

## Media Hotline

October 06, 2008

### COMING SOON: GUIDELINES FOR CHILDREN ON REALITY TV SHOWS

In June 2008, a participant of a Bengali reality dance show was allegedly ridiculed and humiliated by the judges of the show. Shinjini Sengupta, the sixteen year old participant, who thereafter, lost her speech and suffered partial paralysis due to depression, is now recovering at National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS), Bangalore. Following the incident, Union Women and Child Development ("WCD") Minister, Renuka Chowdhury had responded by declaring that regulations are being planned to address this problem. She had promised that the working condition of child artists of TV serials and reality shows would now be closely scrutinized by the government to ensure that youngsters are not subjected to a "new type of child labour".

The WCD Ministry had decided to look into the working conditions of child artists and asked the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights ("NCPCR") to set up the Committee and issue guidelines to prescribe the conditions under which children should work.

Last week, the NCPCR finally disclosed the possible contents of the proposed guidelines in order to initiate public discussion from all sections of society on the same. The guidelines are expected to be finalised by the last week of October 2008, after which all broadcasters shall be expected to follow them.

The proposed guidelines were declared after discussions with producers of a production house named *Sanskriti*, school principals, child psychologists and NGOs.

The guidelines propose the following:

- The minimum age of a child participant to be 12 years.
- The environment on sets of reality shows must be child friendly. (Spokesperson and member of the NCPCR, Sandhya Bajaj opined that sets "should be a playground for the child participants.")
- The presence of a child psychologist on the sets during the shootings will be mandatory.
- Doctors and counselors should be present at all times on the sets to deal with emergencies.
- The onus of the child participant's well being has been put on the parents. They will be required to fill in a form with detailed medical conditions of the child before entering into a contract with the reality show management.
- The children will not be given prize money directly. Instead, the amount should be put in fixed deposits that can be used later according to their needs. (The Coogan Act, 1938 of California, USA had pioneered mandating this practice, that was later adopted by legislations in other countries as well.)
- Proper lighting to be used on the sets. Heavy lights will not be permitted.
- The judges' comments must not be such that they affect the psyche of the child or his/her parent. The Union WCD Minister had in June suggested drafting a code of conduct for the show judges.

### CONCLUSION:

Some issues that also need to be addressed to include: regulation of the hire contracts by an authority, ceiling on working days/week and days/ year, education on the sets where shooting is for long duration, health and nutrition, minimum standards for safety measures on the sets. Further, if the parents have been made responsible for the child's well being, the presence of atleast one parent/guardian on the sets is a reasonable requirement. Many countries including USA, UK, Canada and Australia have full-fledged legislations in place, the first among these being the Coogan Act, 1938 of California. The proposed guidelines of the NCPCR are a positive step towards the much awaited regulation of child participation in the booming entertainment industry.

- Media Team

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