



## **On the Record: Global Movement for Children**

### **Issue 14: Lobbying by Children**

#### **From the AP Editorial Desk**



#### **Razia Ismail and Andal Damodaran Try to Mobilize Indian NGOs before the Special Session**

##### **Razia Ismail**

The Global Movement for Children is more useful to community-based activists than the Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to two veteran NGO lobbyists from India, who are working hard to strengthen Indian NGOs in the run-up to the Special Session.

Razia Ismail is South Asia Facilitator for the NGO Committee on UNICEF and a founding director of the Women's Coalition for Peace and Development, a New Delhi-based NGO. She is working hard with Andal Damodaran, President of the Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) to make sure that NGOs from South Asia make an impact at the Special Session on Children, in May. This involves lobbying, and networking, at the national and international level.

In an important insight, they are finding that the Global Movement complements the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in ways they had not anticipated. "The Convention has proved to be a more powerful tool for lobbying governments," says Damodaran. "But the ten Say Yes points are more accessible and useful for frontline activists. They also help us convince grassroots groups that the GMC and the SSC really can make a difference to the children they are helping every day."

At the international level, Ismail and Damodaran are concerned by the fact that while India has the largest number of children in the world, Indian NGOs have had relatively little impact in the run-up to the Special Session. NGOs from the region were barely noticeable at the third and final preparatory meeting for the Special Session which took place in June last year.

Ismail is working with non-governmental actors throughout South Asia to help each country establish their own branch of the NGO Committee. India and Sri Lanka are currently the only two countries who are making concrete headway towards this goal.

Damodaran says preparatory plans for the Special Session are heating up, and that the Indian government plans to send approximately 25 NGO representatives to the Special Session. But

they have found it difficult to convince local activists that the Special Session is important to their work.



### **Music to the Rescue: MTV and UNICEF join forces to launch the Rallying Call.**

It does not help that for the purposes of the UN meeting, South Asia does not have its own representative caucus. "India has always been lumped in with the Asia-Pacific regional caucus," says Damodaran. "But the issues and solutions coming from our region are very different than those affecting countries such as the Philippines or Australia. People in those countries don't share our concerns about child marriage or basic sanitation, for example."

In India itself, Damodaran and Ismail are also working together to mobilize Indian NGOs to participate in the Global Movement for Children under the auspices of the India Alliance for Child Rights, which was formed in July 2001 as a cross-sector alliance of citizens, activists, government officials, young people, academics, and professionals. The Alliance has so far held two of five regional conferences to mobilize child rights proponents at local, national, regional and international levels.

As the Alliance comes together, it is becoming clear that one of the key organizing principles will be to connect children's rights to other vital issues - women's rights, the struggle for religious freedom, tolerance to environmental justice.

Another will be to avoid what Ismail calls "a top-down, Western imposed model of activism."

"This Alliance must develop organically from the grassroots up," she says. "This has to be a community-based effort that incorporates democratic principles of operation. We will make a collective decision about the structure and style of our group."

### **Building Bridges Between International Agencies**

In March 2000, UNICEF's India country office saw an opportunity to re-establish children's rights as a priority issue for the world's oldest multilateral political organization—the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

UNICEF staff traveled from India to Havana, Cuba that month to lobby the IPU's president, Dr. Najma Heptulla who happened to be an Indian and Deputy Chair of the Rajya Sabha or Upper House. Heptulla was elected for a three-year term as the IPU President in 1999.

The goal was to persuade the Union to put children's rights high on the agenda of their next meeting, which was slated to conclude in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, on September 15, 2001 - a mere four days before the Special Session on Children was originally scheduled to take place.

**Target Audience: However they operate, at the national or international level, all NGO networks should be working for children.**

"We wanted to revive the IPU's relationship with UNICEF, which used to participate in meetings as observers," says Savita Naqvi-Varde, UNICEF India's Communications Chief. "In Havana, I stayed up four nights in a row to lobby everyone. Renewing old partnerships and making new ones, after all, is an integral part of the GMC in our minds."



Naqvi-Varde points out that the India office also felt they had an important strategic role to play on the international stage as a leading non-aligned member of the developing world and one that was making a viable bid for a Security Council seat. She points out that India had long played a key role in the struggle of global justice from the country's own battles with the British colonial empire to their key support of non-violent resistance to apartheid in South Africa. Weeks after the Havana meeting concluded, Naqvi-Varde learned that their lobbying efforts had succeeded.

"Protecting and Caring for Children: The Driving Force of Future Society" was one of two main resolutions adopted by the IPU on September 14th at their 106th annual conference. The document calls upon member states to ratify and implement international child rights treaties from the Convention on the Rights of the Child to ILO Conventions regarding child labor.

The resolution also identifies twelve priorities for securing children's rights in the new century: poverty, discrimination, the girl child, disabled children, health, education, torture and violence, child labor, sexual exploitation, children in armed conflict, juvenile justice and street children. Members are urged to pass child-friendly legislation, fund social welfare programs for children, and incorporate children's welfare into national budgets and governmental directives.

UNICEF India staff remain hopeful that IPU members will share their commitments to child rights with UN member states at the May Special Session. Plans for a parallel meeting of parliamentarians are also being discussed.