



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

### **Issue 16: Listening to Children**

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

Anaga Dalal, the author of this campaign's pages, listens to the children of Delhi:

During my visit to the Center for Advocacy and Research, in East Delhi, I ask some of the children how the tension between India and Pakistan is affecting their lives and the room electrifies. "Only children will suffer if war breaks out," says Nirmal. "Children will be less interested in going to school and they will become orphaned."

When I ask this room of Hindu children if they now react differently to Muslim children, many confess that even though children should not be treated differently because of their religion, there are certain boundaries. "It's okay to have Muslim friends at school," says one young girl, "but I would never visit their home nor would I invite them to mine."

Nine of the twelve children gathered here say they have Muslim friends. One boy says that Muslims don't exactly want to play with them either. Nirmal says his best friend is Muslim and even though his mother tells him not to share food with him, he does it anyway. 11 year old Neesha says she looks Muslim and is afraid to make friends with Muslims because she fears they may convert her. Nirmal adds that caste discrimination is just as bad as religious discrimination, especially in his hometown in Rajasthan.



When the subject of gender discrimination comes up, Nirmal says he recently saw a film about child marriage in Rajasthan and knows families that continue to practice this custom. "Child marriage exploits children," he says. "A girl loses her freedom to grow up when she is married as a child."

Heena says that she feels elders never listen to her

because she's a girl. Her friend next to her agrees. Seven year old Neha says that she attends public school even though her younger brother attends a much more prestigious convent school. "I'd like to go to private school too," she says. "But my father died in an auto accident in 2000 and I don't want to pressure my mother. Anyway, I'm just happy to be in school in the first place." But several boys say that girls aren't disciplined as harshly as boys in school and that when one boy gets in trouble, the whole class has to stand up and be punished, which doesn't happen in girls' schools.

When it comes to their dreams and aspirations for the future, the gender divide fades away. Both girls and boys want to be doctors, engineers, police investigators. Of course, the usual divides also surface. For instance, more boys want to be soldiers and more girls want to be teachers (ones, they say, who would never beat their students), but overall none of the children in this room thinks there are limits to what they can accomplish in life.

"It took a while to make these children feel so bold," says Rizwan, a researcher from CFAR "They were much more shy when they came here almost a year ago. But by using the ten points of the Say Yes program, we've been able to encourage critical thinking about their rights."

At least in this microcosm of Indian society, the rights of children are taken seriously. The challenge is to translate this into action outside the four walls of this little room.