

## Working for India's women and children

28 May 2016, New Delhi, Tania Ameer



In an exclusive interview with Millennium Post, Women & Child Development Minister Maneka Sanjay Gandhi talks about the work done in the past two years and her focus on improving safety, empowerment, and nutrition standards.



### What are the significant changes that the Ministry has brought about in the past two years?

We have achieved a lot in the past two years. Some of the changes brought about by our Ministry have been significant game-changers. Firstly, we have been able to achieve major success in enhancing safety for women - panic buttons on mobile phones which will be mandatory from January 1, 2017, the establishment of One Stop Crisis Centres, 33 percent reservation for women in police, and the operationalization of Mahila Police Volunteers in each village. These four areas will add to the defence and safety of women in India. We have 150 One Stop centres to be completed by the end of this year. My ultimate goal is to have more than 600 of them in place. Next, we have made a lot of progress in enhancing the safety of children. We have revised the guidelines for adoption, foster care, launched the Khoyapaya web portal (for tracking missing children), as well as put up posters in railway train compartments (also for missing children). One of the best initiatives is Childline, i.e. Children's Helpline--1098. Childline solved 1.1 million children-related problems just last month. Every day we get about 40,000 calls from children. One major success has been the Beti Bachao programme which has done phenomenally well in arresting the decline in sex ratio at birth in the first 100 districts that we implemented it in. Encouraged by the results, we have decided to implement the programme in another 61 districts.



### How does the Ministry plan to curb malnutrition?

To tackle malnutrition, we have a three-pronged strategy. Firstly, we are training women sarpanch to make sure that they are empowered to implement the programmes effectively in their villages. On a pilot-project basis, we recently concluded a training programme for them in Rajasthan. These trained sarpanches will also oversee the work done by anganwadi women. Secondly, the entire process of functioning and training of anganwadi women itself has also been modernised, with tablets and smartphones being issued to them to monitor and collate real-time information. Lastly, the standard and quality of food has to change. Whether it is made in anganwadis, self-help groups, or by contractors, the food is very bad. We have suggested standardisation of the food being served across India, keeping in mind local conditions of a particular state, which can then customise the menu as per their need. From this year, we will be building one lakh anganwadis per year, improving the quality of food being served there, training anganwadi workers and also giving them devices to monitor data in real-time. We have also given anganwadi women incentives like promotion and insurance to boost their morale. We have now imposed a ban on them for working as political workers.

### In Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 new borstals are to be set up. Is that happening?

Setting up of borstals (observation centres for juvenile offenders) is on the anvil. We have asked for funds for that and as soon as it is cleared, work should begin. Very few people are aware that we are the first country to ban the sale of tobacco to minors. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 also covers Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) and foster Care. The Draft Model Rules under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015 have been recently released and we will take suggestions from stakeholders before we notify it. The JJ Act was passed by Parliament and it came into effect on January 15, 2016. The Act mandates that the JJ Board and the Children's Courts adhere to the best interests of children with the objective of rehabilitating and reintegrating them back into the society.

### Tell us about the economic empowerment of women.

Mahila E-Haat is one of the significant programmes that we have started and this should eventually lead to the formation of Women's Entrepreneur Council for economic empowerment and upliftment of women. One day, it will be as big as ASSOCHAM and FICCI. The Council will emerge from this website. In Mahila E-Haat, we let women making anything, including goods and services, register on the portal. They put up their products on their website

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free of cost and then we help them get buyers. The Women's Entrepreneur Council will work as an advisory council comprising only of women to advise the government on entrepreneurship, work related matters, issues of unorganised sector among other things. Once we get a substantial number of women in this (Mahila E-Haat), they will each get a vote. They will vote for the district, state, and the national women's entrepreneur councils. These are our plans for this site over a year when it stabilises.

**The government plans to introduce an anti-trafficking legislation. Could you tell us a little more about it.**

We will release a draft Anti-Trafficking Bill on May 30. It has been formulated to look at the issue of trafficking in a holistic manner and provide an institutional response to the problem. This is again a first in India. The Bill will be open to suggestions from stakeholders. The entire kidnapping, trafficking, and safety issues connected with women and children will come under its ambit.

We are already working very seriously on the issue of child trafficking with the Ministry of Railways. Identified NGOs and railway authorities have been trained to identify and assist trafficked children who are being taken on trains. We have also put up posters in train compartments to facilitate citizen participation in tracking traffickers/kidnapped/runaway children. We have rescued thousands of children with their help. We just concluded an International Conference on the issue with countries like Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The deliberations focused on trafficking and all countries agreed to cooperate on the issue.

**The Widow centre has been recently started in Vrindavan. Tell us about this project.**

We are constructing a special Home for one thousand widows at Vrindavan, Mathura. Set up under the "Swadhar Greh Scheme" of the WCD Ministry, this will be the largest ever Home for widows established and/or funded by the Government. Construction on the widows' Home will be done by October this year. It will be a Home with a difference since widows will be able to learn and acquire skills that will enable them to use their time productively. The shelter home will give these widows a new lease of life.

We have carried out a survey of women in mental asylums - the first since Independence. In our survey, we found that many women have been abandoned by their families. Some of them have even forgotten their names, where they come from and who they are. We are going to take out these women and place them in the widows' centre at Vrindavan so that they get a new life.

**What is your vision for the Ministry in the coming years?**

My plan is to strengthen the programmes that we have started. The focus is on economic empowerment of women, tougher anti-trafficking systems, better nutrition programmes, and the establishment of One Stop centres across the country. The Ministry's efforts have seen seven states/UTs enforce 33 percent reservation for women in police. Our aim is to spread this programme nationwide. Training of sarpanches will create 2 lakh women who are politically empowered and aware. So we will bring these women forward from the grassroots level into mainstream politics.

*(Tania Ameer is Special Correspondent, Millennium Post.)*



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