

Support care leavers to have better outcomes in life

Submitted on behalf of care leavers from India to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Day of General Discussion 2021 on Rights of Children and Alternative Care

By India Alternative Care Network (IACN), Make a Difference (MAD), Udayan Care and Care Leaver's Network (CLAN)

Context

Children with experience of institutionalisation struggle during their transition to independent living because of the adverse effects of institutionalisation and the lack of social, emotional, and financial support systems necessary for a safe transition. They also often lack the safety net and buffer a supportive family offers, which puts them at a high risk of falling back into the vicious cycle of poverty.

This submission is on behalf of young persons with experience of care from India. The inputs are based on the discussions in a webinar with over 65 care leavers from India. The event titled "What do care leavers in India want to have better outcomes in life?" was held on June 5, 2021. It was co-facilitated by Care Leavers Association and Network (CLAN), India Alternative Care Network (IACN), Make a Difference (MAD), Udayan Care and supported by UNICEF. Care leavers were divided into five groups. The discussions in groups centred on different aspects of improving care for care leavers, i.e., - understanding care for children and caregivers, meaningful participation of children, strengthening aftercare practice, challenges faced by care leavers, the impact of COVID on care leavers and the support they want and their recommendations.

Understanding the experiences of care leavers

The following discussions with care leavers reflect some critical areas of concern identified by them to have better outcomes in life.

1. Understanding quality care for children in child care homes and care leavers

The youth identified care in terms of the challenges that they face in child care homes and during their transition, and recommend the following as some of the essential determinants to care in child care homes and aftercare:

- Opportunities to keep family relations alive.
- Wherever possible, reintegration of children with their families and extended families.

- Placement of children in child care homes in the home States so that children are familiar with their language, food and culture, and are able to retain their right to identity.
- For children who have lost both parents, the State must look after the inheritance the parents have left behind till the time the child turns 18 years old.
- Access to education and health (both physical and mental well-being)
- Play and leisure should be an essential part of the routine for children in care homes. Too much regimentalisation results in a lack of creativity and imagination.
- Career counselling and the freedom to choose the right academic course and career. Children in child care homes are expected to take up courses that result in immediate job opportunities even if there is no scope for future growth.
- Access to mental health services and psychosocial support to enable positive mental health outcomes.
- Interaction with other children outside residential care.
- Opportunities for vocational training when in child care homes.
- Provision to work part-time while still in care to facilitate a smooth transition.
- Transition preparation should begin a few years in advance and cover life skills training like problem-solving, learning accountability, financial literacy and promoting positive social relationships, among other skills.
- Adequate financial assistance for survival and maintenance for a stipulated period. The current allotted fund of INR 2000 per month is not sufficient.
- Access to positive role models and mentors both in child care home and aftercare.
- Fair treatment from society. We should not be judged because of our experience in care.
- Support in making identity documents and other civil registration documents as we leave child care homes.
- Assistance in higher education, job placements, accommodation and health services.

"I have always been good in cricket. If I had received the right encouragement and opportunity, I could have played professional cricket."

2. Making participation of children and care leavers meaningful in decision-making processes

- As children in care, we often experience early trauma due to family separation. It can usually manifest into low self-esteem, poor

communication skills, fear of judgement, lack of awareness of our rights and existing avenues of participation, lack of interest in education, and our inability to trust people, among many others. These factors hinder our ability to express ourselves freely.

- We feel that the right to express our views and thoughts is not taught to us as children despite it being there in spirit in our law and policy documents. Practitioners must work with us on this to enhance our capabilities.
- In the context of our culture, we feel that working with parents to build their capacities on parenting skills is equally important for sowing the seeds of children's participation in decision about their care and lives at large. Parents and adults have to be oriented to believe in the capacities of children as individuals with an independent thought process.

3. Strengthening aftercare practice in India for care leavers

We believe that access to aftercare services is a right of every youth with an experience of care. The system cannot push us back into circumstances that led us to care in the first place. We are denied equal opportunities in the absence of support, and that marginalises us further. We want the policymakers to recognise our strength and potential as a youth, understand our lived experiences and challenges, and support us to become independent contributing citizens of the country. The following areas need urgent attention by policymakers to make aftercare practice more robust for us:

- We want support with job placements and opportunities for income generation activities. Difficulty in securing employment is the biggest impediment we face in independent living. Lack of job and income means that we start out our adult life with a disadvantage.
- Policymakers must know that in the absence of financial security, we are left struggling for our basic needs such as food, clothing and accommodation. This further compromise our opportunities for education and learning skills. We are pushed to take up our first jobs, often at lower compensations due to our exigencies and lack of a system around us that supports us in crises.
- Another major challenge that we face in transition is the lack of identity documents that hinder our access to government social schemes and jobs, securing accommodation and other opportunities for a better life.
- We are already vulnerable due to our separation and experiences in care, many of us have had traumatic pasts, and most of us don't have family support to fall back on. This makes providing transitioning support even

more critical. Every youth in aftercare needs robust mental health services to have positive outcomes in their independent lives.

- At the national level, we need to be included in flagship schemes and social protection benefits that would ensure equal opportunities and access to higher education, employment, health care, participation in professional sports, accommodation, subsidised ration and loan, and other benefits. The inclusion of care leavers in the youth policy should be done on an urgent basis.
- Policymakers should address the unique vulnerabilities that female care leavers face in policy and practice. Marriage should not be seen as a rehabilitation plan for us. Even if marriage is being done at the age of 18, caregivers must take necessary measures to ensure the well-being of the girl, which should start with providing necessary psychosocial support to help her make the right decision and building her capacity to transition into the new life. The groom's family should also be supported and prepared. The community-based child protection groups and community stakeholders should be involved to provide support and follow-up to ensure the well-being of female care leavers after their marriage.
- We want the Government of India to make a dedicated budgetary allocation for care leavers. Even during the pandemic, we have not received any support from the government.
- We must be given a care leaving certificate stating the benefits we are entitled to as the wards of the State.

"A place to sleep is a basic necessity. However, we face challenges in finding accommodation because of financial constraints. In some instances, people are hesitant to have us as tenants because of lack of proper identity documents or due to our experience in care".

"If the caregivers in residential homes ensure that we get all our basic identity documents made at the time we leave care, it will be a big support for us in transition and accessing benefits that we are entitled to."

4. Measures and responses to support care leavers in India to mitigate risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and support needed in coming times

The challenges that we continue to face since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic includes financial stress due to loss of employment and partial salaries in the extended periods of lockdown, inability to continue and complete our education and vocational courses, lack of access to health care, insurance and access to quality mental health care services. The pandemic and its impact are more demanding for a vulnerable population

like us. This uncertainty and loss of years have further pushed us to the margins. Some of us have faced physical abuse and mental stress in the backdrop of COVID-19.

Some measures that could mitigate our risks include:

- A few of us have come together and formed a pandemic crisis support group for care leavers. We have identified 800 care leavers in need of support during the pandemic and created a WhatsApp group and task force with like-minded volunteers and distributing grocery, medical support and mental health services through professionals to support the care leavers. Such efforts on mapping care leavers and conducting regular need assessment, and providing them support should be encouraged, replicated and supported by the State.
- Expand the scope of COVID-19 relief measures for children who have lost parents to include care leavers as a vulnerable and affected population.
- Ensure that we have accommodation and our basic needs of food, clothing, health and hygiene are met.
- We must be given access to hygiene and sanitisation related items and access to health and medical services.
- Access to existing care leavers networks or peer support groups to stay connected and seek help and share our struggles.
- Prioritise collaborations and Public-Private Partnerships in COVID relief with an aim for raising funds for care leavers going through a financial crisis.
- Support in getting jobs, including government jobs, as we believe that the State is our guardian.
- Option to avail low-interest loans by the government to start our own small scale business.
- Support scholarships for higher education and access to digital learning so that our studies are not hampered.
- Set up systems to support us during emergencies. Make access to support easier through helplines and help desks.

"Many of us don't have any family or a support person to reach out to in times of emotional stress or crisis. We need that one person or support system that can guide us through difficult times."

5. What do policymakers need to prioritise? - Recommendations from care leavers

Care leavers in India must become a priority with the Govt. of India (GOI) as they, more than other young adults, are ill-equipped at the age of 18 years

to join mainstream life. A [study of 500 care leavers in India was done in 2019](#), and while it gathered evidence of the challenges of care leavers, it also set forth recommendations for change which the GOI must act upon. While the law and policy in India strongly mandate aftercare support, it is hardly implemented and remains a low priority with the GOI.

While many NGOs working with children and young people without parental support have developed their care leaver associations, [CLAN Delhi has petitioned the GOI](#) in the midst of COVID to raise their demands and have received over 1300 support for this. Recently UNICEF and YuWaah have enabled the formation of a national care leavers network to mobilise themselves into a collaborative platform.

In our considered view, care leavers in India must be supported in the following domains:

- **Support and preparation to leave care:** preparing children for transition while they are in residential care with independent living skills is essential as long term adult outcomes depend on this critical process.
- **Accommodation:** The government should make a provision of providing accommodation when they move out of care.
- **Health and Nutrition:** The government should make provisions for food stipend/allowance and the State providing health and medical insurance.
- **Emotional Support:** The government should facilitate peer support groups of care leavers that can act as a support system. Provisions should be made to enable free counselling support to all the care leavers seeking emotional support.
- **Legal Identity and Representation:** Ensure that before care leavers move out of the CCIs, they have the primary documents in place and bank accounts set up before they transition out of care.
- **Financial Support:** The government should provide financial support to care leavers in the form of a monthly stipend and one-time settlement amount and customised support to care leavers depending on the crisis they are going through, till 21 years or 23 years.
- **Policy and data of care leavers:** The government must undertake systemic assessments of existing policies for better inclusion for care leavers and set up a real-time data system to support them.
- **Skill Development:** Need assessment to identify skill gaps, and provisions should be made to ensure care leavers are being provided with the necessary skill sets (life skills, functional skills, career counselling, tech skills, and digital literacy).

- **Support in employment and career progression:** State and central governments must organise aftercare and assign a dedicated person/unit in the child protection system who will help the care leavers to become job-ready, acquire market-related skills, be given internships in government and private sectors and be made aware of and offered reservation in government jobs.
- **Awareness and Knowledge:** There needs to be a systemic framework established by the government encompassing basic literacy about general learning and environmental awareness for care leavers, which should provide information about existing administrative and judicial structure such as police station, bank, courts, post office, technology, hospital / public distribution system, government institutions.
- **Network Barriers:** There is a need to provide them with a good network as a support system and safety net that helps in times of crisis and helps them grow and develop.

About us

[CLAN](#) is a peer-led independent network of care leavers in Delhi working since 2017 on advocacy and training children in residential care on transition.

[IACN](#) is a collective of practitioners and CSOs working on the protection and well-being of children without parental care or at the risk of separation, supported by UNICEF.

[MAD](#) is an NGO working on aftercare and supporting CLs in India.

[Udayan Care](#) is an NGO working since 1994, working to bring sunshine to the lives of children and youth.