

FORCES Charter of Demands for the 2014 Elections**

An Appeal to Citizens voters, Members of Parliament contesting candidates and Political Parties.

Many things we need can wait. The child cannot. Now her bones are being formed, her mind developed. To her we cannot say 'tomorrow'. Her name is Today.

Gabriela Mistral

India is home to the highest child population in the world, and children under six comprise 158.8 million and constitute 13.1 per cent of the total population. The first six years of life of the child are critical and have a lasting and cumulative impact on the quality of life of a human being. The quality of interventions, of health, nutrition, development and education and care at this phase determine the health and well being of a person through the entire lifespan.

But this critical phase in the young child's life gets very low priority in policies, programmes and budgets in spite of the indicators pointing to the need for greater investment in resources and a more serious policy thrust. So far, less than one percent of the budget has been spent on children under six.

The National Policy for Children (2013) reiterates that children are the nation's supremely important asset. However, despite more than six decades of national development, today the burden of such development and the ensuing deep social crisis is being borne by the most vulnerable section of children and women/ mothers, testifying to the highly iniquitous nature of our development paradigm. *The much touted high growth rates have been accompanied by unacceptably high levels of mortality rates of young children and mothers, steep decline in child sex ratios indicating a crisis of survival of the girl child, astronomical levels of malnutrition, among many other shocking indices, all of which point to a national crisis of humungous proportions.*

Some of the shocking facts are:

The Maternity Mortality Rate is 212 per thousand live births.

The Neo-Natal Mortality Rate is 34 per 1000 live births.

The Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) is 47 per 1000 live births with the proportion of female deaths being higher.

Only 46% of children are exclusively breastfed for the first six months.

Eighty per cent of children between 6 -35 months are anaemic.

The Child Sex Ratio (CSR) has plummeted from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011

More than 75% of the population lives in households with per capita calorie consumption less than the daily minimum requirements of 2100 calories for urban areas and 2400 calories for the rural areas.

The alarming indicators point to the need for urgent policy thrusts to deal with the situation on an emergency basis. The family cannot be held solely responsible for the care of children. It is a social responsibility, particularly when the family is itself facing the burden of the crisis and unable to meet the care needs of children. The burden of care falls on the mother who is weighed down with the double burden of child care and work outside the home to make ends meet. Both the mother and the child require urgent and serious policy attention in order to address the interlinked needs of the mother and the child

The National Policy for Children 2013 emphasises that the rights of children are interrelated and interdependent and each one of them is equally important and fundamental to the well-being and dignity of the child. It is time to translate some of our ideas and documents into action so that we can make a significant change in the lives of our women and children.

Three core areas that are interlinked and need urgent attention are: 1) food and nutrition; 2) health services and 3) child care with age specific interventions.

Our Demands:

- 1) **Safety and Protection for Young Children.** Every Child is entitled to quality Day Care and Crèches through ICDS, Statutory Creches including those under MNREGA. There is need for scaling up all these to ensure universal coverage.
- 2) **Universal Maternity Entitlements for All Women.** Every woman should be entitled to maternity entitlements especially women in the informal sector. As per the Supreme Court ruling of November 20, 2007, the Age Eligibility and the Parity Criteria should be done away with and the benefits of the National Maternity Benefit Scheme should be available to “every woman irrespective of the number of children and the age of the woman”. This should be adjusted to the cost of living index and tied to the minimum wages. Every pregnant and lactating mother should be provided free meals during pregnancy and for six months after childbirth through the local anganwadi.
- 3) **Strong Planning and Implementation policies and programmes to Arrest the Declining Sex Ratios of Children Under Six.** There should be a vigilant implementation of the PCPNDT Act.
- 4) **Vigilant and vigorous implementation of the National Food Security Act, 2013** with strong guidelines and rules for ensuring locally produced, diverse and culturally appropriate, hot cooked nutritious food.
- 5) **Comprehensive legislation for rights of children under six** for development, i.e. nutrition, health, protection, care and early learning.
- 6) **Appropriate remuneration, working conditions and status of all the frontline care and service personnel** engaged in services for children under six. This should

be accompanied by the requisite training for developing a professional cadre of AWWs, ASHAs and Helpers

- 7) **Appropriate inter sectoral convergence** (between health, nutrition, sanitation and water departments) with empowered structures and decentralised budgets at all levels, starting from the national level to the gram panchayats and municipalities to deliver comprehensive quality child care services.
- 8) **GDP Allocations- At least 3% of the Gross Domestic Product amount to be spent on this critical age group of young children.**

We appeal to all to use this opportunity of the coming General Elections of 2014 to stand up and be counted and pressurise, lobby with all those in public life, in politics to demand a commitment to the young child. By doing we are only ensuring our own future.

*** FORCES (Forum for crèche and child care services) is a national advocacy network with 8 state chapters. The secretariat is located in CWDS, New Delhi.*