

**EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES AND
INITIATIVES OF YOUTH CARE LEAVERS
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN
MAHARASHTRA, INDIA**

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Abstract: Covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted the daily lives of people globally. In this narrative essay, the authors use story-telling method to reflect on the challenges encountered and initiatives undertaken by a support group network for Youth Care Leavers (YCLs) community during the Covid-19 pandemic in Maharashtra, India. It also discusses the findings of a Rapid Needs Assessment survey canvassing 442 respondents under an online relief networking system for the YCLs during pandemic crises. Recommendations that emerged include the need for an adequate emergency preparation plan and support mechanisms for young adults to transition towards living independently after leaving institutional care. Furthermore, inclusion of the YCLs by linking up with existing government schemes and social security programmes through adequate budgeting is advocated.

Keywords: Youth, Care-Leavers, Covid-19 Pandemic, Young Adults, Aftercare, Child-Care Institutions.

Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing health and socio-economic crisis have ravaged the world for more than two years. Numerous studies (Gillian et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Lotan et al., 2020; Greeson et al., 2022) have documented the plight of youth across the world; their marginalization; poor access to resources (material and financial) and support services. The situation of youth in India especially Maharashtra was no different.

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Under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 (The Times of India, 2020c; Business Standard, 2020), the Maharashtra state government converted educational institutions' hostels into quarantine centres (The Times of India, 2020b). Consequently, on-campus students had to vacate their hostel facilities (The Times of India, 2020a). The lockdown also highlighted the underlying socio-economic structural inequalities that confronted migrant labours, casual workers, daily wagers, contract and informal sector workers (Patel et al. 2020, Ferreira, 2021; World Inequality Lab, 2022). Though the pandemic has been hard on mental health of all age-groups (Javed et al., 2020, Pierce et al., 2020), some sections in society are invisible, neglected and are extremely marginalised such as children in child care institutions (CCIs) (Roy, 2020), street children and youth care-leavers (YCLs).

The pandemic pushed the lives of vulnerable children towards uncertainty resulting from household financial pressures and school closures. Children who have lost their parent/s or guardian/s to the Corona virus (Covid orphans) stare at a bleak future (Hillis et al., 2021). They are at an increased risk of mental health problems and violence (Saboula et al., 2015) Addressing concerns of their protection necessitates child-sensitive policy measures supported by adequate budgetary allocations (Kundu and Bhuta, 2021).

Children residing in CCIs or Children Homes (CHs) are already vulnerable (Hojer and Sjoblom, 2014) due to the negative impact of institutionalization and are 'deprived of their liberty'; a phrase signifying any form of detention, imprisonment or placement of a child in public or private custodial setting which that child is not permitted to leave at will, either by virtue of an order given by a public authority or at its instigation or with its consent (UN, 2019). However, when these children become young adults and leave institutional care, they are vulnerable as they have not been adequately prepared for the transition into society (Courtney et al., 2019).

Care Leavers (CLs), or young adults who leave CHs/CCIs upon attaining 18 years of age, have to fend for themselves. Unlike others, these youngsters lack social capital (Glynn, 2021) and do not have any family to support them. They take up petty and odd jobs; because acquiring well-paying employment is tough due to lack of proper educational qualification, vocational training (Roy, 2020) and appropriate work experience. Armed with meagre income, they look to live in shared rented apartments, pursuing part-time educational courses simultaneously. The pandemic has disrupted their lives, and they have been fighting to survive the onslaught of stressors.

Objectives

The paper attempts to highlight the pressing inadequacies and needs of the YCLs since the onset of Covid-19 pandemic, and documents the provision of basic amenities and support provided to YCLs during lockdown. The study situates the experiences of YCLs in Indian context particularly drawing from Maharashtra, emphasizing the need for robust Aftercare support and inclusive social security policies for the YCLs. The role that YCLA and other peer-networks played during the pandemic in mobilizing and organizing the young adults is assessed.

Methodology

Research design and setting

The paper is a narrative essay which uses reflective methodology based on the social work practice undertaken for the welfare assistance of the YCLs and Young Adult Orphans (YAOs) in Maharashtra during the first (March-May, 2020) and second waves (April-June 2021) of Covid-19 pandemic. It documents the planning, organisation, execution and outcomes of the relief services provided to the YCLs, and uses thematic story-telling to detail the challenges and sufferings of the YCLs during the pandemic. The data on the persisting challenges enabled a team of dedicated professional social workers and YCLs network to undertake crisis mitigation planning, resource mobilization and advocacy campaigns during March to October 2020 and February

to June 2021 in Maharashtra. An online Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) Survey tool was also used.

Ethical considerations

The tool underwent an ethical review by a social assistance Committee comprising of senior social work educators from a reputed university, representatives of local coordinating NGOs and a network of YCLs. The survey and its assessment conform to the accepted ethical guidelines.

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their participation in the survey was voluntary. The names of the survey participants mentioned in the article have been changed to protect their identity. In addition to confirming to research ethical standard, obtaining informed consent verbally, precautions were taken to ensure safety and confidentiality of the YCLs. Moreover, data collection was done remotely online, to prevent face-to face contact and ensure adherence to Covid Appropriate Behaviours.

The interventions to address the challenges for the YCLs and the interpretive learnings derived are discussed henceforth.

1. Safety Net for Youth Care Leavers (YCLs)

In the aftermath of pandemic, people lost jobs and earnings, could not fulfil bare necessities. The situation of YCLs, especially orphans and destitute women was even worse as they had no support groups. A gruelling personal experience during Covid-19, spurred the author, a YAO raised in a Pune CCI to help others: “After being asked to vacate my university hostel room, I felt dejected, anxious. I finally reached out to my childhood counsellor who invited me to stay at his home in Raigad. After staying with him for three months, I relocated back. It's really tough for us because our network comprises of our own peers who are in a similar situation. Nobody thinks of our unique circumstance. For instance, civil society provided ration, but mainly to families. Most YCLs are single.”

Despite the presence of a Maharashtra State Probation and

Aftercare Association, the informal, but strong network of YCLA became the point of contact for YCLs across the state. Dubbed *Ekla* (in Bengali language), which translates as *sole*, it is pronounced as *Aikla* (in Marathi language) meaning *listened*, it heeded many adult YCLs who found the YCLA network to be their only lifeline to even access basic food.

Initially, a Pune-based NGO, which was already raising funds for migrant workers in the state extended ration assistance to around 60 YCLs in Mumbai, Pune and Kolhapur with whom the author was in touch. Subsequently, as more requests poured in through word of mouth, the author created a Google form in March 2020 and made a quick assessment of the ground reality of YCLs in Maharashtra. In consultation with an international agency, a protocol was put in place to vet applicants and select beneficiaries so as to prevent duplication of efforts and prioritise YCLs in need.

With the help of mentors, friends and university alumni and NGOs, a crowdfunding initiative raised a sum of INR 5,00,000 in two rounds. During the second lockdown (April - June 2021), the coordinated efforts with NGOs enabled delivery of grocery kits to 650 YCLs along with provision of INR 2000 for one year to 150 young adults. This was done under the Aftercare programme with support of government services (Prime Minister's Care fund) under the Women and Child Development (WCD) department, Maharashtra after sharing the study report with the WCD Minister, Maharashtra.

2. Outreach and Networking

Total 950 YCLs were contacted, out of which 750 YCLs from across Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Panvel, Kalyan, Pune, Aurangabad, Kolhapur, Nashik and Latur districts of Maharashtra received two months groceries during the first-wave lockdown in 2020. During the second-lockdown in 2021, in addition to grocery support, some YCLs were also provided housing and medical expenses. Additionally, it was noted that many YCLs were seeking educational support. Though no new fundraising

activities undertaken, nearly 150 YCLs from Pune were connected with the existing local resources organization for the grocery support. Another 150 YCLs received from the government. A webinar and a field visit were organised to bolster YCLs emotionally and disseminate information on the locally available support systems. The focus of YCLA, Maharashtra expanded to include mental health support, job placement assistance and vocational training in collaboration with NGOs. Advocacy through an international agency resulted in the WCD department developing a Helpline and one-window system in Pune to support YCLs in different cities across Maharashtra by providing crisis support, improving access to entitlements and services for independent living.

The issues that need to be highlighted on priority basis in the government policies and programmes are summarised below.

a) Access to Ration

At the outset, online payment systems were used to purchase the rations, which were then distributed. Later, the YCLs Pune volunteer group began distributing ration, but this mode had to be suspended after the lockdown. Hence, the direct payment route was reverted to. Besides the NGOs, linkages were also made with police authorities in Nashik, Navi Mumbai, Panvel and Kalyan, also with the civil defence in Mumbai to distribute ration kits to YCLs during lockdown.

After being evicted from her room during Covid-19, a 29-year old woman returned to the slum and went without food for several days before contacting a YCLA member and receiving rations. Another 27-year-old LGTBQAI woman staying with friends was sceptical and diffident after being unable to pay the rent. Her plea on the Google Form secured rations.

YLCs were supported with financial assistance for rent, educational fees and internet data for online education. With accommodation emerging as a prime concern during Covid-19.

b) Accommodation

Three YA Os sisters were evicted from their rental accommodation for defaulting on rent during first-wave lockdown. The network sent them a copy of the Maharashtra State Government's Housing Department Resolution, mandating landlords to postpone rent collection and directing that, no one could be evicted over non-payment of rent for at least three months (Financial Express, 2020). Using this, the sisters advocated with their landlord and got their accommodation restored. When a graduate YCL lost his accommodation, assistance was extended to him. He took up a watchman's job which offered him earnings in a time of economic distress as well as accommodation.

c) Health

Due to Covid-19 rush and protocols, hospitals refused to conduct kidney stone surgery on a 19-year-old YCL. Private hospitals cited unavailability of specialised doctors and quoted INR 70000-80000 as expenses. He approached the network and through a local NGO received free medical treatment.

A young woman with a skin ailment approached a Pune-based NGO, which took care of her medical expenses and supported her to regain her confidence. Low self-esteem is a recurring issue for YCLs as despite having reached adulthood, they struggle to forge an identity independent of their past.

Covid-19 affected many YCLs emotionally and psychologically; its worst victims were women trying to survive abusive husbands in enforced self-isolation. Covid-19 also triggered memories of childhood trauma of being alone and helpless. A 35 year-old married YAO man with two children developed a speech impediment from his job retrenchment and absence of social support triggered psychological stress during lockdown.

Online webinars on a variety of topics including life skills were conducted by a supporter to positively engage YCLs.

d) Domestic Violence and Early Marriage

A 40-year-old woman who divorced her husband after battling physical, sexual abuse in her 20-years of marriage was compelled to return to him after losing her INR 5000 job, due to pandemic. In a gender-biased patriarchal social construct, she preferred to face her ex-husband's abuse all over again and held off looking for alternative accommodation till after lockdown because she wanted to be with her son during the pandemic.

A 21-year-old abused woman was deeply grateful for the rations she procured. She said, "He (her husband) felt I'm getting something into the house. There was less frustration and I was spared being thrashed for at least those two-three days." She was counselled and assisted by YCLA to file a First Information Report (FIR) with the local police station and was provided with emergency contacts in case of the recurring domestic violence.

The author notes that, educated YCLs who are married have not shared instances of domestic violence, due to fear of shaming. Moreover, orphaned women in an abusive marriage are more vulnerable as they do not have anyone else to emotionally support them, increasing their loneliness and eventually pushing them into depression. One of the supporters says, "It's either the CCI head or often family members who push young women into marriage as soon as they finish their senior secondary schooling or turn 18 in age. I too, was being forced into marriage by my maternal cousin who refused to take on my responsibility once I left the institute. My elder brother, opposed my marriage and insisted that I complete my education. I was lucky because as a YCL I had a mentor to guide me in my education, career and life choices. Not everyone else has it as easy, which is why I feel I need to help them." She emphasizes the need to have a mentor with whom YCLs can connect in times of crisis as it becomes a preventive action and safety net.

3. Rapid Need Assessment for the support to the YCLs during pandemic crises.

Youth leaving institutions find themselves unequipped to smoothly transition into society due to lack of job opportunities or job loss, insufficient financial support to pursue education, absence of shelter and legal documents to avail schemes, services and scholarships (Andrews, 2020). Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated the turmoil that YCLs have to confront. An understanding of the needs-gap and challenges faced by YCLs will enable the development of corrective mechanisms to adequately support them during their stay in CCIs and continue post their deinstitutionalization ensuring their integration into mainstream life.

During the first-wave lockdown, an online and telephonic RNA survey was conducted to assess the nature of support required by YCLs at that time. A committee comprising representatives from the YCLs, professional practitioners in Aftercare services, NGOs, academicians and an international agency was formed. The committee decided to seek Maharashtra government support. The data was collected during May - June 2020, after realising the need for an evidence-based report for seeking support from the State government. 442 YCLs respondents (53% males and 47% females) shared their life-history and detailed information which was verified by the volunteers from the partner organizations. Data analysis revealed that majority of respondents were from Maharashtra; Kolhapur (27.8%), Thane (23.3%), Mumbai Suburban (17.2%), Pune (14.7%), Palghar (6.3%), Sangli (3.4%), Raigad (2.0%) and Nashik (1.4%) districts. Most importantly, 51 percent of the respondents were in the younger age group of 18 to 25 years. The Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act, 2015 states that Aftercare support must be provided to young adults at leaving the institutional care upon completion of age 18 years (Charegaonkar, 2020). However, the data showed that these individuals have not been provided financial or other resources support. About 3.4% of YCLs were persons with disability (PwDs), and the challenges faced by PwDs in a pandemic are manifold (WHO, 2020; OHCHR, 2020) requiring urgent attention and assistance. Majority of orphan YCLs (65.9%) left the institutional care

without any familial support, further aggravated by lack of governmental financial support severely hampering their transitioning out process. The lack of preparatory training and handholding support during initial transition, especially in middle of a pandemic can severely affect these YCLs not only socio-economically but also in terms of their mental wellbeing (Roy, 2020). The aforementioned issues can also emerge in case of YCLs having a single parent, who may either be the only earning member or may have lost employment due to the pandemic. In cases where family and extended relatives are present, lack of acceptance from the family or refusal to provide shelter due to insufficient resources can cause problems for the YCLs.

The number of YCLs educated below higher secondary (50.2%) and senior secondary schooling (25.3%) levels is comparatively higher, therefore calls for attention. The data also highlights the importance of providing education scholarships to children in institutions and YCLs to access education. For individuals who lacked access to education or have discontinued their education, stepping out in the real world during a crisis situation entails a trail of difficulties and finding suitable employment, continuing higher education or becoming financially independent becomes more challenging.

Approximately 50 percent of the respondent YCLs were already unemployed before the lockdown. During lockdown almost all YCLs lost their jobs except a few who were medical assistants. This raised questions regarding financial support and other forms of assistance provided by the government as per the JJ Act. Further, the pandemic induced economic distress and hardships is likely to increase the barriers faced by YCLs in accessing quality education and employment opportunities. This emphasizes not only the need for financial support from the government but also access to technical guidance, counselling and mentoring for affordable skill-based vocational training programmes tailor-made for them.

The study highlighted the following:

- More than 50 percent of YCLs did not have voter ID and Ration card.
- Around 67 percent YAOs did not possess the *Anath* (orphan) certificate.
- 31percent were identified with either single parent's or both parents.
- About 10.6 percent respondents did not possess bank accounts.

These documents are essential for identity, to exercise one's fundamental right to vote but also to receive benefits of governmental schemes (Saini et al., 2017). The lack of ration card is a major hurdle, particularly during the lockdown when its absence means not being able to acquire ration through the Public Distribution System (PDS) or being unable to avail other social security benefits which further worsen their quality of life.. It is therefore crucial for the government to create systems for the YCLs to avail documents during their stay at CCIs or immediately after leaving them. Supporting YCLs to open bank accounts, provide assistance with the same and allocate direct cash transfers to them is essential for safeguarding social security.

During the pandemic lockdown about 88.2percent of the YCL respondents did not own a health insurance. This displays their precarious predicament given the pandemic escalated risks to poor physical and mental health conditions. Health insurance is of immense significance (Prinja et al, 2017) particularly for YCLs who lack reliable social network.

Recommendations for Way Forward

These recommendations emerge from field work, experiential knowledge from engagement with the YCLs during pandemic and two studies (Udayancare, UNICEF and Tata Trusts, 2019; Karandikar and Charegaonkar, 2019).

In accordance with the aforementioned challenging issues, the

following recommendations for the government aim to ensure smooth transition of YCLs and attract adequate support for their holistic and inclusive development.

Two key areas need to be addressed:

1. Inclusion of YCLs as a specifically named group in health insurance schemes (Pradhan Mantri Bima Suraksha Yojana, Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jan Arogya) designed for marginalised populations and in the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana applicable to destitute individuals below 65 years of age, orphaned children, PwDs and those suffering from tuberculosis, cancer, AIDS and other critical illnesses. Creating awareness amongst orphan YCLs and PwDs leaving institutions is essential for them to avail the scheme benefits.
2. Strengthening the coping capacity and resilience of YCLs. Previous researches (Udayancare, UNICEF and Tata Trusts, 2019; Charegaonkar, 2020) highlight that youth in institutions often have poor mental health. Enhancing their resilience and nurturing their emotional wellbeing during their stay and upon their deinstitutionalization is critical requiring focussed policy attention in the post-pandemic era. Free counselling services and assured psycho-social support must be offered to the YCLs. Peer-to-peer CCIs support groups like the YCLA should be established along with to ensure that they remain in mutual contact and solidarity. There is a need to orient the youth before leaving CCIs and CHs regarding helplines for free counselling and other professional services.

1) Mapping and Database Maintenance of YCLs

A comprehensive database that incorporates monitoring of Aftercare support would ensure that when leaving care, the youth are equipped with necessary documents, adequate skills, monetary funding and enabling environment to transition into society.

2) Recognition of Youth Care Leavers (YCLs) as vulnerable youth

Advocacy for according special recognition to all YCLs as a distinct and vulnerable youth population for social inclusion, addressing unmet needs and mainstreaming. YCLs should be recognized as a disadvantaged section under the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) category and be provided support in the following ways:

- Educational scholarships with age limit increased to 23 years for YCLs so they can complete their education including professional education where needed.
- Cash transfers for electronic devices (mobiles and laptops) which are needed for higher education.
- Periodic review and auditing of the 1% education reservation scheme to ensure that YCLs benefit from it.

3) Employment and Financial Security

The pandemic has thwarted mobility and employment related migration plans of YCLs. This calls for change in the short and long-term mitigation measures.

Short term measures: The government must provide a six-month relief pension to the YCLs as a financial support for housing and basic amenities.

Long term measures:

- a) Career counselling, vocational information circulation and skill-training among the youth post care-leaving must be provided. Career-mentors must remain in touch with YCLs to plan their career facilitating the youth into self-dependence and job-security.
- b) State government must come forward to provide appropriate employment support to these YCLs to extricate them from economic vulnerability.
- c) Youth willing to engage in self-employment or possessing entrepreneurship potential must be trained in business management by the State Higher Education Department for enhancing their business acumen. They should be provided with easy credit and professional guidance to initiate their

business ventures.

- d) Government must ease the availability of the *Anath* (orphan) certificate essential for obtaining 1% education reservation benefits.

4) Participation, Inclusion and Social Protection

a. YCLs have enormous potential to be effective resourceful contributors to larger society. Increased interaction between YCLs and the bureaucracy at local, regional and national level for creating YCL peer groups, CL community organisations will enable advocacy on improving the socio-economic life of YCLs and increase engagement in public dialogues and campaigns.

b. Women YCLs are more vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion needing critical advice and support as they transition and negotiate into non-institutional life.

- Issues of gender discrimination and Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) needs, violence and safeguarding must be discussed amongst men, women and gender non-binary YCLs to build gender sensitivity and solidarity. This is essential in the post-pandemic scenario whereby social distancing can lead to isolation, loneliness, anxiety and negative emotions (Li et al, 2021).
- Presence of a strong support network with regular interaction through electronic media would help the youth to stay in mutual contact, provide emotional bonding and encourage acceptance and belongingness.

5) Legislative Policy, Reforms and Documentation

The pandemic has highlighted the challenges faced by YCLs in accessing social protection schemes and essential services. These include the absence of specific clear advisories focusing on YCLs, inaccessibility of care authorities, lack of timely required support and lack of legal documents. Hence, the government must prioritize the creation of robust mechanism for making necessary legal identity documents for the YCLs to ensure their safeguarding and access to rights.

6) Convergence between existing schemes

- All government relief packages (free ration, cooked meals, cooking gas and financial aid) announced since Covid-19 must be made applicable to YCLs, adolescents and YAOs.
- Help the YCLs to open Jan Dhan bank accounts and obtain essential identity documents such as Voters' ID card; Below Poverty Line (BPL) status Ration Card, Domicile Certificate, *Anaath* (orphan) certificate and Aadhar card.
- Build effective linkages for Aftercare based on government inter-departmental convergence such as Social Justice and Empowerment, Central Social Welfare Board (MoWCD), Housing, Youth Affairs, Higher Education, Industry and Health in order to provide integrated services across the Sphere of Aftercare (SOA).
- Create a convergent model based on the 'SOA' which identifies 8 different domains of Aftercare; i) affordable and adequate housing, ii) independent living skills, iii) interpersonal skills and social relationships, iv) mental and emotional wellbeing, v) physical health, vi) financial independence and career, vii) education and vocational skills, and viii) identity and legal awareness (Udayancare, UNICEF and Tata Trusts, 2019). The WCD department Government of Maharashtra, (GoM), can take the lead for this.

7) Access to Healthcare Services

- Healthcare service benefits under National Health Mission (NHM), linkages with hospitals, access to subsidized medical services and health insurance must be made available for all YCLs under Pradhan Mantri Jan Aarogya Yojna (PMJAY), with accentuated focus on mental healthcare.
- Provide affordable mental healthcare access to YCLs through professional specialized counsellors and peer mentorship programmes along with continuous support

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- for individual and group counselling therapy.
- Create awareness and build greater acceptance amongst YAOs regarding importance of psycho-social health and support seeking since their time in CCIs to decrease their reluctance towards help seeking. Increase awareness and sensitivity amongst the staff, caregivers, duty-bearers and functionaries within the Aftercare-system about recognizing symptoms of distress and address them in a timely manner.
 - The District Aftercare Associations and Outreach Service Centers must be accessible to YCLs in the post Aftercare phase for crisis support for at least two years after CCI exit.
 - Ensure that a list of important contacts and welfare services such as the police, hospitals, lawyers, de-addiction services, help-lines for domestic violence, shelters and hostels, job placement agencies are made available to YCLs. Social media can be an effective medium for this.

8) Effective implementation of existing provisions of policy and law on Aftercare

The WCD department, GoM, as a nodal agency responsible for effective implementation of Aftercare in the state should ensure that YCLs are provided with sustained support across the SOA (Udayancare, UNICEF and Tata Trusts, 2019) in a dignified manner that respects their freedom and choices. For this they must:

- Appoint one dedicated Aftercare officer per district under Maharashtra State Child Protection Society.
- Establish a forum for coordination and cross-vertical sharing between District Child Protection Unit (DCPUs), Child Welfare Committee (CWCs), NGOs, other government departments and stakeholders.

9) Monthly Grant

Ensure expeditious disbursement of the monthly grant of INR 2000/- for YCLs up to the age of 21 years as mandated under the JJ Act. Increase the quantum of monthly grant to an amount equal to 75% of the notified Minimum Wage for unskilled workers for the urban centres from where the YCLs exited the CCIs. Automatically revise the amount of monthly grant as and when the revision in the Minimum Wage for unskilled worker is notified by the Government (Karandikar and Charegaonkar, 2019).

10) Tracking of YCLs and Youth Adult Orphans (YAOs) and Follow-up

- Set up a robust Database Management Information System (DBMIS) for Aftercare to maintain real-time reliable disaggregated data on YCLs and their outcomes, mandated by the District Child Protection Office (DCPO) and the Member Secretary of the Maharashtra State Child Protection Society (MSCPS) at the District and State level.
- Local NGOs, District Aftercare Associations and MSCPS should ensure data analysis to track outcomes of YCLs in relation to SOA and assess the situation of those who have not received any Aftercare support or services during Covid-19 pandemic. All CLs should be informed about the monitoring process so that they are aware and willingly participate in the data collection process.
- For the best interest of the YCLs, all such data could be made accessible for monitoring and research purposes whilst ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Longitudinal data could be deployed to assess the changing situations of YCLs and used as evidence for any policy formulation on youth in the State.

11) Create and Strengthen Peer Group Networks

State government must provide ample opportunities, Information, Education and Communication (IEC) Resources and Capacity Building Programmes among the CLs to get associated with formal and recognized YCL Associations. Active and inclusive

participation of YCLs and YAOs, leadership generation activities, productive use of pooled resources and cooperation from civil society organization (CSOs) must be promoted.

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic has rattled the global healthcare systems and devastated millions of lives through deaths, infirmity and poverty. However, the pandemic can be controlled by vaccinations, social distancing and upgrading medical infrastructure. But the situation of the YCLs is dire and demand effective remedial measures. They are excluded, neglected and are treated as nobody's responsibility pointing to the urgent need to introduce appropriate affirmative policy and programmes for the inclusive growth and development of YCLs alongside that of the other marginal communities. The government system of India must incorporate the YCLs into the existing policy framework and create targeted programmes for delivering long-term and inclusive support for the YCLs.

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