

Towards a Better Investment in the Rights of the Child

By

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This submission¹ is an outcome of a series of experiences of the author and practices brought into being by her in the course of her work as the head of an organization which she founded for the welfare of the destitute children and women.

Maher, the name of the organization, meaning mother's home in the local language, was founded in 1997 basically for sheltering and rehabilitating the destitute and abused women. It was however soon found that a woman, forsaken by her husband and relatives, hardly ever came alone. She almost invariably carried with her a child or two whose care and nurture too became a part of her own rehabilitation. As a result, Maher also, over the years, became a child care centre cum orphanage- the role it has played, we feel, in an exemplary way.

In many ways Maher has been a unique institution. This uniqueness of its character has abundantly helped in the shaping of the personality of children under its care and creating a natural atmosphere for the protection of their fundamental rights. In fact it has helped Maher to go beyond the minimum needed for the protection of the rights of its children.

The developmental aspect: The personal and social development of the child

A system that dovetails needs and rights of children and women

Over the years, Maher has evolved a unique system that takes care of a child's emotional and economic needs. As a home that works for rehabilitation of both women and children, it has evolved a system of a chain of children's homes that has successfully dovetailed the needs and rights of children and women both.

A children's home at Maher consists of a group of around 20 children looked after by two women known as housemothers who also at one time came to Maher for help and shelter and who are responsible for the academic progress and health of the children under their care. This arrangement meets several purposes. On the part of children, it ensures fulfillment of not only bodily but emotional needs as well. The housemothers are taught to be loving mothers for the children under their care and this is ensured

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through periodical meetings and training sessions of housemothers. Thus for the housemothers, their rehabilitation is sought not through the conventional mode of finding them means of livelihood (though Maher does not play down the importance of this effort) but through creating a situation that takes care of their need for raising a family through an emotional bond with a child. This ensures them a relatively peaceful mental state which in turn sustains the well-being of the children too.

There are 28 such children homes at Maher scattered throughout the area of Maher activity- various villages surrounding Vadhu as also elsewhere in Maharashtra, Kerala and Jharkhand. Maher does not believe in creating a monolithic structure intended to house a large number of children at one place. While it may look impressive enough since it makes the work very obvious, it hampers assimilation of children into the mainstream and creates a segment apart. Maher does not believe in raising children in a cloistered atmosphere in a world of their own. On the other hand it wants children to bloom along with the children in normal families.

This is also a reason why Maher does not have a school of its own. Apart from the financial feasibility of such a project, a separate independent school would again impede an unfettered development of the child and their assimilation into the mainstream. Maher has opened children's homes in different villages to make the community responsible for the welfare of children.

The quintessential principle of inter-faith culture

The principle of *sarvadharmasamabhava* (respect for all religions) or an unflinching trust in the inter-faith culture is another inseparable part of the uniqueness of Maher's character. In a world riven by communal hatred and religious bigotry, educating children in harmonious and peaceful living need not be overemphasized. This is something that a child in a normal family may miss but an institution of the kind of Maher can most effectively do. For such an institution has no religion, caste or faith of its own but has regard for all faiths and ideologies. At Maher, it is customary on important occasions to display in reverence a copy of the Holy Koran, Bible, Bhagavad Gita and other holy books. At all its centers of activity, a board depicting emblems symbolizing diversity of faiths greets visitors. The inauguration of a new project is blessed by religious teachers from different faiths. Children have gala time celebrating festivals of all religions. These childhood memories are going to last in their mind lifelong and will permanently create in their mind a strong bias for an interfaith culture and harmonious living. The Maher prayer is addressed to a God that cuts across all religions and is looked upon as the Omni-potent Creator of the Universe. Maher's management as well as staff has Parsees, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Buddhists at all levels. We at Maher feel this Maher ethos is a product of these healthy practices followed by the organization since its inception and has been having a very potent and positive effect on the delicate mind of its children. That is something that Maher feels deeply proud of.

The financial aspect: resource mobilization, allocation and disbursement

The resources are channelized, allocated and disbursed within the Maher model in such a way that these are optimally utilized for the purpose for which they were mobilized.

Maher manages a total of thirty-four homes in different parts of the country, 28 of these being for children, five for women and one for men. Each house has a social worker, two housemothers and around 25 to 30 children.

The vegetables and grocery are purchased in bulk at the main centre, based at Vadhu, from where to each home vegetables are sent every week and grocery every month. In case of additional requirements, the concerned housemother or the social worker is free to place the additional demand at the Vadhu office which then arranges to send the required items.

At Vadhu, a social worker in charge of petty cash transfers some advance to social workers in charge of various homes who spend in accordance with the need and demand of the home under their charge. The social worker is responsible for the accounting transactions of the home under him. It is he who hands over the accounts of his home to the Vadhu Office which in turn sends it to Maher Head Office at Pune. There is a through scrutiny of the vouchers submitted to the Pune Office, normally on the 1st of every month. The Pune office makes cash disbursements to the Maher centers in other states through the Canara Bank, one of India's reputed nationalized banks.

The system has been working impeccably for the last 17 years thanks to the efficient visualization, and honest and dedicated staff.

Towards the realization of a child's rights

For the last seventeen years Maher has been working toward creating an environment that is best suited for the realization of a child's rights.

In keeping with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children, we may here consider in the context of Maher's mission the four fundamental rights which the Convention feels all children are born with.

■ RIGHT TO SURVIVAL, INCLUSIVE OF RIGHT TO LIFE, HEALTH AND WHOLESOME NUTRITION:

With neonatal mortality rate (death within the first 28 days of life) in India standing at 31 deaths per 1000 live births, a child's right to survival needs to be provided the most urgent attention from its parents or care providers. With 800 children under its care divided among 28 houses, Maher workers face a Herculean task of providing health care and wholesome nutrition to each and every one of them. As mentioned above, each house is managed by two housemothers who undergo a periodical training in child care and nutrition, and kitchen management. Additional housemothers are appointed in case of the house with children below 6 years of age.

The housemothers are provided with a set but flexible time schedule with regard to healthcare, discipline, value education, prayer, study, sports, food, and skill development. Above all they are reminded that they are not the employed care takers but mothers to the children under their care who must be treated with

love and understanding. The emotional development of the child is a vital part in child health care and survival and in the training and interactive sessions this fact is underlined.

■ **RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT, INCLUSIVE OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION, CARE, LEISURE, RECREATION, CULTURAL ACTIVITIES**

The right to proper education and personal development follows the assurance of survival of the child. As mentioned above, one of the housemothers in each Maher house is allotted the responsibility of taking studies for the children in the house and looking after their extracurricular development. Maher has well-developed troupe of child artistes who perform on every important occasion. The troupe was invited to UK and regaled the British audience many times during its month long stay in the country.

Maher supplements the regular academics with extra coaching in such performing skills as tabala and harmonium playing, singing, dancing, drawing and Taekwondo. Additionally the exposure programs include a common prayer, meditation, Anapan, yoga, exercise, leadership development, career guidance, formation of a Maher government, summer sports camp, effective non-violent communication and others. A Maher library and a computer training centre exist too.

Children who have had no opportunity for formal education and are overage now are admitted to National Open School.

The proof of identification is an important matter. In case the child has no name, the name is given on the basis of the child's antecedents. Admission to school is obligatory and birth certification is obtained for the purpose.

■ **RIGHT TO PROTECTION, INCLUSIVE OF THE RIGHT TO PROTECTION FROM EXPLOITATION, ABUSE, NEGLECT; FROM DISCRIMINATION BASED ON CASTE, RELIGION, GENDER, NATIONAL ORIGIN, COLOR AND DISABILITY; FROM SEXUAL EXPLOITATION; FROM ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND FROM PHYSICAL HARM**

The child is a highly vulnerable and fragile being and as such needs to be protected from the evil influences in the world around.

In a section above, the tradition of inter-faith culture at Maher has already been explained. Maher is not aligned to any religion and Maher children come to imbibe this principle right from their childhood. Children and women are admitted to Maher without any prejudice to their caste and religion.

There is a possibility of a child being already sexually abused in which case special counseling is organized for the child. Training in sex education for children is regularly organized. The house mothers and social workers too are asked to note any behavioral changes in child so as to spot sexual abuse, if any, at the right time.

Maher opens an account in the name of every child on its roll. Money received from parents when they exist is deposited in this account. In case of a child being admitted to Maher already being a victim of

economic exploitation at the hands of employers or family members, the Maher social workers meet with the employers or family members and seek to redress injustice with the child, if any, through recovery of wages or a piece of family property or other assets.

Housemothers have been instructed not to raise their hand against children and do their best to give a patient hearing to children.

■ **RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION, INCLUSIVE OF THE RIGHT TO EXPRESSION, INFORMATION AND TO PRACTICE OF ONE'S44 RELIGION**

Maher children are given full opportunity to participate in public functions which are numerous and are happening throughout the year. Besides multi-religious festivities, these include anniversaries and inaugurations of Maher projects, weddings, annual sport camp and annual social.

There is a Maher Parliament which consists of members elected by Maher children and also a cabinet in charge of various administrative responsibilities. This facilitates training in democratic values, acceptance of criticism and development of a tolerant attitude.

Concluding remarks

Twentieth November 1989 will go down as the milestone in the history of the rights of children the world over. The day is marked by a realization by the United Nations that the human rights of the children needed to be protected. The resulting Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely signed human rights treaty in history,' has no doubt ushered in an awareness of the supremely important role of the rights of the child in the human development. It is now up to the governments of the countries and the non-governmental organizations within them to render a concrete shape to the objectives of the Convention.

Today in 2014 which marks 25 years after the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the problems facing the children the world over are still with us. Much has been done but there are still miles to traverse. Maher is happy that within its own limited sphere of activity it has been able to contribute its mite toward the goals of the Convention. Maher has planned many activities in all our homes and centers for the 25th year of UN Child Rights Convention.