



SHINE TOGETHER was informally established on **November 18, 2020** with the purpose of bringing together children and young people with lived experience of care where we grow professionally and personally. The network began as a close group of 10 care experienced young adults with an aim to create a safe space to communicate and interact, share stories, achievements, challenges, and support one another. Today, we are a group of 37 young and aspiring individuals with a strong willpower so that we can grow further beyond physical boundaries and empower children and young people like us all over the world. A network is fueled by a common voice and vision. **SHINE TOGETHER** is that network which is built on the voices of care experienced demanding rights of the children who are still in the care system and the young adults who have left the care system.

Nepal's context

In Nepal, a care experienced or a child living in care leaves the care system such as children's homes, child care homes, institutions and orphanages when they reach the age of 18. They are expected to leave the care system as adults - often without guidance and no clue on how to reconnect with their families and build a future. A majority of these children come from some of the most remote and farthest districts of Nepal - traveling as long as 4 days on local transportation and on foot to reach care systems often situated in densely populated tourist destinations such as Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal.

Under the guise of providing quality education and better care in the city, families in remote districts who are struggling with stark poverty take loans and handover their children and 'fee' to traffickers who are often people they are familiar with. According to the State of Children in Nepal Report 2023, National Child Right Council documented 11,202 children living in 418 registered child care homes in Nepal. Unfortunately, the majority of these children are growing up in neglect, abuse and a distant sense of belonging when they should be growing rightfully in the care of their own families.

As young people with a long period of lived experience of the institutional care system, we call for action from our government, donors and concerned authorities who hold power to make decisions to shift from institutional care to family care and donors to redirect and invest their fundings towards supporting children in families and prioritize transition of residential care systems into family and community based services. This is pertinent even more when a child is very young because the long years of separation can cause irreversible damage to the emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people. It detaches them from their own natural identity - having lost a chance to grow in their own family and turning into a stranger to

their culture and traditions. Lack of examples and conducive environment to foster healthy bonding and meaning emotional attachments in the care system further complicates care experienced youths in navigating their adult life.

- **Understanding the importance of family and community connection in a child's life.**

Family and the community provides a conducive environment for growth and stability for every child. Families provide a safe environment and they are the best support system for children. No residential care, no matter how much facilitated, can never replicate the selfless love of a parent for a child.

- **Strong documentation of care experienced**

The majority of young people with lived experience of the care system in places such as residential care systems are either undocumented or have records of falsified documentation prepared during the time of getting enrolling into the institutions. A child acquires their citizenship when they reach the age of 16. But due to falsified documents, a care experienced youth struggles to find their own identity of belonging.

The government must commence documentation of care experienced children and youths and their whereabouts to make necessary amendments to promote alternative care services.

- **Donors contributing to creating strong support system**

Donors with good intentions can help ensure the natural right of a child to grow within their own family and community when they make careful fact checks about whether their investment is making the lives of the children better or, separating more children from their families.

Donors can play their part in pooling like minded people and diverting their support to family and community services that ensures a family tackles problems staying together instead of taking children away in the name of solving the problem.

- **To prevent the psychological harms and impacts that affects even in their adulthood**

The long years of separation from love and care of a family negatively impacts the emotional and mental well being of a child. Lack of stable, experienced and emotionally available caregivers in residential care results in psychological disorders such as separation anxiety disorder and attachment disorder.

No residential care, no matter how much facilitated, can never replicate the selfless love of a parent for a child.

- **Support the transition in a safe way and promote alternative care**

In the light of promoting family and community based alternative care, residential care too is another practice of ensuring the education and wellbeing of vulnerable children in the community. However, care systems that are closest to their own biological

community (such as biological, kinship and also foster care) are in the best interest of children.

It has become imperative to have conversations with care experienced children and young people since the pre-transition to post-transition to help them understand their scenario and circumstance and build trust with people around them while having their feelings and concerns acknowledged and respected.

Increased support and practice for family and community services will save families from resorting to orphanages as the first option thereby, saving children from years of neglect, abuse and loss in identity and a sense of belonging.

- **Need of after care services**

Aftercare services are imperative to strengthening safer and successful adjustments of children in and with family after being transitioned from residential care. A recently reunified child will be at risk of redisplacement into another child care home in the lack of support because the taking away children does not guarantee the end of problems such as poverty.

Support in education, finance, counseling and health are important components of aftercare services. Supporting a child in a family means ensuring a child gets raised in their own family while tackling problems. Vocation and skill based training and family strengthening programs ensure sustainability of the family making it possible to raise children in their own community.