The Webinar "Gatekeeping as a Systematic Process: Preventing Child's Separation" was organised by India Alternative Care Network (IACN) in association with Miracle Foundation India, on April 28, 2023, from 11.00 am -12.30 pm. It was attended by participants from across the country.

The webinar was organised with the objective to understand gatekeeping with a vision of getting acquainted with the components, tools, mechanisms, stakeholders and their role in gatekeeping and learning some promising practices at the Primary and Secondary levels of gatekeeping. The panellists included experts who have been extensively involved in implementing child protection, family-based care, and gatekeeping in different states in India.

Dr. Maninder Kaur, the National Coordinator of IACN established the rationale for family-based care for children and the need for gatekeeping in preventing the vulnerability of children and separation from their families.

Ms. Parul Patle, Manager-Family Strengthening & Family-Based Alternative Care, Miracle Foundation India then provided a detailed understanding of Gatekeeping and the various levels at which gatekeeping operates. The key points included:
Gatekeeping is a systematic process that ensures that alternative care options are opted for children only when necessary and that the best suitable option are selected. The same has been advocated in JJ Act and Mission Vatsalya. Gatekeeping is about keeping a watch and ensuring that the vulnerable child and family are identified at an early stage, proper assessment is done at the community level or CWC level and provided support that keeps them together. An effective gatekeeping system :
- Prevents children's unnecessary separation from family and placement into family-based alternative care options.
- Reintegrates the children placed into alternative care back into families, and
- Supports community and organisations responsible for the care of children to make decisions through a consistent and informed process.

Gatekeeping has been divided into:
- Primary Level (Community level gatekeeping): Gatekeeping at the community level where vulnerable children and families are supported with family-strengthening interventions.
- Secondary level (Gatekeeping at Child Protection System level/ the level of CWC). A proper assessment of the family at this level enables decisions of placement of children either into alternative care or back to the family. Efforts are made to strengthen the family by keeping the child in the family without any separation.
- Tertiary: Gatekeeping for the reintegration of children and preventing re-separation.

This session was followed by a panel discussion focusing on the process, interventions, and tools involved in gatekeeping at the community level and the level of CWC. Ms. Sharmila Ray, the Child Protection Specialist, at UNICEF, Gujarat, moderated the panel discussion.

The first speaker, Mr. Rathva Rushanbhai, Village Child Protection Committee (VCPC) Member, Gujarat in his session elaborated on the "Role of CPCs at the Primary Level of Gatekeeping (Community-level Gatekeeping)". He based the session on his three years of extensive experience working as a member of a VCPC in Jaloda, Chota Udaipur, Gujarat, supported under the joint partnership program of UNICEF, Gujarat state and Miracle Foundation India, with Deepak Foundation providing field-level support and Leher providing the technical support.

The speaker focussed that the Gatekeeping approach of the VCPC of Jaloda is to strengthen the families with the support of volunteers along with creating a safety net for the children. In its efforts towards gatekeeping, the committee has identified 87 families at risk due to lack of access to services, poverty, children without parental ties, addiction in the family, school dropouts etc. The selected families and children are assessed on the five well-being domains of Family and Social Relations, Household Economy, Living Conditions, Education, Health and Mental Health using the "Thrive scale" tool developed by Miracle Foundation. The VCPC initiates convergence with various government schemes and services and organises awareness camps. Regular meetings with the government department, providing project updates have been initiated. Capacity building of VCPC members, parents, volunteers, teachers and children has been done from time to time to perform their roles more efficiently and effectively. To encourage child participation, *Bal Panchayat* is also formed where children discuss their issues and also have representation in VCPC.

With all these initiatives, the VCPC has been able to curtail the practice of child labour and child marriage. The migration of children with families has decreased and children have been enrolled in schools and have uninterrupted education. Furthermore, the VCPC have initiated scaling up the gatekeeping mechanism in neighbouring villages to ensure the children are protected and thrive.

Ms. Nicole Menezes, the Co-Founder, Leher, took forward the discussion by speaking about the Role of CSOs at Community-level Gatekeeping. The speaker observed that the role of CPC is not only limited to gatekeeping but also focuses on larger behavioural change, discussions and prevention. She shared a case story from their field where Leher works with around 400 CPCs. The story portrayed how the *Bal Panchayat* with the support from VCPC and DCPU addressed the issue of misuse of the funds under *Parvarish* Scheme by a kinship carer and also helped the children move to an appropriate family-based placement.

Through the case story, the speaker showcased the monitoring role of CPC in ensuring long-term follow-up support for children and families so that the benefit of schemes reaches them, and any issues affecting children are addressed. She spoke about Leher's systematic approach of working not only with vulnerable families but also identifying hot spot areas by looking at HDI indicators, migration, and poverty, for

focused secondary-level interventions for the entire community and form platforms like CPCs and Children's groups which can identify issues of child protection and vulnerabilities in the community.

Various tools are used by the organisation. Child Protection Baseline is used at the initiation point, where Focus Group Discussions are conducted with different cohorts like groups of children, community members and duty bearers, to understand the primary issues related to child protection, which helps the organisation plan their interventions. The audio-visual tools developed by the organisation are utilised in the formation of CPC through a democratic process and help in their functioning. Once formed the CPCs are introduced to the community members, and their roles and responsibilities are shared with the community to ensure the community can approach the CPCs.

The speaker talked about tools for school assessments, problem tree analysis, self-assessment tools for CPC, and how discussions on common child protection issues like child labour, child marriage, and addiction are used to identify cases. System assessment tools like fish exercise- an audit exercise are conducted at the level of children, CPC members and other stakeholders to understand if specific child rights are achieved.

The speaker also shared about an MIS tool, to be implemented as a mobile application that is designed and developed for CPCs, to record their work - cases and discussions and to generate reports. The application analyses data and shows trends in the community to support the CPCs in planning interventions. She also talked about creating a curriculum for developing strong children groups and a workbook which can be easily administered by children and enables them to participate and work with other community mechanisms.

The next speaker, Dr. Surendra Tiwari, a member of CWC Bench, Sahebganj, Jharkhand threw light on the role of CWCs in Gatekeeping. The speaker shared that for effectively implementing gatekeeping it becomes essential for CWC to thoroughly investigate the reasons for the child's separation and give priority to reintegrating the child into their family. He shared that his CWC bench ensures that proper SIR (Social Investigation Report – Form 22, JJA) is done, and the ICP of the child is adequately prepared and regularly updated by the case workers. The CWC regularly counsels the child and family and advocates that family is the best environment for a child's development. During counselling, many concerns like the family's economic condition, education, and absence of proper health facilities, are raised and addressed. The CWC also supports the families in availing basic documents, linking them to social protection schemes and ensuring that the children are reunified with their families as soon as possible. Another important component of gatekeeping is the regular follow-up of the family and extending support to the child and family for any challenges after the reunification of the child.

The speaker provided evidence of how the CWC can converge with key stakeholders in achieving effective gatekeeping. He shared how the CWC bench closely works with the child protection workforce, Childline and other government departments to spread awareness about the available government schemes and facilities in supporting families in providing care for their children. The village headman is taken into confidence to ensure that the community is aware of child protection in preparing a safety net for the

children. The hotspots are also identified with the prevalence of children in illegal activities to ensure they are rehabilitated into the community.

The next speaker Ms. Geetarani Lourembam, Program Manager, Deinstitutionalisation and Gatekeeping, Prerana, Mumbai, talked about the role of CSOs at the secondary level of Gatekeeping. She introduced how Prerana started with intervention in urban areas of Mumbai, Project *Unnati* for deinstitutionalization which also provides family support systems in the community. She shared about the practice of the Helpdesk in CWC premise which serves as a single window for providing support to stakeholders, CWC and complements them to ease out the caseload to CWCs. Other interventions include direct social work for positive linkages to various government schemes and services, Psycho-social support and direct financial support (short-term – Bridge support)

The speaker highlighted that the challenges of gatekeeping and deinstitutionalization include a lack of clarity on CNCP children among stakeholders, a lack of feasible alternative care and community-based services, limited organisations providing family support services, and a lack of recognition regarding the correlation between child protection and other vulnerabilities.

She made key recommendations based on some of the good practices of Prerana such as training the functionaries on the principles of the JJ Act and making them aware of gatekeeping using small group learning circles. In addition, the speaker recommended that alternative care services and community-based services need strengthening; the need for establishing strong linkages between resources and services at the community and CWC level; capacity building of the child protection stakeholders to truly understand the definition of CNCP and strengthening assessment capacity of the system; creating regional platforms to share learnings, practices and challenges.

The question & answer session brought out the below questions which were responded to by the panellists.

Q)How to scale up the gatekeeping mechanism and how to ensure ownership of government departments in the context of gatekeeping.
A) One should share effective tools for assessment and progress with the government regularly. However, it is also important to note that centralisation of power at one level curtails community participation. The ownership must give flexibility to the community to exercise their social, cultural, and economic differences. The concept, though well defined as village, block, district and state-level CPC, must adopt flexibility to reach out to communities and ensure their participation in scaling up.

Q)What is the basic difference between child protection and gatekeeping?
A) Child Protection is a larger umbrella under which falls various modalities like prevention, transition, alternative care options, and various government and private support. Gatekeeping is one such modality which is used as a mechanism for child protection

Q)How can secondary-level gatekeeping be rolled out in vulnerable communities in a holistic manner?
A)A strong case management system can support children and families for the child's education, health and other family support services. CWCs can keep an eye on and provides proper follow-up with reintegrated child and family to decrease the re-separation of the child.

The webinar was summed up by the moderator, Ms. Sharmila Ray by sharing the key takeaways.

- Child protection is a holistic issue and covers a range of domains. Child protection is not limited to the issues of child labour, or child marriage, and cannot be viewed in isolation but needs to be seen in the context of the child's entire ecosystem. Thus the role of family and community becomes crucial for Child protection and gatekeeping, as rightly captured by the saying "It takes the whole village to raise a child".
- All stakeholders including the family, community and state stakeholders must work with the child-centric approach. While planning a scheme or programme, the best interest of children must be kept at the centre, and interventions can be built on that.
- All the players - the CSOs and Government machinery including the Department of Education, Social Justice and Empowerment, Women and Child Development, need to come together and hold hands in achieving effective gatekeeping and addressing the care and protection of our children.