

# The Telegraph

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# Child helpline comes of age

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**New Delhi, May 29:** Children are no longer afraid to call to complain about bad behaviour or abuse and seek help, or so the figures say.

Data from India's only child helpline have revealed that the number 1098 recorded over 93 lakh calls from children between April 2015 and March 2016, more than double the calls it received in the same period the year before.

This seems to mean that the country's first toll-free tele-helpline — Childline — that minister Maneka Gandhi started in the 1990s for street children has become the go-to number for children across the country when anything troubles them.

Those who call the helpline most often are 11 to 14-year-olds. Sixty per cent of the callers are boys.

Even parents aren't spared. "Children call up to complain about their parents quarrelling, about their teachers scolding them or even about how their mother has refused them money for pizza," Maneka, who had started the helpline as Union minister for social justice and empowerment, said.

"However, about 20 per cent of the calls concern serious issues of abuse, missing or lost children, child labour and trafficking. That so many children are calling up means we are being successful in reaching them," Maneka, now women and child development minister, added.

Of the 93 lakh calls, some 56,582 reported abuse while around 46,000 children called up to seek medical aid or shelter.

There were 9,513 calls from parents who asked for help to find missing or lost children. Around 16,000 children called

## GO-TO NUMBER

*Some facts that emerged from helpline figures*

- 40 per cent calls from rural India
- 150-200 calls per month related to online abuse and harassment
- 11-14-year-olds call up the helpline most often
- 60 per cent of the callers are boys

saying they were lost and needed help.

"We have partners across the country and as soon as the calls come in we pass on the information to our teams for direct intervention, which could mean rescuing children, filing police complaints or presenting a child to child welfare committee. When calls come in, it's the job of the staff to make the child feel at ease and to get as much information as possible without spooking them," said Nishit Kumar, head, communication and strategic initiatives, Childline.

Those who man the 1098 call centres mostly have mas-

ter's degrees in social work, sociology or psychology and are trained for two weeks every year to make them conversant with new laws and technologies.

Highlighting the trend of children speaking out against abuse, Kumar spoke of a call they got from a Class VII student of a school in Andhra Pradesh who complained against the principal.

Investigations by a Childline team later revealed that as many as 15 girls were being molested by the principal, who has since then been arrested and charged under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.

Another caller, a 10-year-old, said her employer beat her up for minor mistakes. "I was punished for every small mistake and the lady of the house often beat me up if I failed to obey her orders," the girl from Titagarh, Bengal, said.

"The girl was rescued a day after the call was made and her employers were booked under the Juvenile Justice Act and the anti-child labour act. We also get calls from children to complain about their par-

ents," Kumar said.

The helpline also gets crank calls and abusive calls, which numbered 14 lakh in 2015-2016, while as many as 27 lakh called the number but didn't speak.

"The silent callers are worrisome as they call us but don't tell us anything. While we can track their locations, we don't know exactly where they are.

"Sometimes, we can hear trains behind them or hear railway announcements, so we know they are at a station. Most of these children are those that run away from home, drawn by the glamour of a big city," Kumar said.

"Many of them call back within 2-3 days and can be sent back to their villages," he said, adding that disappearing public phones has been a major cause for concern for Childline.

It is for this reason that Maneka has decided to reinvent Childline, which has a presence now in over 20 railway stations.

The target is to have 200 Childline kiosks at key stations across the country as also a mobile-based application.

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