

Strategic planning meeting on proposed 2 Child Norm by the Punjab govt for Panchayat polls

The Punjab government in April 2018 announced plans to amend the Punjab Panchayati Raj Act to include a provision disbarring individuals with more than two children from contesting elections for panchayati raj institutions. The National Alliance for Maternal Health and Human Rights (NAMHHR), in collaboration with the Voluntary Health Association of Punjab, organised a strategic planning meeting on 3rd May 2018 at Chandigarh to deliberate on the relevance of the two child norm and develop a strategy to oppose the same. The meeting was attended by members of 18 civil society organisations from Punjab. Pyare Lal Garg from Jan Swasthya Abhiyan, Subhash Mendhapurkar from SUTRA, HP and Sandhya Gautam from NAMHHR facilitated the discussion.

History of the proposed two child norm was shared with its relevance in present day Punjab. NFHS data was presented reflecting that the population growth rate of Punjab has shown a steady decline over the past few decades. It has reduced to 1.29 in 2010-11 from 1.89 in 1991. The Total Fertility Rate of Punjab (1.62) is below replacement level fertility and also below the Total Fertility Rate of India. The two child norm which was intended to bring down the number of 3rd order births is irrelevant as more than 82% of all births in Punjab are 1st or 2nd order births.

It was highlighted that the cultural preference towards having son would mean that the two child norm would affect the sex ratio adversely by increasing the chances of sex selective abortions, female foeticide and female infanticide- reasons why this norm was removed in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Experiences of the two child norm from Rajasthan show that it disproportionately affects women's leadership by prioritising the birth of the third child over the political ambitions of the woman. The norm is also biased against young reproducing couples and women from marginalised communities.

More suited methods to contribute to the decline of population growth in Punjab would be promoting spacing of children, community level education and awareness, promoting the dwindling family planning services and improving ASHA services. Policies like the two child norm are opening the back door to sex selective abortions.

The two child norm is not acceptable because it is undemocratic, violates reproductive rights and choices of women and violates India's international commitments.

Discussion was focussed on how two child norm is an example of politics of exclusion directed at excluding women from practicing democracy. It is disempowering women from accessing leadership positions. Gram sabhas are the parliament of villages through which welfare schemes are implemented at the village level. Hence, in order to successfully oppose the two child norm support of panchayats is paramount. The two child norm is contradictory to the 73rd object as it will marginalise the women who the reservation policy attempted at including. Women who are left out of the fold of family planning due to their socially or economically marginalised status are the ones who will not be able to contest elections despite ambition and aptitude for the same. The two child norm would also increase violence against women from family members due to son preference.

Action Points emerged after the discussion in small groups and agreed upon to take forward:

1. Identify farmer's union members and workers, youth clubs, self-help groups, ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, religious groups, mahila mandals, keertan mandals, youth sports clubs, NGOs, CBOs and other key leaders and engage them through group discussions. Ask them to discuss the two child norm further in their villages and networks.
2. The strategy will be to enlighten people on the two child norm as being discriminatory and a tool for dividing the society.
3. MLAs will be approached to understand their perspective on the two child norm and engage them in opposing the same.
4. In engaging people to oppose the two child norm people must be made aware of how it would impact development activities of the village by restricting the leadership pool.
5. Committees could be formed at the village level to disseminate widely opposition to the two child norm.
6. Involve local press and media to oppose the two child norm.
7. The campaign will be a voluntary initiative. So if fund raising is done, it must be through crowd funding to ensure local ownership of the issue.
8. Post card campaign wherein post cards are sent to the Chief Minister opposing the two child norm. The post cards could contain a standard slogan (to be decided) which will be written on every post card.

9. Nukkad Natak can be used to spread awareness among people on the consequences of the two child norm.
10. Form a core group at state level to co-ordinate activities and provide support to the campaign at the ground level.
11. A letter can be drafted with the minutes of this meeting and emerging resolutions. This letter can be sent to the chief minister and other government officials.
12. Create a whatsapp group to co-ordinate activities of the campaign.
13. Draft a pamphlet containing information on the two child norm.
14. A state level core committee was formed consisting of Dr. Manmeet Kaur, Dr. Pyare Lal Gard and Ms. Inayat Singh Kakar to co-ordinate campaign efforts.
