

National Care leavers' Network India

About Us:

The National Care Leavers Network (NCLN) was launched in August 2021 through a collaboration between UNICEF and YuWaah, designed to facilitate an interface between care leavers and representatives of the government and private sector. In August 2021, the NCLN Charter was launched to address key issues such as housing, health, education, and legal identity. In 2023, it was established in partnership of UNICEF and Aide et Action.

It is managed by care leavers themselves with oversight from an external committee, serving as a crucial support system and community. National Care Leavers Network is a platform for Care Leavers by Care Leavers that serves as their support system and safety net. They come together, learn and exchange experiences, and offer peer support to members. The network facilitates learning, peer support, and the exchange of experiences among its members, offering a secure space to share information and best practices related to transitioning out of care. Particularly vital for those without family support, the NCLN fosters social relationships and provides opportunities for collective celebration, reflection, and progress.

The Network provides a safe forum for information exchange and sharing of common experiences and good practices on the entire aftercare process. It has become particularly important for those Care Leavers who have no family around them to fall back on and need to build their social adult relationships for support as well as giving back. It allows them to come together to celebrate together, think together, and move forward as a collective. As put by one of the care leavers, this becomes their heart family. The National platform is also striving to develop a national database and provide services and referrals for the rehabilitation of care-experienced youths.

Situation of Residential Care in India:

India's residential care system has expanded rapidly in response to socioeconomic challenges, aiming to support children from impoverished backgrounds who lack essential services like education and healthcare. However, this growth has highlighted significant challenges and concerns, underscoring the need for reforms towards family-based and community-supported care systems. A key issue is the prevalence of unregistered facilities. As per the year 2022 report by National Commission for Protection of Child Rights: India, out of total 6299 NGO/Trust run CCIs, about 15% are operating without proper registration or oversight.¹ The unregistered facilities often lack adequate staff training, child protection policies, and necessary resources, posing severe risks to children's safety and well-being. Though some registered facilities may also have the same issues since they have supervision and monitoring they are better placed. Children in such environments are vulnerable to neglect, abuse, and exploitation due to the absence of regulatory oversight.

Another critical issue is the unnecessary separation of children from their families due to poverty. The Ministry of Women and Child Development reports that over 80% of children in these institutions have at least one living parent.² Economic hardships, such as poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to education and healthcare, compel rural families to send their children to childcare institutions, hoping for better opportunities. This practice disrupts family bonds and denies children the emotional support and cultural identity provided by their families. Furthermore, growing up in institutional care can significantly negatively affect child development. Research, including a study³ done by Udayan Care, UNICEF and TATA trusts: Beyond 18-Leaving Child Care Institutions-A study of Aftercare practices in five states of India,

¹ https://ncpcr.gov.in/uploads/167145198563a05551c7b75_national-report--social-audit-of-ccis.pdf

² https://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/WCD_AR_English%20final_.pdf

³ https://www.udayancare.org/upload/Repots/2019-20/Full%20report_%20Beyond%2018.pdf

indicates that institutionalized children face higher risks of developmental delays, emotional and behavioural problems, anxiety, depression, and challenges in forming healthy relationships. Institutional environments lack the nurturing and stable relationships that families provide, which are crucial for children's emotional and cognitive development.

There is also a notable disparity in resource allocation between residential care and community-based support systems in India. Reports from UNICEF⁴ highlight that a significant portion of funding from government and private donors is directed towards maintaining and expanding residential facilities, while family strengthening, and community support initiatives receive inadequate attention. This imbalance perpetuates a cycle where financial constraints force children into care rather than supporting efforts to keep families together through community-based interventions. Therefore, India urgently needs to shift from institutional care towards community-based alternatives that prioritize family preservation and cultural continuity. Programs providing financial assistance, education, healthcare, and counselling to families can prevent unnecessary separations and ensure that children grow up in familiar and supportive environments. Community-based care models, advocated by organizations, have shown promising results in reducing family separation and improving child outcomes by maintaining strong family bonds.

Efforts to address these challenges are underway by both government and non-governmental organizations. The Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched initiatives such as the Mission Vatsalya, to promote family-based care and deinstitutionalization. Many NGOs in India actively create family-like environments and support community-based care through advocacy and direct intervention. However, stronger enforcement of regulations, enhanced monitoring mechanisms, and increased collaboration among stakeholders are crucial to translating policies into effective actions at the grassroots level. In conclusion, while India's residential care system has expanded to address significant socioeconomic challenges, it faces critical issues that necessitate comprehensive reforms. The prevalence of unregistered facilities, the unnecessary separation of children from their families due to poverty, the negative impacts on child development, and funding imbalances all highlight the need for a shift toward community-based care models. On the flip side, even the prevalence of too many registered facilities can lead to unrequited enrolment of children in CCIs. By prioritizing family preservation and providing adequate support to families, India can ensure better outcomes for children, maintaining their cultural continuity and emotional well-being. Continued efforts by the government and NGOs are vital in this transition, requiring robust regulatory frameworks and collaborative approaches to protect and nurture the country's most vulnerable children.

Importance of Families

Children belong in families. CCIs, even those with good intentions, cannot replace the crucial role of a family in a child's life. The best place for a child is in their own home, where they receive the love and affection they need. Government and non-governmental organizations working with vulnerable children must take steps to ensure that children are supported to be raised in their families. For children already in alternative care, adequate services must be provided to help them transition back into the community, complete their studies, find employment, and access other critical services, including social protection schemes.

⁴<https://www.unicef.org/media/110876/file/Child%20Protection%20Systems%20Strengthening%20.pdf>

The network's statement of belief regarding the importance of families and harms of residential care

As young individuals who have experienced institutional care, we emphasize the profound importance of families for our emotional and psychological well-being. Families provide essential emotional support, individualized care, cultural identity, and lifelong relationships, which are crucial for our development. In contrast, residential care often leads to emotional isolation, lack of personal connection, inadequate individual attention, social stigma, and instability, causing long-lasting negative effects. Our experiences highlight the need for prioritizing family-based care to ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive in a loving and supportive environment.

It is the call of a moment to develop comprehensive social welfare programs that support families with financial aid, education, healthcare, and counselling to prevent children from being placed in care due to poverty and economic hardships.

Call to Action or encouragement to Donors and Partners to support residential care service translation efforts, divest of residential care services and unjust in family strengthening, community services, and family-based care

We urge organizations providing residential care services and their donors to support the transition of these services, so children can be reintegrated back into their families and communities. Support should be directed towards initiatives such as livelihood programs, educational support, healthcare, community services, and counselling services. Local authorities should be engaged to provide family-strengthening services to families at risk of separation. Children should not be separated from their families due to poverty. We call on all stakeholders to contribute to efforts to keep families together.

This is also a call to redirect funding and resources towards community-based care models that prioritize family preservation and cultural continuity, fostering environments where children can thrive within their communities. Also, for the existing and utmost required institutions, there is a need for enhanced regulation, i.e. to implement rigorous registration and monitoring processes for all residential care facilities to ensure compliance with child protection standards and improve accountability. Also, to provide continuous training and capacity-building programs for staff in residential care facilities to enhance their skills in providing nurturing and supportive environments for children.

A statement of support from care-experienced persons for the transition of residential care services in their country.

International and national commitments have been made to phase out institutional care. However, residential care institutions continue to receive funding, resources, and investment. This financial support has contributed to the rise of the "institutionalization" where children are separated from their families. Governments and donors have a crucial role in redirecting resources away from institutions and towards family care. Financial support should be redirected towards family strengthening efforts, the transition of residential care services, and aftercare services for young people exiting care, in line with national and international obligations and commitments.

Short testimonials from care-experienced young persons

Sheetal Agarwal, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh

“According to me, family is more important than staying in CCIs because CCIs cannot provide the same kind of environment as a home. In my experience, children in CCIs face many difficulties adjusting to society and their culture. There's a significant difference in how a child raised in a family develops compared to a child raised in a CCI.

The most important thing, as I've experienced, is the love of a family, which is something CCIs cannot fully replicate. Children sometimes need special attention, which is difficult in CCIs where there are many children and everyone needs equal care.

Family is also important because it allows for opportunities and experiences at the right time, something I've observed many CCI children miss. For example, after leaving CCIs at 18, many children struggle to complete their education or pursue their goals due to a lack of support, especially financial support. For them, finding a job becomes a top priority for survival, which can take away from focusing on their main goals. This can sometimes lead to the feeling of "maybe I should have had a family." In conclusion, I believe family plays a crucial role in everyone's life.”

Shahid, Jammu and Kashmir

“I am a care-experienced youth from Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on special children who have lost parental care due to various reasons. The establishment of institutions for these children was a much-needed step, especially in the Kashmir region. However, as the world is evolving and new research on the mental stability of these special children emerges, we must also consider alternative solutions. One such alternative is providing all possible facilities at their homes if a parent or a willing relative is alive.

Completely shutting down Child Care Institutions (CCIs) is not a feasible option, particularly in Kashmir. The circumstances here are different. Relatives or parents often send their children to CCIs to ensure they receive a good education, as most institutions are located in the main city, offering better development opportunities.

Children who lose their family's breadwinner become eligible for admission to orphanages. Additionally, children from poor families are admitted to these institutions to receive a quality education that might not be available in their local areas. Therefore, I believe that if these children could receive the same facilities as other children while staying at home, it would be beneficial.

When children return home after spending a lot of time in a CCI, they often face difficulties reintegrating into society. However, I have also observed that they tend to be broad-minded and possess good educational knowledge. So, while there are challenges, there are also benefits.”

Mohsin, Madhya Pradesh

“After spending 18 years in an institution and then transitioning from an institution to an independent life in society presents a complex set of challenges. Living in an institution often leaves individuals with a label that carries discrimination. People may view orphans or those raised in institutions with Doubt, questioning their background, religion, level of education, and values. Individuals may face a stigmatized identity due to their background, and struggle to answer basic questions about their personal history. The Institutions often provide a structured

and controlled environment, which can limit exposure to everyday life skills like managing finances or cooking.

The abrupt transition at 18 with little preparation and the absence of a familiar support network can further intensify feelings of isolation. This can lead to significant difficulties in adapting to societal norms and expectations. The steep learning curve of navigating societal norms, finding work and housing, and building a social circle fosters resilience and self-reliance. By recognizing these challenges and creating a more supportive environment, society can empower those leaving institutions to thrive in the broader world.

My journey from institutional life to societal integration is fraught with challenges, but it also offers opportunities for growth and development. By addressing the issues of identity, skill deprivation, and lack of support, society can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for those transitioning out of institutions.”

Surja, Uttar Pradesh

“CCI was awesome, safe, and supportive, and it helped me grow. However, turning 18 felt bad because it meant leaving the CCI family and detaching from the bond I created. The transition to the larger world was difficult since I hadn't practiced dealing with outsiders. At CCI, I felt protected and was given information, but I wasn't practically prepared for the outside world.

Now, my relationship with my sister feels awkward. We act like strangers! CCI cared for me perfectly but due to legal rules and regulations, practical life learning was somewhat missed. While those who live in family, start getting prepared to become emotionally and socially strong at very young age so that they can tackle the struggles that one faces when turning 18 and even if living anywhere. Children need both – love at home and the skills to face life outside. That's why I say, support families with the resources they need so that children can grow with love and learn to face life, all at the same time.”

Conclusion

The transition from residential care to family-based care is imperative for the well-being of children in India. By supporting families and providing community-based services, we can ensure that children grow up in a loving and nurturing environment conducive to their holistic development and well-being. It requires concerted efforts from government agencies, NGOs, donors, and communities to create a future where children are not separated from their families due to poverty but are supported to thrive within their communities. We call on governments, organizations, and donors to work together to make this transition a reality, ensuring a brighter future for all children.