7.

Ten—Nine—Eight—Childline!

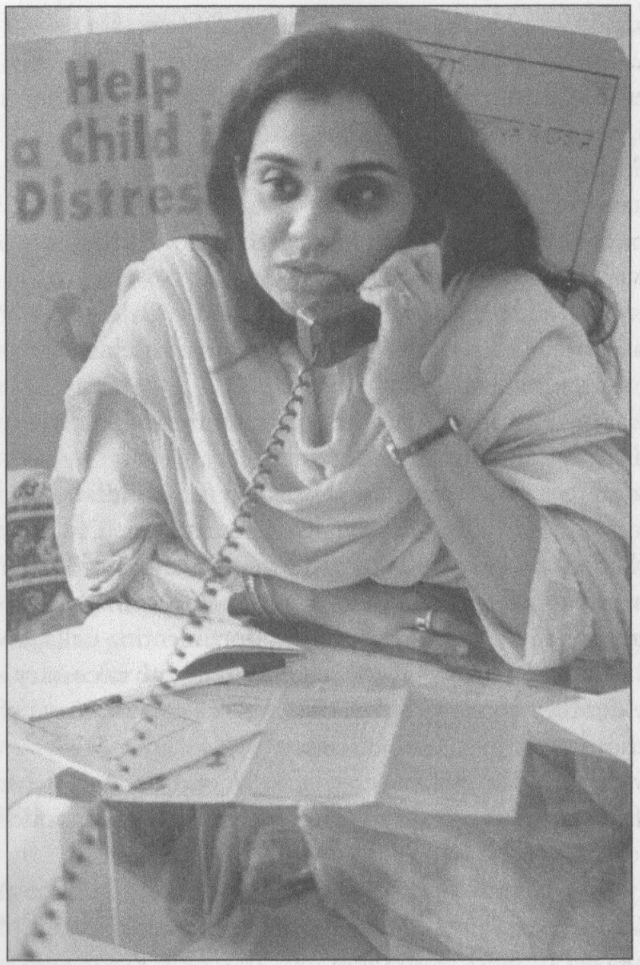
Jeroo Billimoria, India: Child Protection

As the plane approached the runway, I pressed my face to the window to survey the massive shantytown below. It looked like a sea of rotting wood and rusting tin. I had traveled to Bombay to interview Jeroo Billimoria, the founder of Childline, a twenty-four-hour helpline and emergency response system for children in distress. Millions of children in India live on the streets and work as underage laborers. As I scanned the sprawling slum, I imagined emergency calls ringing in to Childline from similar slums across the city—thousands of calls—reporting injuries, abuse, abandonment, assault, tuberculosis, dysentery, jaundice, AIDS—and I could not begin to fathom how, in the chaos of Bombay, such a system could possibly work.

According to the reports on my lap, however, Childline had begun operating in Bombay in 1996; in 1998 it had branched out to other cities. By March 2000 it was operating in eleven cities. By 2002 it was in thirty.

I had spoken to Jeroo once by phone before my arrival to firm up the details of my visit. (I refer to her by her first name, as she is generally known.) It sounded as if she were standing in a schoolyard at recess. She asked for my flight information. "I'll send one of the street boys to the airport to pick you up," she yelled over the din. "He'll take you to the beach. We're having a conference. You're lucky. You'll get to meet all the boys."

As promised, Laxman Halale, twenty-one, whom Jeroo had met in a boy's shelter years earlier, was waiting at the terminal brandishing a yellow Childline poster. He had run away from home at the age of eleven



Jeroo Billimoria

and had been a Childline "team member" since 1996. He hoisted my bag like a veteran porter and hailed one of Bombay's black-and-yellow bowler-hat taxis. Soon we were stuck in a brown haze of horn-blaring traffic.

After two hours, we arrived at a camp with bunk houses and a view of a golden sunset over the Indian Ocean. The taxi stopped in front of a dining hall. I heard laughter and applause and the buzz of conversations in many languages: English, Hindi, Bengali, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi. Inside, a group of eighty people, most of them youths who had lived for years on the streets, kneeled, squatted, and sprawled across one another. They were in a large circle. All attention was fixed

on Jeroo, thirty-six, in the center, barefoot, dressed in a *salwar kameez* and *dupatta* that waved like a cape as she moved.

"When contacting police, at what level should you call?" speaking in Hindi, she was asking the youths.

"Don't go to senior officials. Go to constables or ward boys," a young man from Jaipur replied.

"We have workshops with police," Jeroo said. "We must work more closely with them. What else?"

"When you go to a police station," added a Calcuttan, "you need to find a particular constable who is sensitive to children and begin working with him first."

"It's important to begin working first with the constables who are child sensitive," Jeroo reiterated.

The conference was a training workshop for Childline "team members" from across India. The team members were Childline's front line. Backed up by social workers, the youths responded to calls, providing information to other street youths, transporting street children to shelters, hospitals, or police stations, documenting calls, and working with Childline partners to match children with necessary services. Not only did they carry out much of Childline's work, they defined the organization's priorities and policies.

"How do you deal with a case of HIV or a death?" Jeroo asked. "What if the hospital refuses to treat the child? What if police are unwilling to intervene?"

"The police commissioner is a member of our Childline Advisory Board (CAB)," explained a member of the Nagpur team. "So this makes it easier to work with them."

"Yes! Yes! Good! Every city has a CAB," Jeroo said. "This is one of the most important aspects of Childline. If you have a problem, the CAB can help.

"Remember," she added, speaking slowly. "Childline *cannot* work in isolation. We used to think we were great people—that we could do everything alone. Now we know better. Now we set up the CABs to facilitate things. The CABs include government officials, health department officials, railway officials, police officials. We work with them. When they begin to see that Childline can do what they cannot do and that Childline will make their jobs easier, they begin to readily cooperate."

She paused for a minute to let the information sink in, then proceeded with the next question: "Now, what do we do in a case of child abuse?"

"We rescue the child," said a team member from Madras (now called Chennai).

"First, we ensure the child's safety," Jeroo concurred. "What do we do with the abuser?"

"Our job is to rescue the child," explained a staff member from Madras. "It's not our job to deal with the abuser."

Jeroo spun around. "No!" she said. "We *must* deal with the abuser!" She scanned the circle to make sure everyone saw how serious she was.

"First, we have to rescue the child, get him or her to a safe place, and later try to rehabilitate him or her with the family. Our policy is that institutionalization is the last resort. But we will also make sure that people who abuse children get punished. *We will make sure they are locked up if necessary*. Offenders must not go scot free. And we'll go and get some compensation for the child. Set up a trust for the child. The offender *must* be made to pay.

"Childline is not a charity service or a welfare service," she added. "It is a *rights* service. We are not helping 'poor children.' I want to take the word 'poor' out of our vocabulary. If we take a charity approach, we will be here for 50,000 years and nothing will be different. We are a child rights service. Childline has to play the lead role in this!

"Now, what is the *most* important thing to remember in Childline?" Jeroo said, turning 360 degrees.

"EVERY CALL IS IMPORTANT" came the response from eighty voices.

"Every call is important," Jeroo echoed.

"A child may call us and it may seem like a prank," she said. "Or the child may speak abusively. But it is equally likely that the child is testing us to see whether we will take him or her seriously and deal with him or her politely. Someone who calls and hangs up may be testing us too.

"And remember," she added with a grin, "it may be *me* calling. You know I call up to test Childline. Sometimes I call and I say bad words or speak angrily to test out the service—and very often people speak bad words back to me!"

The hall erupted in laughter.

"So the next time you answer an angry caller, remember, it might be me!

"Now," she went on, "what is the first thing you do if you make a mistake?"

"ACKNOWLEDGE IT" came the group's response.

"Yes," Jeroo said. "Acknowledge it. Tell others you made the mistake. Then correct that mistake.

"Be passionate," Jeroo added, "but make decisions with your heads.

"Remember our mission: The child comes first. We don't work for the government. We don't work for any organization. We work for the child. The child comes first."

Jeroo paused to let it all sink in.

"Now, there are 400,000 most vulnerable kids living on the streets," she continued. "These are the main target kids we want to reach. How are we going to reach them *all*?"

From Hyderabad: "We have to tell them."

Another boy from the Hyderabad group, standing, clutching a stick by his side, spoke up. "I have lived on the streets, and I don't want other children to go through what I went through. So I make it a point to tell other children I meet about Childline. I have a little book which I always keep with me, and every time I tell a child I get them to sign my book and I give them a Childline sticker. I have four hundred names in my book."

Jeroo raised her hands and applauded.

"We have to reach out to all these children," she said. "But we have to think *how* we are going to do this. We are going to talk about this tomorrow morning. Not the professionals or the staff. This question is only for the children who have lived on the street and know what life is like. How are we going to reach them all? I want you to think about this tonight.

"Now finally, it's time to eat."

The group erupted in applause.

After dinner I spoke with Venkahnababu Vidyanagar, the boy with the stick and the notebook with four hundred names. He was eighteen. One leg was lame from polio. He came from the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India and spoke Telugu, which for our talks was translated first into Hindi and then into English.

Venkahnababu had been abandoned by his parents when he was thirteen because they were too poor to care for him. He had lived on the streets of Hyderabad for a year shining shoes and working in a tea stall, where the owner let him sleep. Then he went to Bombay and was befriended by boys who lived in a railway station. They helped get him into a boy's shelter. After hearing about Childline, he became a team member, earning 1,200 rupees (about $30) a month, which he liked to spend on "fancy clothes" and movies. He loved *Titanic*.

Street kids, explains Jeroo, are savvy and tough, but in many ways naive. "They're easy to manipulate, and they have a strong chivalrous streak. Young women can easily lure them into marriage. They want very badly to be loved. Many get married suddenly and in nine months *flat* there will be a baby. I am constantly telling the boys in the office that they *must* not get married right away. I tell them if they get married, I will *kill* them."

When I asked Venkahnababu if he had any contact with his family, he said no. Then he told a story: Several months earlier a stranger had approached him saying that Venkahnababu's mother was sick. The man said he needed 800 rupees (about $20) for medicine. Venkahnababu had had no contact with his mother since the day he had been abandoned. Still, he gave the man the 800 rupees. After that, the man returned twice; each time Venkahnababu gave him some more money.

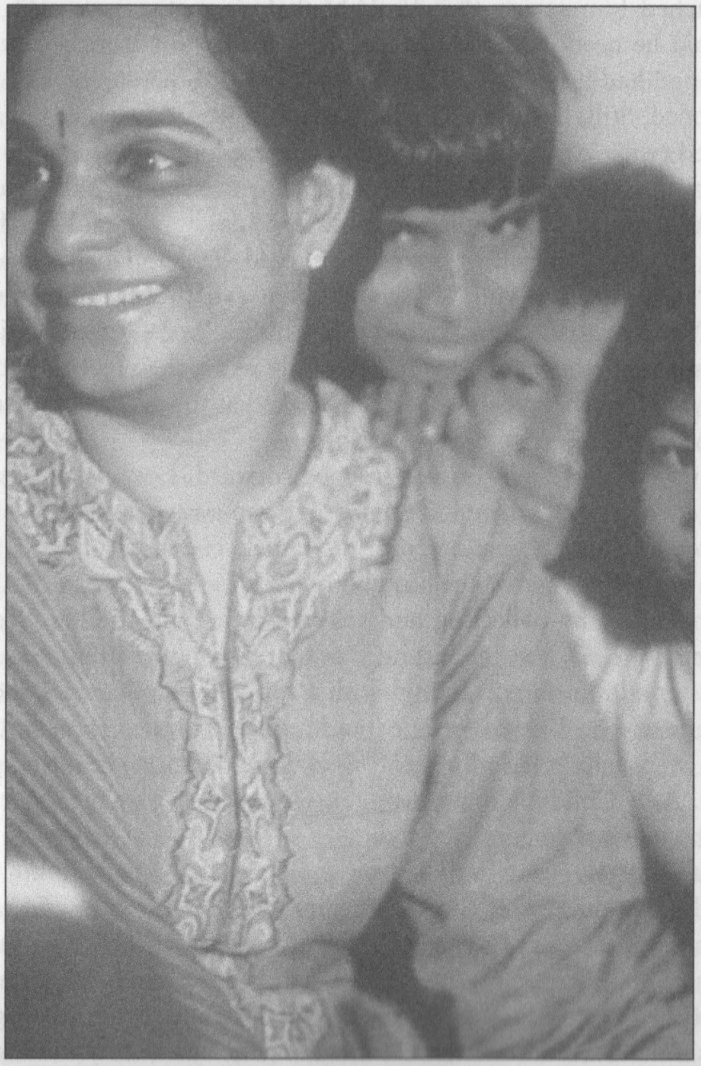
A dozen team members huddled around as we spoke. When I asked Venkahnababu if his mother received the money, he said he didn't know. None of the other boys interrupted Venkahnababu; no one said, "He's cheating you," a thought that ran through my mind. I asked Venkahnababu if he wished to see his mother. "I might visit her sometime in the future," he said. "But only when she's feeling better. I am afraid to see her sick in bed." He looked at the ground, indicating that he wished to end the conversation.

On that cue, Deepak Kumar stepped forward. Deepak, also eighteen, grew up "somewhere in Punjab" and ran away from home at age ten after receiving a beating from his father. He ended up at a train station in Delhi, where some boys befriended him and taught him how to earn money by collecting and selling bottles and broken glass. A policeman picked him up and he was sent to a juvenile home, where the master administered beatings with a variety of implements, including a cricket bat. Deepak escaped and returned to the train station in Delhi. Eventually a friendly social worker helped him get into a good shelter. As a Childline team member, Deepak felt that his work was "worthwhile and important."

That night everyone gathered on the beach for what the boys described as a "cultural event." The stars were bright; the sea roared. Signs along the beach warned of a deadly undertow. The boys built a mammoth bonfire. Everyone joined hands in a circle and danced around the fire crossing over their feet and kicking their legs high in the fashion of a hora. There was no hanging back; a bystander was immediately swept into the celebration by many hands. After a while

the dancing turned chaotic, with the boys knocking into one another with increasing gusto ever closer to the flames. In the excitement of the moment, they appeared not to have a worry in the world.

Jeroo Billimoria grew up in a prominent Bombay family in which the dominant profession was accounting. Her father, Mehervan—an accountant in a manufacturing firm—was cautious and conservative. Her mother, Homai—a social worker who counseled low-income children in public schools—was adventurous and liberal. As an undergraduate, Jeroo studied commerce. She was leaning toward a career in accounting but her father's death, when she was twenty, caused her to reevaluate her life plans.



Jeroo Billimoria with some of the children Childline works to assist

"My father was a very kind man," Jeroo told me. "He felt very strongly that you should focus on giving of yourself. And I found out after his death, despite his being so unwell—he had a heart and a lung condition—that he had helped many people living on the streets anonymously. We had queues of people who came to pay their respects. Even my mother did not know that he had silently supported these people through the years."

She decided to switch to social work. She enrolled in the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), India's premier college of social work, to do postgraduate studies and then studied nonprofit management at the New School for Social Research in New York City. In New York she also got involved with the Coalition for the Homeless, a nonprofit group that assists people living on the streets and in shelters. "I was very moved by the spirit of survival among the homeless," Jeroo recalled.

In 1989 she returned to India and traveled for six months before joining TISS as an instructor. A number of her graduate students were placed as social workers in Bombay's shelters. When Jeroo visited them, she found herself drawn to the children, especially to their honesty and resilience. "Street kids are tough and they speak their minds," she explains. "When they are sad you know it, and when they are happy or angry, you know it. It's very clear, but they don't hold on to it."

They needed to be acknowledged in small ways—by a smile or a touch—and they were easily hurt when they felt ignored. They were also very proud. Many of the street children worked hard to support their families in the villages. They would tell the social workers: "Don't take pity on us. We can earn our own money."

The children called Jeroo "Didi," an affectionate term for an older sister. In turn, she found herself developing a strong protective feeling for them. She gave out her home phone number—to be used in cases of emergency—but soon she was receiving calls on a daily basis. "That's when I learned how much street kids love the phone," she recalled. Sometimes the kids called just to say hello, sometimes they called because they were feeling sad and lonely. But when the calls came in the middle of the night it was because one of the kids had

been injured, or fallen ill, or had been beaten up by an adult, often by a policeman.

Jeroo found that it could take days to find the necessary assistance for a child. Bombay had many children's agencies, but they had no mechanisms for working with one another or with the government. Jeroo approached several organizations and proposed the idea of coordinating services but found little enthusiasm for the idea. She decided to drop it for the time being. "The climate for networking among NGOs wasn't there yet," she recalled. "Or maybe I wasn't ready to take it on."

Instead, in 1991 she founded an organization called Meljol (Coming Together) to bring together children from diverse backgrounds to work, side by side, on projects with tangible social benefits: building playgrounds, cleaning up schools, campaigning against smoking. "The goal was to create an alternative mindset for children to give them a sense of their own power," she said.

By 1993 Jeroo was still receiving late night calls. It was obvious that the children needed an emergency service. This time she decided to see if she could convince the Bombay police to initiate one. After the police turned her down, she approached the government telecommunications department to explore the possibility of creating a toll-free number for children's assistance. "I went to the DOT [Department of Telecommunications] and just hung out and met people and asked how to do this," she recalled.

At the suggestion of one of the DOT's public relations officers, she arranged a meeting with the general manager. She brought along Armaity Desai, then the director of TISS. "The general manager said, 'We'll think about it. We'll get back to you,' " Jeroo recalled.

In the meantime, Jeroo followed up with letters to DOT officials in Bombay and Delhi. With the backing of TISS, the request made its way up to the Ministry of Telecommunications. The ministry was doubtful that children would use a hot line. However, Jeroo had conducted her own survey and almost all of the street children said they would use the service. "Today in India we have women's hot lines, hot lines for disability and drugs," Jeroo explains. "But in 1993 it was an absolutely new concept."

In fact, such a service had become feasible only because of three recent developments: (1) Public telephones had been widely installed in India's major cities; (2) the number of child service organizations had exploded; and (3) the government was receptive to the idea of forming partnerships with citizen groups.

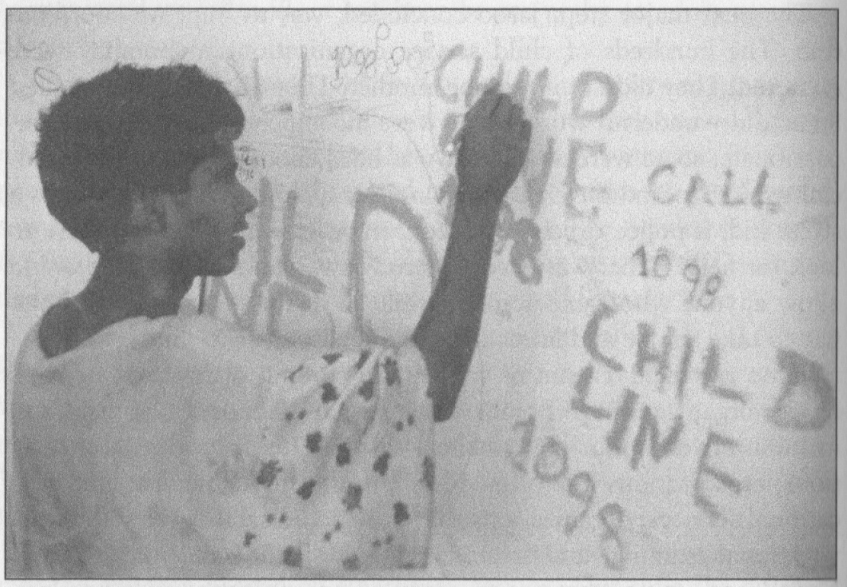
The next major step, Jeroo concluded, was to improve coordination. The hundreds of child service organizations in Bombay were scattered. They didn't talk to one another. They also varied in quality. Some did wonderful work; some were incompetent; some were compassionate; some were abusive. It was hard enough for a full-time social worker to find the right assistance for a child in need. How was a street kid, a police officer, or a concerned citizen to know where to look for help? What was needed, Jeroo saw, was a system that would allow anyone who came across a child in distress anywhere in Bombay to take simple and immediate action to assist the child.

Jeroo recruited a team of students to compile a directory of child service organizations in Bombay. They listed a hundred organizations, including twenty-four-hour shelters and long-term residential institutions; organizations that offered legal, health, psychological, and educational services; organizations that provided disability rehabilitation, vocational training, and treatment for addiction; and many others. Next Jeroo set up meetings to encourage participation in a new network: Childline.

She put together a budget and set out to raise start-up funds. For the first year, she needed 250,000 rupees, about $6,000, to establish two call centers staffed by fifteen people. Initial support came from the Ratan Tata Trust and the Concern India Foundation. In May 1996 the government telecommunication department granted Childline use of the telephone number 1098. And a month later, with fourteen organizations having signed on, Childline was officially launched.

To create awareness about the service, Childline staffers, team members, and volunteers, mostly street children, targeted railway stations, bus stations, slum areas, bazaars, and hospitals. They organized fairs and outdoor plays. They encouraged youths to distribute yellow 1098 stickers and to test out the number, reporting any problems. They asked older street youths to teach younger ones. Jeroo wasn't crazy about "1098," but the kids taught her to say it as "Ten—nine—eight—Childline."

Childline's telephones are housed in organizations with twenty-four-hour shelters for emergencies. In Bombay, one such shelter is run by Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) and located near Dadar Train Station. In the front room of the YUVA shelter is a desk where the phones are manned. The day I visited, I met team members Ravi Saxena, Samir Sabu Sheikh, and Rupesh Kumar.



Childline team member Manohardas spreading the word

Ravi, nineteen, had run away from the city of Bhopal at the age of ten. "When I fell sick, there was no one to help me or take me to the hospital," he said. "In Childline, I have helped more than three hundred children." Samir, twenty, had gotten lost at age six and lived on the streets until he was put in a government home at age nine. And Rupesh, eighteen, had run away from his home in the state of Bihar at age ten to escape an alcoholic father. All three were studying to take their tenth-grade exams. Each earned $30 to $40 a month from Childline.

The team members worked eight-hour shifts. They had each fielded hundreds of calls, and they each had dramatic stories to tell. One of Ravi's stories was particularly moving.

"Some boys called up Childline," he explained. "They said: 'There is a little girl in the station. She is standing all alone with no clothes on. Someone has thrown hot water on her. She has a burn all over her chest, stomach, and legs.'

"So a Childline volunteer went to take her to the hospital. But at the station, a drunk man came by and said he was her father. It turned out he was just a strange man who lives in the station. He wanted to use her to beg. The policeman wanted to hand the girl over to him.

"We had to go to the police station and argue and argue, explaining that the police couldn't just hand over the child. She needed medical

care and the man was clearly drunk. Finally they gave in and we took her to the hospital to treat her burns. Then Childline petitioned the court to declare her destitute so she could be adopted. Now she's living in a children's institute. It takes about a year to get her adopted. She's small so she won't be difficult to get adopted. She didn't know her own name. We named her Seema."

During its first year Childline fielded 6,618 calls. More than 70 percent came from children and youths. Many called to chat, sing songs, ask questions, share feelings, and offer insults. The opportunity to make a free phone call was itself a major attraction.[1]

"It's their service," Jeroo reminded everyone. "They're testing us out."

Eight hundred fifty-eight calls were for direct emergency assistance: medical problems, need for shelter, abuse, repatriation of missing children, protection from police, and death-related services.[2] More than half of these calls were received between 5:00 P.M. and 10:00 A.M., when most children's agencies are closed. "I thought that we'd get a lot of calls about police abuse," Jeroo recalled, "but the boys said, 'No, you'll get a lot of health-related problems.' We weren't geared for that."

At first the calls came from children living on the streets. After some time Childline began receiving calls from concerned adults and children working as domestic servants in middle-class homes. "Initially I didn't want it to become a middle-class service," Jeroo recalled. "I wanted it focused on the street level. But then we got two cases from concerned adults about domestic child labor. One was about a girl named Sarita, who'd been severely beaten. She had cigarette burns all over her body. It showed us that people often observe abuse, but turn a blind eye because they don't know who to contact and don't want to get involved with the police. I saw that it was necessary to create awareness about the service amongst larger sections of the population."

The first year was all about making mistakes and correcting them, identifying gaps and filling them. Team members were having trouble locating callers, so a system of standard questions was introduced to note the time of call, specific landmarks, and the clothes the child was wearing. Childline volunteers were issued yellow T-shirts and caps.

After receiving angry calls because phones were not connecting to 1098 and the proprietors of pay phone concessions were being

uncooperative, Childline enlisted street children to test phones around the city. The Department of Telecommunications also issued letters informing all pay phone managers that they were obligated to allow children to call 1098 at any time.

Team members who were having difficulty gaining the trust of runaways received trainings from social workers in telephone interaction.

Each month children were invited to Childline's "open house" to learn about the service and suggest improvements. Case by case, the system improved.

Meghana Sawant, the first of Jeroo's students to become an official Childline staff member, recalled a policy decision that was enacted after the death of an eighteen-year-old boy. "A call came in from a boy who had tuberculosis," she explained. "A team member went to take him to the hospital. But he said, 'I don't want to be admitted to the hospital. I'll be fine. If I need help I'll call Childline again.' So our team member left this boy on the platform. After three or four days, the boy expired. His friends who are very frequent callers started making abusive calls. They informed other people that Childline is a useless organization. So we went back to the place where our team member let the boy stay sick. His friends were very angry. They said, 'We don't want to have anything to do with Childline.' We and the team member apologized and said we made a mistake. We asked the boys to tell us what we should have done. They were still very angry. But after they calmed down, they gave a suggestion: 'If the boy says that he doesn't want to be hospitalized or go into a shelter then you should inform *us*, his friends. Let us know that you have left him on the street.'

"We thought that was a good suggestion," Sawant added. "So now that is our policy."

One night a call came in at 1:30 A.M. reporting that a boy had been hit by a taxi. A Childline team member rushed to the scene and took the child to the hospital only to be accosted by a policeman for seeking admission for a boy unknown to him. Jeroo had been pulled out of bed many times in such situations, and she'd learned not to be confrontational with police or hospital officials. "That was a big learning experience," she said. "It got you nowhere."

This time she contacted the Coordination Committee for Vulnerable Children, a municipal body, and Unicef, the United Nations agency charged with promoting the well-being of children, and got them to sponsor a conference, inviting members of the Juvenile Welfare Board and the Juvenile Aid Police Unit to learn about Childline.

Her goal was to build awareness about both 1098 and India's Juvenile Justice Act, which extends protections to all children under the age of eighteen.[3]

At the conference, Jeroo noticed that the police officials became receptive when they began to see that Childline would simplify their jobs. They agreed to participate in more workshops. Eventually Childline and the Bombay police established a partnership, with the Juvenile Aid Police Unit issuing special identification cards to Childline team members.

Hospitals were another challenge. Medical staff regularly turned away kids who were dirty, without identification, or unaccompanied by an adult.

So Childline trained its staff in basic first aid and instituted a policy of cleaning up children before taking them to the hospital. Meanwhile, all staffers received training in Indian law, which stipulates that a public hospital cannot deny care to anyone in need of medical attention. Additional workshops were organized to sensitize hospital staff.

As word about 1098 spread, the network grew. Newspaper articles brought in tens of thousands of rupees in public contributions. Jeroo persuaded a local college of social work to develop a two-month telephone counseling course for staffers. She raised additional funding. Then, one day at the airport, she bumped into an executive from Tata Consultancy Services, one of India's leading management consulting firms, and persuaded him to help. His firm could design a database to track calls.

In November 1997 Jeroo took an unpaid leave from TISS to devote herself to Childline. Her plan was to create a national child protection system. Shortly thereafter she was elected an Ashoka fellow.

In February 1998 Jeroo sent a letter to Anand Bordia, the joint secretary of India's Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, proposing that the Indian government help extend Childline to other cities. "From the very beginning, I had envisioned Childline as a national service," Jeroo explained. "I knew we had to get the government involved. But first we needed to demonstrate it. And we needed documentation and statistics."

That June Childline organized a gathering, in conjunction with the government, inviting 117 people from twenty-nine cities to explore the potential for spreading the service. At the time, Childline had responded to 14,000 calls. It had arranged direct assistance for 3,505

children, including medical services (2,126 cases), shelter (988), information and referral to other agencies (249), repatriation (49), emotional support and guidance (39), protection from police harassment (30), protection from abuse (23), and death-related service (1).[4]

The government's rationale for supporting Childline was compelling. The service was doing many of the things that the Indian government had committed to when it ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, such as promoting children's access to healthcare, justice, shelter, and education.[5] Childline also had the hallmarks of a twenty-first-century organization. It was integrated and decentralized. It blended technology and human services. It linked government, business, and citizen groups to maximize efficacy. And, best of all, it was low cost, involving almost no bricks and mortar. Just about everything that Childline needed to work was already on the ground. At essence, Childline was about turning a city into a team.

Why not a country?

By the workshop's end, Anand Bordia and a colleague, A. P. Singh, the deputy secretary of the Ministry of Justice and Social Empowerment, agreed to help spread the service to ten cities. A month later Maneka Gandhi, India's minister of social justice and empowerment, declared that she wanted to see Childline in every Indian city with a population above 1 million (twenty-three cities) by 2002.[6]

It took only a few weeks to sketch out the general plan for national expansion. Childline would operate like a franchise, with decentralized management, but with a uniform brand, operating procedures, and standards. It would remain a free, national twenty-four-hour service. The word "Childline" would always be written both in English and translated phonetically into regional languages. (India has eighteen officially recognized languages.) The logo and the phone number would remain the same everywhere.

Each city would select organizations based on local needs but conform to a uniform structure: A "nodal" organization, a noted academic institution like TISS, would facilitate operations, training, documentation, and advocacy. "Collaborating" organizations, like YUVA, the shelter where I met Ravi, Samir, and Rupesh, would respond directly to calls. "Support" organizations would handle follow up, and "resource" organizations would assist with long-term needs.

Each city would have one Childline coordinator. The government would make grants to Childline partners to pay salaries for Childline social workers and team members placed in them. Each organization also would have to raise its own funds for Childline. Franchisees would receive training and promotional materials, a call-tracking database, and, initially, one year's funding for out-of-hospital medical assistance to children.

Seeking to avoid conflicts with officials, Jeroo decided that Childline would not begin working in a city until the police commissioner and senior healthcare officials had furnished written commitments of cooperation. Additionally, each city would be required to establish a Childline Advisory Board made up of senior officials in the police and health departments, the Juvenile Welfare Board, the Department of Telecommunications, and other key agencies.

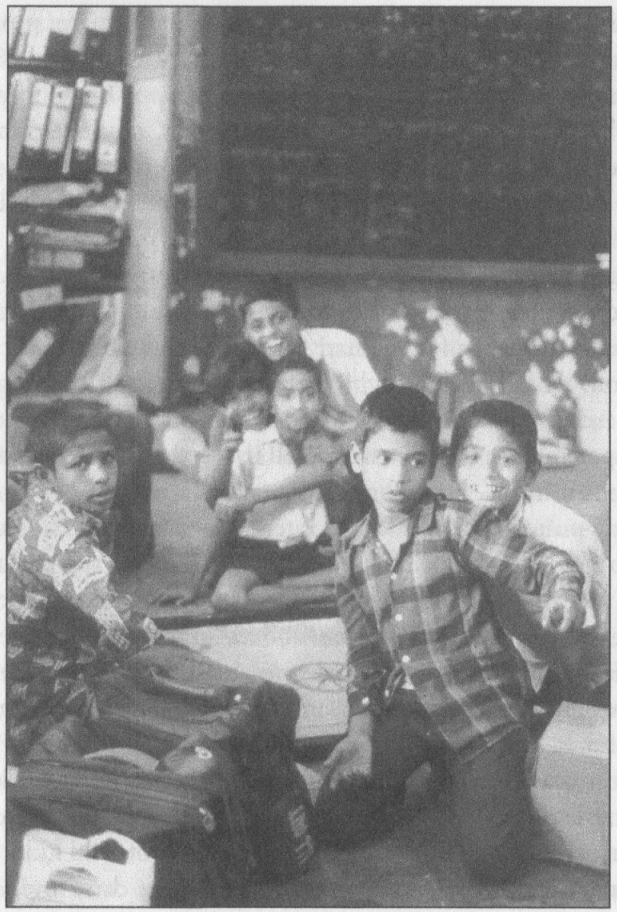
Another policy that Jeroo adopted was that any business that wanted to publicly associate itself with Childline at the national level would have to commit to a full partnership. It would have to offer business expertise and ongoing assistance—not just write checks.

Nationally, Childline would have a central office in Bombay to oversee expansion, set standards, monitor results, allocate funds, and advocate for better children's services.

Today the national hub of the Childline India Foundation is located in a yellow municipal school in central Bombay, in a classroom crammed with old mattresses and board games and a bunch of wild kids. "Our office is a madhouse, *really*," Jeroo told me on the drive over after the beach conference. "I have to warn you. People will jump on you. We have three kids who are high on glue. We tell them not to do it, but at least they come in; otherwise they'd be on it eight hours a day."

Moments after we arrived at her office, Jeroo shifted into work mode. She sat down cross-legged on the floor and took over one of the office's two phones. A young boy crawled onto her lap, and she curled an arm around him. Periodically—as when the secretary of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment called—she brought her fingers to her lips and whispered "shhh," but the gesture had no discernible effect on the noise level.

The room next door housed a quiet, squeaky-clean office, equipped with networked computers and air conditioning, courtesy of Tata Consultancy Services. But Jeroo preferred the madhouse. "I think this office gives you a sense of what Childline is all about," Jeroo said. "Everything is happening—despite what may seem to be the case."



Inside the Childline India Foundation office in Bombay

Meghana Sawant was testing the new ChildNet computerized call-tracking system. Prakash Fernandes, sitting cross-legged on an old mattress, was drafting the expansion plan. Both had been students of Jeroo's at TISS. On the floor, also sitting with a child on her lap, was Neelam Kewalramani, city coordinator for Childline Bombay, who was reviewing a call report.

I asked Neelam how she had come to Childline. "I was working in a nine-to-five job at the Indo-American Society, in a lavish setting, as a counselor for students who wanted to go abroad for higher studies," she said. "These were mostly wealthy pampered kids. I thought: 'Do these people actually need me?' I realized I wasn't getting much satisfaction from my life. I said, 'Neelam, you're not meant for this.' A

teacher referred me to Childline. I came to an open house here and I saw these kids enjoying themselves. I saw the volunteers. I was taken away by it."

Within six months of the June 1998 workshop, Childline had expanded to Delhi, Nagpur, Hyderabad, and Calcutta. Drawing on her contacts in Bombay's business community, Jeroo pulled in various corporate partners, including the advertising firm Ogilvy and Mather, which helped Childline develop a national branding and marketing campaign.

In each new city, the launch was similar. Local organizations began by meeting informally. With guidance from the Childline team, they formed a core working group. Then a Childline Advisory Board was assembled. Next the working group conducted a needs assessment survey and feasibility study and compiled a resource directory. After consulting with the advisory board, the NGOs determined who should staff the phones and who should provide follow-up support.

The central office screened all partner agencies, a critical role. "Initially in Bombay we worked with any organization," Jeroo explained. "But we made a lot of mistakes." One Childline office had to be shut down due to corruption. Another agency was dropped from the network because it refused shelter to disabled children. Others did not meet Childline's standards of care. "Now we look first at commitment and motivation," Jeroo added. "We make sure the organization has a crisis culture and a child rights orientation. We like to choose younger organizations that are self-sustaining and already working on children's issues. We don't want to build something new."

Prakash Fernandes, who handled much of the preparatory work in new cities, added: "In a collaborating agency, the first thing we look at is: Are they responsive and free with kids? We talk to the staff. It's very rare that we look at their reports—because they can put anything on paper. We look at how they *really* work. What are their processes? Intake policies? Are they flexible? Would they be willing to accept a child at 2:00 A.M.? What if the child doesn't have documentation?"

After the structure was defined, the phones were activated and the DOT communicated with pay phone operators across the city. Then, after locals had had two weeks' experience handling calls, a staffer from the national office came to conduct a ten-day training. Two or three months later, if all went well, the local franchise called a press conference and launched an awareness campaign. The national office

monitored franchises closely for several months and, thereafter, through spot checks.

There were always problems. One of the most common was when a local organization claimed full credit for Childline. "In the NGO sector, a lot of people, especially senior people, don't like partnering," explains Jeroo. "My biggest task is making *everyone* feel that they own Childline."

By the spring of 1999, Childline had launched 1098 in Calcutta and Madras and was preparing to start up in Patna. Groundwork had begun in Bhopal, Bhubaneshwar, Calicut, Coimbatore, Guwahati, Gwalior, Jaipur, Lucknow, Panjim, Pune, Trivandrum, and Varanasi. (In one year Jeroo and her colleagues visited nineteen cities.)

There was a slight problem with the government, however: In six months, only *one* check had arrived. "It was a big crisis," Jeroo recalled. "For almost a year, we had no money from the government. I give hats off to the NGOs. We survived because we chose solid organizations. Even when there was no money they could carry the project on. And we kept talking with everybody, saying 'We're all in this together. . . .' "

Three times Jeroo had to turn to wealthy individuals to avert collapse.

In May 1999 Childline was registered as a government initiative and given national control over 1098. Jeroo persuaded the government to select a board of directors comprised of individuals who had demonstrated strong commitment to Childline, a key factor in the organization's success.

Within twelve months Childline was operating in fifteen cities and preparatory work had begun in another fifteen. It had fielded a half million calls.[7]

The ChildNet database system was an unusual computer program: It had been designed for users who were easily distracted and often semiliterate. It guided team members with picture and voice commands in English, Hindi, and regional languages. "Street kids really don't like to document things," Meghana Sawant explained. "And even when they do document them, there are often important elements missing."

The new system, which addressed the problems, proved extraordinarily useful for analyzing call patterns. For example, it enabled Childline to track specific hot points within cities. If a high number of

health-related calls were coming from a particular railway station, Childline could advocate for a medical booth to be installed in that station.

As Childline expanded to new cities, the call-tracking system also emerged as an important source of child protection information. National data showed that the biggest killer of street children was tuberculosis, but regional call patterns revealed a variety of local problems. In Jaipur, for example, Childline received reports of abuse in the garment and jewelry industries. In Varanasi, there were reports of children being abducted to work in the sari industry. In Delhi, many calls came from middle-class children. In Nagpur, a transit hub, there were frequent reports of children abandoned in train stations. In Goa, a beach resort, a major problem was the sexual abuse of children by foreign tourists.

ChildNet also proved to be India's best resource for repatriating missing children. With franchises in most of India's major cities and a centralized database that stored information about children, it was suddenly possible to repatriate children who turned up a thousand miles from home. And because Childline was a government initiative, its data carried an official imprimatur. It is an inspired combination of technology and human management that today allows telephone calls from children across India to be systematically analyzed to inform government policy.

Despite many high-level pledges of cooperation, Childline found that police, health, and railway officials across India remained largely ignorant about and indifferent to 1098. So Childline designed a series of training workshops, and, in June 2000, in conjunction with the government's National Institute of Social Defense and seventy-eight partner organizations, launched a National Initiative for Child Protection.[8]

The goal was to make police stations, hospitals, schools, and train stations more "child friendly" by educating officials about the law, introducing them to street children, and teaching them about Childline. One of the features of the campaign was the presentation of awards by children to child-friendly police stations and hospitals.

Because empathy begins with understanding, the training began with children explaining to officials what their lives were like. They role-played encounters with police and hospital employees. The interactions were followed by discussions about children's rights and Indian law.

Despite much fanfare, the government came through with little funding for the National Initiative for Child Protection. As they had done before, Childline's partners drew on their own resources, conducting more than 700 training programs with officials across the country.

The majority of participants in these programs reported to Childline that, in the future, when they encountered children in distress they would call 1098. Many of them regularly had experiences like that of a policeman in Calcutta who one day came across a young girl wandering naked alone in the streets. The policeman admitted to Childline that, if he hadn't completed the training course, he might have ignored the problem—not knowing how to help the child and not wanting to take an action that might create significant paperwork for himself. Instead, he simply dialed 1098 and was immediately referred to a shelter with social workers and an educational program. He took the girl there. He even bought her crayons and a coloring book.

By the fall of 2002 Childline had spread to forty-two cities, with preparatory work under way in another twelve. Mature franchises were now directly paired with start-ups to speed training. In addition, preparatory activities had become more sophisticated. "We do much more training with the police, health departments, Department of Telecommunications, and the chair of the Childline Advisory Board," Jeroo said. "And we don't launch formally until the service has been in operation for at least six months."

The network had more than 120 organizations directly implementing the Childline service and over 2,000 providing assistance. By October 2002 Childline had fielded 2.7 million calls.[9] The Ministry of Justice and Social Empowerment had consulted with Childline during the drafting of its most recent Five Year Plan. The government also had incorporated several Childline recommendations in revisions of India's Juvenile Justice Act and mandated Childline as a lead child protection agency.

In 2001 Jeroo received international recognition for her work from the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. Later that year she made the decision to step down as Childline's executive director. She remained on board until May 2002, easing back from her 100-hour workweek and watching how things progressed without her. Some of Childline's board members felt her decision was premature. But she believed that Childline's expansion had become a technical challenge and felt her energy could be better applied elsewhere.

"Most people think I resigned because I got married," she wrote in an e-mail in March 2002, a month after her wedding. "But the truth is I needed a new challenge. And I believe, in principle, that a founder should leave after five to seven years. It has to do with my understanding about the social sector and has a lot to do with the principle of detachment and *dharma*.

"I am a lousy administrator and I hate routine and systems. I was bad for the long-term sustainable growth of the organization. And most important there was an inner voice which said it was time to go."

Her new plan is to build an international consortium of child help lines. In August 2001, Childline had convened a gathering in Pune, India, which brought together seventy-nine child protection advocates from nineteen countries to advance the global use of children's help lines. Jeroo is now exploring ways to link existing help lines in the United Kingdom, the Philippines, Zimbabwe, Slovakia, Pakistan, South Africa, India, and other places, to set up a global "help desk" for these services, and to establish global standards. She launched a new organization—Child Helpline International (CHI)—and, to build initial momentum, invited groups from more than forty countries to CHI's first "international consultation" of child help lines, which was held in Amsterdam in October 2003.

Once I asked Jeroo to describe the most important thing she had learned from her work with Childline in India. She thought for a moment, then replied: "If I have to summarize it in one line, it would be, 'Learning to let go.' Everything will not be exactly the way you want it. You have to let people take charge. The best thing is not to have a picture of what you want, but to have basic principles.

"Anyway, I don't take ownership for Childline. It happens because it has to happen. It is not because of me."