

Who Cares? Progress and Challenges for Early Childhood Development

The science of child development established the crucial significance of the first six years of a child's life requiring adequate health care, nutrition, psycho-social and intellectual stimulation, as well as a safe and supportive environment. Against this background, Mina Swaminathan's 1985 book titled *Who Cares?*, was an in-depth analysis of the childcare facilities for low-income working women, both in the organised and unorganised sectors.

Despite national policies and commitments to meeting the rights of women and children, the study found largely deficient and sub-standard provisioning, quality and implementation of childcare services. It posits that "the facilities for children of working women can no longer be seen in isolation from the needs of child development and education, the two must converge and be placed in the larger framework of social and economic change and development."

Who Cares? pointed to a number of constraints in the provisioning of early childhood development programmes such as supply-side lacunae (training, resources, infrastructure), inappropriate provision of the law and location of services; poor implementation; absence of child-oriented perspective; lack of consultation with women, etc. It also provided a framework on the way forward – the need for building demand from below; the need for a diversity of child care and development models and most importantly the need for financial commitments.

Four decades on since the publication of *Who Cares?*, there has been apparent progress, both normatively and legislatively, globally and within countries. The recognition of Early Childhood Development and its inclusion in the SDGs with a clear target (4.2) endorses the rights of young children to develop their mental and cognitive abilities towards their holistic development as human beings. At the same time, the recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work (5.4), and their right to equality and to participate as active, effective and productive members of society (5.5) needs arrangements of responsible child care.

These open up questions on the extent to which national commitments and programmes on child care and development have been successful in addressing the rights of children below six years or in providing succour to low-income working women and families today.

Successes may have been demonstrated, but have children from marginalised communities been reached? To what extent have policies been implemented, or do they remain as paper tigers? Are the rights and needs of the whole child being addressed, or do they continue to address in a fragmented manner? What progress has been achieved to provide childcare facilities for working women?

These and other questions were of deep concern to Mina Swaminathan, and led her to advocate and push for concrete action. It is thus in the fitness of things that, on the occasion of her birth anniversary, a panel of distinguished speakers discussion is being organized by the MS Swaminathan Foundation on April 3, 2023, to explore some of these questions in relation to the policy and practice of early childhood development, discuss the progress, the continuing challenges and the way forward.

The panel discussion will be moderated by Dr Anjana Mangalagiri, Senior Fellow, Institute of Social Sciences, NewDelhi, formerly Chief of Education, UNICEF Country offices in Bangladesh, Mozambique and China. The panel will comprise Dr Adarsh Sharma, former Director of the National Institute of Public Cooperation and Child Development, New Delhi, Dr Sumitra Mishra, Executive Director of Mobile Creches, New Delhi, Dr Manzoor Ahmed, Professor Emeritus, BRAC University, Dhaka; Chair of the Bangladesh Early Childhood Development Network, Dhaka, Bangladesh and Dr R Sujatha, Consultant -SDG - UNICEF India with Planning & Development Department, Govt. of Tamil Nadu.