Rotating children from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation is integral to the holistic development of children, as it enables them to become active participants in their own development and the development of the Nation.

A child who sells flowers or magazines at a traffic light every day is not just another salesperson, but someone who is deprived of a normal and secured family life, and denied his or her basic rights of nutrition, health, education, and development.

Unfortunately, it is common to see children in vulnerable and difficult situations. At an age where they should be in school and learning, children are married off; engaged in work – in farms, households, restaurants, and in industries; trafficked for labour and sexual exploitation; and exposed to abuse and violence.

According to the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), around 170 million or 40 percent of all children in India are either vulnerable to or experiencing difficult circumstances, such as violence at home, separation from family and street life (Integrated Child Protection Scheme – ICPS).

If we look at sexual abuse, a study conducted by MWCD in 2007 shows that more than 53 percent of all respondents reported to have faced one or more forms of sexual abuse.

Gender-biased sex selection is another important challenge for child protection in India. As per 2011 Census, there are only 914 females to every 1,000 males in the age group of zero to six years. This means that baby girls are largely discriminated over boys at birth.

Child marriage is also preventing girls from going to school, developing skills to get a job and growing to their full potential. The District Level Household Survey or DLHS 2007 indicates that almost one in two women (43 percent of all women aged 20 – 24 years) were married before they turned 18. In fact, India has the record of having the highest absolute number of child brides: about 24 million. This represents 40 percent of the 60 million world’s child marriages.

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Other concerns relate to child labour (according to the 2011 Census India has nearly 12 million working children) and crimes against children (a 24 percent increase, with 33,100 cases, has been reported in 2011 by the National Crime Bureau, which has also recorded 3,422 incidents of trafficking in 2010).

Protecting children from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation in different settings, including family, community and wider society is essential to ensure that they are given all the rights due to them. When children are protected, they develop to their full potential, but when they are exposed to risks, they become vulnerable to getting trapped in the cycle of violence, abuse, and deprivation.

Child Protection and UNICEF

At UNICEF, the vision and approach to child protection is about creating a “protective environment” for all children. This means working together with all stakeholders, including the Government, communities, schools, families, children, Panchayat members, teachers and Anganwadi workers to protect children against all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation. This protective environment, which implies the establishment of a responsive system to address violations of children’s right to protection, has some key elements:

- Government’s commitment to fulfilling children’s right to protection, which is reflected in a strong and sensitive policy for children;
- Appropriate legislation, which safeguards children’s rights, and adequate financial and human resources to implement the laws;
- Promotion of positive social and cultural norms, attitudes, traditions, behaviours and practices, which are essential to address issues such as gender-biased sex selection, child labour, and other protection concerns;
- Creating an atmosphere of open and frank discussions on child protection, including engagement with the media and civil society to raise and address child protection concerns; Building children’s own capacities to protect themselves and demand their rights, through knowledge and skills;
- Enhancing capacities of families, caregivers, and everyone who comes in contact with children, to be able to provide effective care and protection of children;
- Provision of basic and targeted services, including health and education, as well as specific services for children who have been victims of violence, abuse, and exploitation;
- a system that can provide effective monitoring and oversight – both in terms of violations of children’s rights, and to the child protection system as whole.

UNICEF works with government and NGO partners, with communities, the media, academia and children themselves to build and strengthen the protective environment so that children do not get harmed and if this happens, they can rely on buffers which will support them through difficult circumstances and risks.

Strengthening Child Protection in India

UNICEF has been providing technical support to the Ministry of Women and Child Development to support the implementation of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) which provides an excellent opportunity to establish and strengthen a robust preventive and responsive child protection system at state, district, and community level by creating and reinforcing structures, promoting coordination and accountability of all stakeholders.

On the one hand, the scheme provides for setting up village and block level child protection committees, with a mandate to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, and on the other, it ensures that a child sensitive and effective response mechanism is put in place to provide specific services to children who have been victims of any form of violence and exploitation. The scheme also brings with it adequate provisions for financial and human resources to provide a range of services.

One innovative element of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme is the emphasis placed on family and community based modalities of care in lieu of institutions for those children that are deprived and/or separated from their biological family. Global evidence suggest that institutions are not the most
suitable form of care to promote child’s development as children best thrive in family like environments. Traditionally, institutions were used as the most common option for children without families but ICPS is bringing a change as it is trying to promote family care modes by setting guidelines, standards and models for State Governments and their partners. UNICEF is supporting the government in building capacity for this change.

In addition, UNICEF implements a number of programmes that promote the establishment of a protective environment for children at local level in partnership with State Governments, District Administrations, and Civil Society. The focus of these interventions is to strengthen the district and village level child protection mechanisms, ensuring that children are going to school, learning, and not working, to mobilise communities to promote social and cultural norms to address issues such as child marriage, trafficking and child labour, and linking vulnerable families with social protection programmes of the government.

**Changing mind sets**

Traditions and beliefs often contribute to violence, abuse, exploitation and other harmful practices. For instance, corporal punishment in schools is practiced as it is traditionally believed to be a suitable disciplining method for children; and child marriage, even though is influenced by poverty, lack of education, and limited job opportunities for women is also backed up by traditions around marriage and puberty, social norms and expectations around gender roles.

But traditions and beliefs can also be turned into positive ones which can contribute to protecting children. For instance, the value and importance of marriage can be used to ensure that marriage does not become a harmful event in a child’s life but that is instead destined to a person that has reached adulthood and therefore full maturity.

As part of building the protective environment, changing beliefs and norms becomes a long-term sustainable solution. For this purpose, it is not just individual’s views that require a change but the collective opinion. UNICEF works with its partners to promote awareness of communities, families and children on social norms that are harmful to children; to identify role models that can campaign for a change; to mobilise entire communities to resist harmful practices; and to empower girls through life skills development and safe spaces for discussions.

Although child protection is often concerning invisible aspects of children’s lives, if not ensured, it may have an enormous impact on children’s lives and cause an endless loss for the Nation. Creating systems and strengthening structures to protect children will contribute to giving children a joyful and thriving life and will lead to advancing humanity.

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**Cabinet approves ban on hiring children below 14**

The Union Cabinet has approved a proposal for amending the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986, to ban employment of children aged up to 14 in any form of industry. It will be an offence to employ such children not only in factories or industries but also in homes or on farms, if their labour is meant to serve any commercial interest.

The Ministry of Labour is likely to introduce the amendment bill in Parliament soon. Quoting the National Sample Survey Organisation’s figures, official sources said the amendment would benefit 46 lakh children, who have been working in various industries now, and they can concentrate on education.

The Cabinet also approved another amendment to define children aged 14-18 as “adolescents” and prohibit their employment in mines, explosives industries, chemical and paint industries and other hazardous establishments. The government’s decision is in line with the convention of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which prohibits any form of child labour until the age of 14.

Since the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or RTE now stipulates compulsory and free education of children up to the age of 14, the upper age limit in the Child Labour Act has been kept at 14. The RTE, which makes education fundamental right of a child, was passed by Parliament on August 4, 2009. It sets forth the modalities of free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14.