

# THE CHILD AT THE CENTRE: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON MISSION VATSALYA

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Children - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Schemes designed for social good do well on intent, but their success depends on whether they are built on principles of sustainability and work within structures of accountability. While the Centre's intent to provide 'integrated benefits to children and women' is behind the comprehensive revamping of the Department of Women and Children's schemes, is this a rejig constructed with rules that will ensure maximising benefit for shareholders — women and children? Mission Vatsalya, which has been operationalised, is one of the new triad of schemes along with Mission Shakti, and Poshan 2.0, that aims at securing a healthy and happy childhood for every child. Components under Mission Vatsalya include statutory bodies; service delivery structures; institutional care/services; non-institutional community-based care; emergency outreach services; training and capacity building. The impact of this on one of the pillars of India's child protection services, the ChildLine, has been giving child rights activists sleepless nights. ChildLine (1098), the 24-hour toll free helpline for children in distress, will be manned by the Home Affairs Ministry under Mission Vatsalya, Union Minister Smriti Irani said last year, citing the need to 'preserve data sensitivity'.

ChildLine has been in operation for over 25 years, growing gradually to become one of the largest global networks to assist and rescue children in distress. It has functioned as a public-private partnership between the government and civil society organisations to provide a first-responder safety net, and kick start the process of rescue and rehabilitation of children. A road map to implement the scheme is not yet available, but it is understood that police personnel will first answer the call, handing over implementation to NGOs later. This flies in the face of the facts invoked while setting up the ChildLine in 1996 — children do not feel comfortable confiding in police personnel. It also sought to reduce the burden on the police force, by invoking their assistance only if the circumstances necessitated it. This was proven beyond doubt during a short-lived experiment in Chennai around 2003 when ChildLine calls were diverted to All Women Police Stations (AWPS) — they were inundated with calls, hampering regular work. Sometimes, all the children wanted was to spend some time talking to someone, or they were making multiple blank calls before they picked up the courage to tell all. In many cases, police intervention was not needed at all. The old system was hurriedly revived, and order restored. The Centre will do well to incorporate these responses as it sets out a road map for a key aspect of child protection. Above all, it must consider the issue from the perspective of the key beneficiary of this scheme — the child — and make sure that his/her safety, security and happiness are ensured in a bond born of trust, necessarily going beyond the letter of the law.

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