How Patron-Client Relationships Influence Children's Reintegration





VIDEO SUMMARY

There are a range of factors that case workers supporting children's reintegration out of residential care need to consider and assess for to ensure reintegration is safe, effective, and pursued in a way that is in the best interests of children. Much attention has been paid to the importance of conducting rigorous child and family assessments and to facilitating family reconnection prior to reunification. This video explores a lesser-known factor, that also has a strong impact on children's reintegration in many contexts; the influence of patron-client relationships formed between orphanage directors and the families of children in care.

In this video, Kinnected Myanmar Senior Social Worker, Htoo Say, describes the nature of patronclient relationships and gives examples of how they influence the participation of directors and families in the reintegration process. In addition, she shares critical insights into how the Kinnected Myanmar social workers learnt to navigate these relationships to facilitate children's reintegration and promote their best interests.



DISCUSSION TOPIC

Power and obligations

Htoo Say explains how common patron-client relationships are in Myanmar society, and how orphanage directors almost always operate as the benefactors to the families of the children in their care. As the patron, the director provides food, shelter, and education for the children, and in exchange the children and their families are expected to serve the director and must demonstrate gratitude and loyalty. As a demonstration of this loyalty, families are expected to follow all decisions the director makes about their children's care. This puts the director in a position of considerable power over the children and their families. Htoo Say shares a Burmese proverb that best captures the disposition of clients towards their patrons: "Never bit the hand that feeds you."

In your context:

- Discuss whether patron-client relationships are common in your context and society, giving examples of how they shape relationships if they are.
- ? Do orphanage directors operate as benefactors to children in care and their families? If so, discuss:
 - in what contexts or types of residential care services,
 - how this influences the relationship and power dynamics between directors and families,
 - what obligations the children and families have towards the directors, and
 - how this impacts children's care.





DISCUSSION TOPIC

Removing barriers to reintegration

Htoo Say describes how the power afforded to patrons means that families must defer to the decisions made by orphanage directors, regardless of whether they agree. As a result, if the director is not onboard with reintegration, it is unlikely families will feel able to cooperate or agree to reunification- even if they have the capacity and desire to care for their children. In fact, directors may sabotage reintegration by instructing families how to respond to questions asked during family assessments. Htoo Say describes how this influences the way social workers must approach reintegration. They must first work with the directors to envisage different ways they can fulfil their role as patron by supporting community-based initiatives rather than perpetuating institutional models of care. This can generate buy-in from directors, which in turn, gives permission for families to explore options for reintegration with social workers.

In your context:

- What barriers to reintegration do you experience that stem from the directors' attitudes towards reintegration and family-based care?
- What strategies have you used to overcome these barriers, and how effective have those strategies been? Discuss ways to overcome any outstanding barriers that have been identified.
- Phow can the negative influence of patrons on children's reintegration and care be redirected or curtailed, and through what measures (awareness raising, advocacy, donor engagement, regulation, legal mechanisms)?