report Card on Maternal Mortality

Progress for Children: A Report card on maternal mortality details progress in maternal health in countries and regions around the world, and highlights areas where improvements are needed. Maternal mortality is Goal 5 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goal which has set itself a bold target of reducing maternal mortality by

three quarters between 1990 and 2015. Still, each year more than half a million women die from pregnancy-related causes that are avoidable. At the present rate of progress, the world will fall well short of the MDG 5 target.



Book Review

Tube Family

Web Based Information on Family & the Environment

TubeFamily is a web based database that provides quality and pertinent facts designed to generate awareness and promote different cultures among societies worldwide. TubeFamily projects an image based on values and safety while still being entertaining. Its objectives are:

- To create a 24 hours/7 days a week access to information that may help families and youth in their every day decision making;
- To educate the population at large about the issues that youth may encounter throughout their lives;
- To provide information on environmental problems;
- To create family time that would involve sensitizing both parents and their children about the importance of children's protection;
- To create blogs and discussion boards where youth, teenagers and adults can communicate with each other about subjects or situations they may have in common;
- To create blogs and discussion boards where adults may also communicate with each other about certain subjects or even give out advice regarding different situations;
- To create cartoons, shows and games to facilitate learning;

- All to prevent youth crimes and gang involvement by gathering pertinent data to inform youths, parents and society.



Tube Family is an internet multimedia database easily accessible to everyone. Its content is chosen based on the interests of the family and the environment. It focuses initially on providing daily updated information on major problems concerning our youth today that most parents may not

be aware of as well as all pertinent information or questions anyone may have concerning all aspects related to any subjects of interest.

The plethora of information on the

World Wide Web can be overwhelming for individuals who need to rapidly find reliable, current, scientific information on issues affecting children. The objective of this website would be to gather all data about children, teenagers, parents and grandparents and make it available for the common person who simply needs to know some facts that will help them with their own situation. What will distinguish the TubeFamily website from all other websites is that the information will be unbiased and independent of any special interest groups. The researchers who will contribute their findings to the TubeFamily website will be scientists and academics who are autonomous and are free to make their research known to the world.

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project, she organized protests and stalled the scheme.

In early 1997, following a court order, the police evicted prostitutes from Mehboob-ki-Mehendi, a notorious Hyderabad red light area. Carried out with typical bureaucratic ham-handedness, hundreds of prostitutes were suddenly homeless. Desperate many committed suicide.

Sunitha found a friend in arms in a Catholic priest, Jose Vetticatil, who was just as committed to helping the underprivileged. The two met the evicted women who said they wanted their children to be educated so that they, too didn't end up in the sex trade. Sunitha set up a classroom for five children in an empty brothel, and became its first teacher.

As Sunitha grew friendlier with the prostitutes, they began telling her about trafficked children confined in brothels. Sunitha made up her mind to free them.

Because of the danger of violence from traffickers, Brother Jose was dead against the idea. But Sunitha refused to step back. Each rescue was a cloak and dagger operation, dependent on acute information, perfect timing, and a clean getaway. Sunitha had never attempted anything remotely similar, but she trusted her instincts and her informants and was able to pull it off. Initially, the children she rescued were placed in missionary and charitable juvenile homes; later she started her own shelter.

Slowly, 'Prajwala' (meaning eternal flame), as Sunitha and Jose named their organization, took on additional responsibilities. Today, apart from Astha Nivas, the children's shelter, Prajwala has five day schools for the children of prostitutes in Hyderabad and a residential facility in the city called Asha Niketan for rescued adult women. It has also helped other

NGOs set up and run 17 day-care centers for children of prostitutes across the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India.

While the children at Astha Nivas and the day schools are educated up to the seventh standard and then transferred to private high schools, the older victims are trained in a number of useful skills ranging from book binding to masonry and welding. They are then placed with private companies or given a job at Prajwala Enterprises, a small scale unit that mostly makes and sells stationary and furniture.

In its early years, Sunitha had to sell her jewellery and even most of her household utensils to make ends meet at Prajwala. However, soon funds came in from private organizations and corporates.

In 2005, brother Jose died of a heart attack. But Sunitha carried forward the work of Prajwala. Today, with a staff of 200, two thirds of whom are survivors of prostitution, Prajwala has earned an international reputation under Sunitha's leadership, who is regularly consulted in addition to the Indian authorities, by the United Nations and the US government. She has also won several awards, which she has used to strengthen Prajwala's finances.

Sunitha has also single handedly worked in changing the mindset of the state police toward prostitutes. Until recently, the state police, like cops in the rest of India, mostly arrested prostitutes when raided a brothel. Then, at a workshop in 2005, Sunitha convinced Umaphathi and other officers that the true criminals were the traffickers, not the women they had forced into prostitution. Now, the police provide counselling to the victims along with counsellors from Prajwala and other social workers. ■

(Adapted from the Readers Digest October 2008)

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Programme to Increase School Enrolment for girls

latrines for girls, facilities for hand washing, a safe water supply and solar energy equipment. Using a community-based approach, it has improved the environment in modern schools as well as traditional religious schools.

With 75 million children around the world still not enrolled in primary school (and 93 million not attending), UNICEF is working rapidly to achieve the Millennium Development Goal and UNESCO's 'Education for All' goal on ensuring education for all primary school-age children by 2015. And real results have been achieved in recent years in Mauritania, where girls now outnumber boys in primary school enrolment.

The programme has made so much progress in the Brakna region that it is now being extended

to the rest of the country in a partnership between UNICEF and the Mauritanian Government. "We understand today the importance of education – particularly, girls' education which can help us alleviate poverty and improve our future," said Sarandougou Parents' Association President Malal Samba.

The child-friendly principles in evidence at the Sarandougou School reflect Mauritania's commitment to provide quality education. In the spirit of 'Education for All', these principles help to create a space where girls and boys want to be – and where they want to remain in order to complete their schooling. ■

(UNICEF)