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A STUDY ON THE CARE LEAVERS IN KERALA

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Abstract

Aftercare means making provision of support, financial or otherwise, to persons who have completed the age of eighteen years but have not completed the age of twenty-one years and have left any institutional care to join the mainstream of the society. Upon turning 18, youth transitioning out of child care institutions to independent life in Kerala face many challenges, such as securing housing and identity documents; accessing education, skill development, and employment opportunities; and psychosocial support. The present research study explores the importance of aftercare institutions in giving reintegration services that prepare Child Care Institutions (CCI) or re-entry into the community by establishing the necessary collaborative arrangements to ensure the delivery of prescribed services and supervision. The research examines the aftercare services that provide youth with comprehensive education, shelter, mental health, vocational services and material support after leaving CCI in the Kerala context. This study showed that absent or inadequate aftercare support during transition increases care leavers' vulnerabilities to homelessness, unemployment, education, substance misuse, social exclusion. It also found that continued aftercare support is necessary to foster independent living skills in these young people and enable their reintegration into mainstream society. Finally, the study points out that intensive interventions have to be put forward to provide a smooth transition to aftercare and ensure services that promise independence and safety to the youth availing aftercare services.

Keywords: Care Leavers, Aftercare, Child Care Institutions

Introduction

Children are the supreme assets of our country. The future of a nation rests on healthy, protected, educated and well-developed children. They are the potential and valuable human resources for the progress of a nation. If children are deprived of their childhood - socially, economically, physically and mentally, the country gets deprived of the potential human resources for social progress, economic empowerment, peace and order, social stability and good citizenry. Therefore, they are to be provided with all necessary facilities and atmosphere to grow into responsible and valuable citizens (*Children: The Supreme Assets of Our Nation*, 2021). Indian constitution provides all the equality for the entire citizen and pledges more protection for the children. Also, we adopt the National policy for children in the year 1974 and 2013, respectively. The National policies address the problems and challenges faced by the children.

Long-term development may be compromised without the early experience of a few warm, caring, socially–emotionally responsive adults. Insecure attachment, wildly disorganized, is related to increased problem behaviors later. This situation is actual for externalizing behaviors in males and other social, behavioral control, crime, and psychological state problems, especially in high-risk children and people who still experience insensitive parenting and child care. In addition, children reared in globally bad orphanages tend to be smaller tall, weight, and head and chest circumference (Bradley, R. H. & Corey, R. (2002).

The number of orphans and abandoned children worldwide increases daily because of human causes. According to 2014 estimates by UNICEF, there are about 31 million orphaned and abandoned children living in India. The modern world's social and economic changes create more orphan hood challenges. Orphans can barely meet their living standards, such as shelter, food, satisfying emotional needs and a sense of belongingness. Children in this category generally become victims of physical and sexual abuse. The CCI's helps the orphans fulfil some of their essential needs and make the children meet social, emotional, and cognitive development.

The child care institution provides a suitable environment for the growth and development of the children. But after attaining the age of 18, they had to leave the Child Care Institution, and after that, they didn't get any institutional support. For addressing this problem, JJ act 2015 introduced the "aftercare" for making provision of support, financial or otherwise, to persons who have completed the age of eighteen years but have not completed the age of twenty-one years and have left any institutional care to join the mainstream of the society.

The system of Aftercare is a recent one in India. In India, the primary legislative mechanisms for the protection and development of children in residential care are the Integrated Child Protection Scheme 2009 and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015. Any child under the age of 18 who is: homeless; at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation; separated from family; a victim of armed conflict, natural disaster, drug abuse or trafficking, and a member of a dysfunctional family may seek shelter in a residential care home,

according to this legislation. They get educational and material support while in care to ensure their overall development.

The aim of Aftercare is making provision of support, financial or otherwise, to persons who have completed the age of eighteen years but have not completed the age of twenty-one years and have left any institutional care to join the mainstream of the society. Young people usually go from CCIs when they are 18 years old. They are provided with accommodation but often have no support to manage their tenancy, keep track of their bills, and stay in education and employment. It can be a challenge to juggle all these tasks without a safety net if things go wrong at such a young age. (Juvenile Justice Act, 2015. (IN)). Therefore, they have to be supported.

Globally the aftercare system is worked to better the children who leave the CCI system. The types of aftercare assistance include Referral and financial assistance for finding accommodation, education or vocational training, counselling, employment, legal advice, health services or professional services and Information and advice about other government or non-government agencies which can help with family searching, family mediation and family reunion services. Aftercare services support young people aged 18 to 21 years who age out of foster care or other court-ordered placement. The seven domains of the Sphere of Aftercare that must be assessed to ensure successful reintegration are represented diagrammatically below:

In India, the aftercare system is still an evolving area in the domain of youth availing this system. According to the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 (JJ Act 2015), Aftercare in India means making provision of support, financial or otherwise, to persons, who have completed the age of eighteen years but haven't completed twenty-one years, and have left any institutional care to hitch the mainstream of society '[Section 2(5)]. This technique is predicated on the premise that children aging out from child care institutions (CCIs) are susceptible to unemployment, psychological stress, physical and mental disease, homelessness and dependency, in sight of the absence of family or dependable adults who can act as a pillar of support. Unless they're assisted in critical matters like finance, employment, accommodation etc., the method of their transition from protected institutional care to independent adulthood and life after that may derail.

The need for aftercare services through government and Non- Government has become more critical in the current scenario because Aftercare is the final stage in a continuum of care of institutionalized children that facilitates their rehabilitation and social reintegration after they age out from CCIs. Aftercare also helps them prepare the youth for rehabilitation and social reintegration after leaving the CCI. So, this study tries to highlight the issues and make recommendations that help formulate policies for the youth availing of the aftercare service.

Research Methodology

The study employed qualitative research methodology, and the data was collected from the respondents using the method of in-depth interviews.

Findings of the study

Through analyzing the descriptive case studies taken, the researcher had discovered specific themes under the broader area of Aftercare, which is detailed below;

EDUCATION

Education enables socio-economic stability, and it is the key to escaping poverty. Educating the children and youth makes productive and influential members of society, which is essential for the country's sustainable development and the world. UNESCO believes that education is a human right throughout life and that access to quality education is critical for holistic development. Knowledge is a significant factor for youth's full and effective participation in socio-economic and political action. Giving attention to the child, especially marginalized youth, is needed to ensure that they acquire knowledge, skills, ethical values to fulfil their role in the society for development and good governance.

But some people, particularly children out of the child care institution, cannot attain education because of their socio-economic problems. Some others are devoid of education due to a lack of resources. Still, some others avoid taking education due to a lack of awareness about the importance of education.

This study put forward the need for education and the challenges children face to access education in childcare institutions, care leavers, and youth available aftercare.

Children in CCI face both issues of accessibility and the quality of education accessible to them. Most of them did not receive education as per their wish, which was the first barrier to achieving their full potential and exploring life options accordingly. Shifting of children from one CCI to another (multiple placements), issues of adjustment with other children, absence of age-appropriate education and lack of support to cope with the academics are also major fundamental problems of youth availing aftercare. The quality of CCI education was further impacted during the transition to Aftercare.

Formal v/s skill-based education

The introduction of the National Skill Development Policy in India does provide vulnerable youth access and the opportunity to become financially self-reliant. Though skills are not an alternative to education and may have limitations in long-term career growth, the skill development policy in India provides avenues of lateral and vertical movement between skill development and education.

Many education and training systems do not provide young people with the basic skills to reduce poverty and unemployment, even when they continue to receive formal education. Non-formal education programmes seek to fill this gap by providing learning and skills development opportunities relevant to the context in which young people live and pursue their livelihoods. Often provided through youth and community-based organizations, non-formal education facilitates learning life-relevant knowledge and skills, especially for disadvantaged and marginalized groups.

Typically, children in child care institutions have difficulty identifying their potential, strengths, and weaknesses, which should aid them in developing a career plan. Structured orientation programs and training by assessing the individuals' capabilities help them choose their career options, making them self-sufficient. There is a need to find the children's strengths through a strength-based approach and develop those potentials to the fullest.

Higher education challenges

Inadequate education and skills are the primary reasons for high unemployment rates for care leavers. However, this is compounded by the stigmatization faced by them.

If they wish to do so, the care leavers do not have educational scholarships or other sources to support their higher education, which becomes a challenge for them to pursue higher education opportunities.

There is a need to develop measures to ensure that youth availing aftercare receives financial assistance in the form of a scholarship till they complete their studies. Scholarship programs will provide more excellent rates of schooling among them. In addition, there is a situation in which they are pushed to work to continue education. Lack of financial assistance and financial problems force them to do so.

Young people who drop out of school early are vulnerable to unemployment, poverty. A system like Aftercare should consider these things and give these young people appropriate opportunities, knowledge and equip them with skills to find a job or a start-up or engage them for productive work.

IDENTITY

The concept of 'identity' is socially constructed. Identity is a new way of thinking about oneself that emerges during adolescence. Identity involves a sense of self-unity, accompanied by a feeling that the self has continuity over time. A firmly established identity also provides a sense of uniqueness as a person. According to Erikson's psychosocial model of development, identity must be perceived by the individual and recognized and confirmed by others. (Sprinthall & Collins, 1984).

Identity is a dynamic, not static, psychological structure. The formation of identity in adolescence sets the stage for continual changes in identity content through the adult years.

Social identity can be defined as belonging to a social group, as a strong connection with a social category. An essential part of the mind affects social perceptions and behavior (Korostelina, 2007). The concept of social identity refers to various societal roles concerning others. They feel pride, self-worth, and consistency from their social identities, whether through social status, culture or ethnicity, interests, achievements, or beliefs. By creating boundaries and a feeling of a shared space inside a group, social identity protects individuals from the possibility of interpersonal conflict and safeguards them from isolation. The critical identity factors are gender, caste, class, religion, age etc. While we address the fundamental problem of the vulnerable orphaned children and youth, most of them grow up without cultural identity and no documented proof. They live without the necessary documents to prove their identity. Sometimes they cannot re-join their families because of this, which makes them abused worldwide. Most Child Care Leavers didn't receive any information about the Aftercare service and their other legal rights. However, legal awareness is also deficient among the youth. Unfortunately, they do not have the legal identity document, which poses challenges; without necessary proof of birth and permanent address, many face hassles in obtaining a ration card, voter ID, passport, etc. In addition, it leads to losing employment opportunities, education, and government subsidies for orphan youth. This problem is still alive in this group which makes them more vulnerable.

The certificates are the permanent and official record of an individual's existence and provide legal recognition. Institutionalization and Aftercare did not facilitate Aftercare avails to have requisite documents, for domicile, residential address, Aadhar card, PAN card, birth certificate, caste certificate and educational certificates, etc.

Identity encompasses the family name, surname, date of birth, gender, and nationality. Through these details, an individual will hold rights and obligations specific to their status (woman, man, child, handicapped, refugee, etc.).

Lack of caste and birth certificate makes many troubles to youth in Aftercare. They face several problems at admission or any other selection procedure due to the inability to submit caste and birth certificates. Also, they are denied government benefits and scholarships.

Due to the absence of certificates and other documents, youths in the aftercare service and care leavers lack their fundamental right of participation and arise a situation that has to lose their dreams. Child care institutions and aftercare services have a crucial role in helping children and youth avail these documents but often fall behind in doing the same. Accessibility to the services is denied to them due to having no legal proof.

Challenges

Identity formation and giving value and importance to personal self is also a critical development crisis of an adolescent. Identity and citizenship are fundamental survival rights of an individual. They are proof of their being in a state or country and are mandatory for access to various services and entitlements as a citizen. Additionally, the absence of legal documents of identity and citizenship can lead to increased vulnerability.

They cannot live independently because of a lack of primary documents proving their birth and existence. However, there is a situation where youths are not aware of the importance of documents. If they are accessible to these certificates and primary documents, they can lead an independent life.

The present study reveals many cases in which children from orphanages were refused in sports, admission or job selection and other activities because they failed to produce a birth certificate from a civic body, a mandatory requirement as per a rule. However, when these children come into the Aftercare setting, the situation remains the same. The lack of legal awareness and the framing of the law makes them hopeless and helpless.

Some states, like Rajasthan, have taken the initiative to prepare state-wide guidelines and have attempted to integrate existing government schemes of affordable housing, skill-building, fellowships for higher education, employment, etc., into the state-sanctioned aftercare services. Rajasthan and Telangana have declared orphans' children as socially and educationally backward classes and included them in quotas for OBCs. The State of

Maharashtra has gone beyond the JJ Act (2015) and has introduced a one % reservation, from the general class, in education and jobs for orphans.

ECONOMIC STABILITY

Financial literacy is that the ability to know and effectively use financial skills. These financial skills are as simple as budgeting, investing, credit management, and financial management. In other words, financial literacy is the ability to manage money. A strong foundation of those financial skills will help achieve various life goals like education, housing and good health. Financial literacy often teaches individuals how to make major financial decisions, increasing financial discipline and financial capability, leading to significant lifestyle changes like saving and investing regularly, managing debts effectively, and efficiently fulfilling life goals.

Additionally, financial literacy will ensure one's economic well-being and protect individuals from financial fraud. Lacking the knowledge of those skills leads to financial illiteracy. Financial illiteracy resulted in budget mismatch, higher expenses than income, accumulation of debts, poor credit score, financial fraud, and other negative consequences.

However, for children who grow up in Aftercare, there is no opportunity to learn about financial literacy. Even though financial literacy appears relatively straightforward, most individuals do not have the training to work their finances.

Financial independence and Career

They have no income while in CCI. Therefore, after completing the CCI term, there may be a situation where there is no money to study or stay temporarily somewhere in society.

Every youth in the Aftercare wants to have an income of their own. Many go for part-time jobs for financing their studies. They need special training to ensure financial security. They also want the proper training and proper means of earning. They need training in earning a living and training in financial matters, and how to make financial investments. Those who are avail of Aftercare do not adequately understand health insurance. They face a great deal of economic hardship regarding health issues of any kind. Having insurance coverage and accessibility to availing schemes can make much difference in bringing security to youths. Unfortunately, these youths are financially unstable, and if they are affected by any disease or accidents, it will cause economic problems. These circumstances show the necessity of ensuring services to provide safety and protection to their lives. In addition, access to subsidized health care and services for youths will offer a safe environment.

Housing

Stable and secured housing is an essential life requirement that can become a significant challenge for Aftercare, transitioning from protected institutions to independent life and increasing vulnerability. It is the most basic need but must be addressed first as they move out of the CCIs and Aftercare. They will be a lot older when they get a job and financial security. Having a home after that can be a daunting task. They may stay in rented or remain in any organization's shelter during these times. Participants responded to the necessity of having a home, and it remained a burden and unachievable goal because of having no support system even from Government. Those working also struggle to make a shelter because there are no adequate schemes. Even if having plans and benefits for building a home, they are not aware; hence the Government should provide support in terms of shelter for the youth to ensure the smooth reintegration into society.

SOCIAL ASPECTS

Aftercare is defined as making provision of support, financial or otherwise, to persons, who have completed the age of eighteen years but have not completed the age of twenty-one years, and have left any institutional care to join the mainstream of the society (Section 2(5), JJ Act, 2015). Social and economic factors like income, education, employment, community safety, and social supports can significantly affect how well and how long we live. These factors affect the ability to form healthy choices, afford treatment and housing, manage stress, and more.

For instance, employment provides income that shapes choices about housing, education, child care, food, medical aid, and more. In contrast, unemployment limits these choices and, therefore, the ability to accumulate savings and assets, which will help cushion economic distress. Social and economic factors are not commonly considered when it involves health. However, strategies to enhance these factors can significantly impact health over time than those traditionally related to health improvement, like strategies to improve health behaviors.

Across the state, there are meaningful differences in social and economic opportunities for residents in communities that are stopping from investments or have experienced discrimination. These gaps disproportionately affect people of colour – especially children and youth.

Social support and social integration

The institution impacts youth for the social relationship with the others in the society. Aftercare is a process of supporting and preparing children transitioning out of Institutional Care on attaining maturity towards independent living and social integration by providing a comprehensive set of services across different domains of life.

Young ones are concerned about their life after CCI. They leave the care system and enter into society without having any secured environment. They need guidance and support as they transition into the community in multiple aspects such as health, education, housing etc. People have a high chance of exploitation as they are not aware of the realities. The added stigma of being an orphan or belonging to an institution makes their social reintegration a hazardous journey. But sometimes, they feel rejected from many places. The findings show that the experiences, values, knowledge, and skills accumulated during adulthood in Aftercare have a direct and profound impact on experiences and outcomes of their adult life. The attitude of society towards these young people is the reason for facing exclusion from the community. Unwanted judgments, discrimination, and avoidance that people show towards them leads to social exclusion and challenge their psychosocial well-being. Due to inadequate planning and non-implementation of the Aftercare program, these children are usually among the most socially excluded and vulnerable people in society. Young people who have been disadvantaged or excluded have no access to opportunities to participate. For example, young people aged out of Aftercare are frequently socially excluded from participation in mainstream social, economic, political, and cultural systems. They do not have access to informal social networks, including extended family, family friends, school-based supports, youth friendship groups, and local athletic, cultural, and religious organizations. When they enter society without guidance and support, the chance of entering into unethical activities and places is high. Once it gets into those traps, it's difficult to escape, revealing the importance of proper follow-up and monitoring needed for care leavers. If acquired during childhood, social and life skills decrease the risk of youth encountering social problems of homelessness, substance abuse, violence, social exclusion, etc. Adequate investments to ensure better individual Aftercare care planning, education, and targeted skilling during childhood are needed, which allow for a smoother transition into independent living, resulting in better outcomes in critical domains of adult life. The added stigma of being an orphan or belonging to an institution makes their social reintegration a hazardous journey.

Lack of community experience

Separation of children from family and long periods of stay in CCIs limits children's exposure to a larger community and creates challenges of learning various social and interpersonal skills. They also feel they are challenged to maintain close personal relationships with caregivers, mentors, other children in the CCI, and their families. When youngsters need to feel cherished and regarded, they also need to feel acceptance and a sense of belonging from the community addressed by the public authority's backing and everyday society. Even though welfare measures and support for the care leavers are recognized, they didn't get adequate help. They are not different from other youth and can enjoy life as other youth. After the transition out of the child care institutions, they need better care and facilities in the society.

Mental health of care leavers

Mental Health is a state of well-being in which every individual realizes their potential, can cope with the everyday stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and contribute to their community (Mental health: strengthening our Response, 2018). Several aspects impacting the mental health of care leavers is connected to entering care (such as a family breakup, abuse and neglect), the care experience (repeated transfers, rejection, isolation, stigma, lack of personal care), and life aftercare (unemployment, lack of educational qualifications, isolation). Mental health and well-being difficulties are closely linked to various past and present events. Because of violence, exploitation, neglect, and a lack of parental love and care, care leavers are more likely to develop emotional and behavioral difficulties. They are also more prone to be psychologically reliant, insecure, and sensitive. All of these difficulties may have a detrimental influence on these people's psychological and social well-being. Also, there is having high self-esteem and self-driven motivation from the experiences they

have gone through. Those who are with inspiration have dreams and an urge to pursue them. Lack of support and guidance is the barrier to achieving these goals. The situation of the care leavers becomes worse than these after leaving the institutions. It has the potential to lead to delinquency or anti-social behavior.

The successful resolution of identity crisis in the adolescent period will lead the person into a greater sense of autonomy, healthy interpersonal relationships among family, society and community, develop a coping capacity to ace stressful life events, high self-esteem. On the other hand, individual with avoidant identity leads to more anxiety, poor quality in interpersonal relationship, poor decision making, poor academic and job career. Another is that they felt insecure about their future, received no support in dealing with the challenges of daily living, were socially isolated and had constant housing problems. Therefore, they had many fears and were lonely. In addition, they were uncertain about their identity and faced negative judgments from others.

Self-driven motivation to pursue goals

Motivation is the driving force behind actions. It's the "why" behind everything you do, and it's the reason you would join a cause, commit to an activity, or strive toward a goal. Everything we do is driven by a mix of conscious and unconscious needs or desires. Self-motivation is something significant. It is the capacity to persist in creating a positive change in one's life without giving up. Self-motivation necessitates that you believe in yourself, stay motivated, and persevere in the face of adversity.

Their statement regarding dreams: The care leavers' motivation differed based on their subjective experiences, capabilities, emotions and identity. Care leavers have self-confidence, have positive future expectations and have the inner strength to build a better daily life and identity for themselves; they thus have a growing sense of hope. They were optimistic about their future and had the urge to live independently. They had distinct coping ways and characteristics. The hopefulness of care leavers belongs a source of resilience and self-confidence. It is an inner strength that can assist goals in problem-solving and coping. This summary paints a more positive image of care leavers.

Low self-esteem

Self-esteem describes a person's overall subjective sense of personal worth or value. In other words, self-esteem may be defined as how much you appreciate and like yourself regardless of the circumstances. Your self-esteem is determined by many factors, including Self-confidence, feeling of security, Identity, Sense of belonging, Feeling of competence. Low self-esteem has been linked to mental health problems; it may also be tough to achieve objectives and maintain good relationships. Low self-esteem can negatively influence your quality of life and enhance your chances of having suicidal thoughts. Low self-esteem among care leavers is that they frequently encounter the same problems in terms of obtaining work, getting an education, and having someone on whom they could depend and uncertainty regarding how to reach the goals without substantial support and documents. Due to the tensions existing in the future, house, job, there is a lack of hope to build a family life. The stigma associated with orphans, absence of support systems, sympathy is the reasons which make reluctant to think of marriage.

Suicidal Thoughts

care leavers have reported suicidal thoughts occasionally. Many of these vulnerabilities are linked to unmet psychosocial needs. Young individuals in the struggler's category frequently have mental health issues due to poor levels of education, unemployment, and having no supportive social networks around them, leading to isolation and loneliness. In addition, assistance from designated mental health experts in the form of free counselling, advice, psychological interventions, and crisis management has been identified as critical to effective transitions.

Substance use

Young care leavers were prone to drug use and misuse for various reasons, which was due to factors, including adverse childhood experiences, feelings of loss and fragmentation. Their experience reveals multiple factors leading to substance use and drug dealers. One is the homelessness after leaving the CCI, the isolation experienced during those days and unemployment. Substance use is closely connected with different aspects, like a chain. Some may not cope with the transition to an independent life without support. Another factor is the positive and negative peer influence. Adolescents and youths are vulnerable to peer influence, and care leavers with no support system become more prone to the effect. In the case itself, there is a positive peer

influence as positive informal support, which helps to stop the use. Positive peer connections impact psychological factors linked to coping and resilience. It has been observed that young individuals who run away after leaving child care institutions do not receive any social services support at the time of running away, making them a particularly vulnerable and neglected group. Care leavers have a high chance of becoming mentally vulnerable when brought into the institution during their stay and after leaving due to the lack of a support system. Therefore, it is crucial to focus on their mental health during their visit and upon their exit from the institution.

DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The following is the diagrammatic representation of the gap identified in the aftercare services in Kerala.
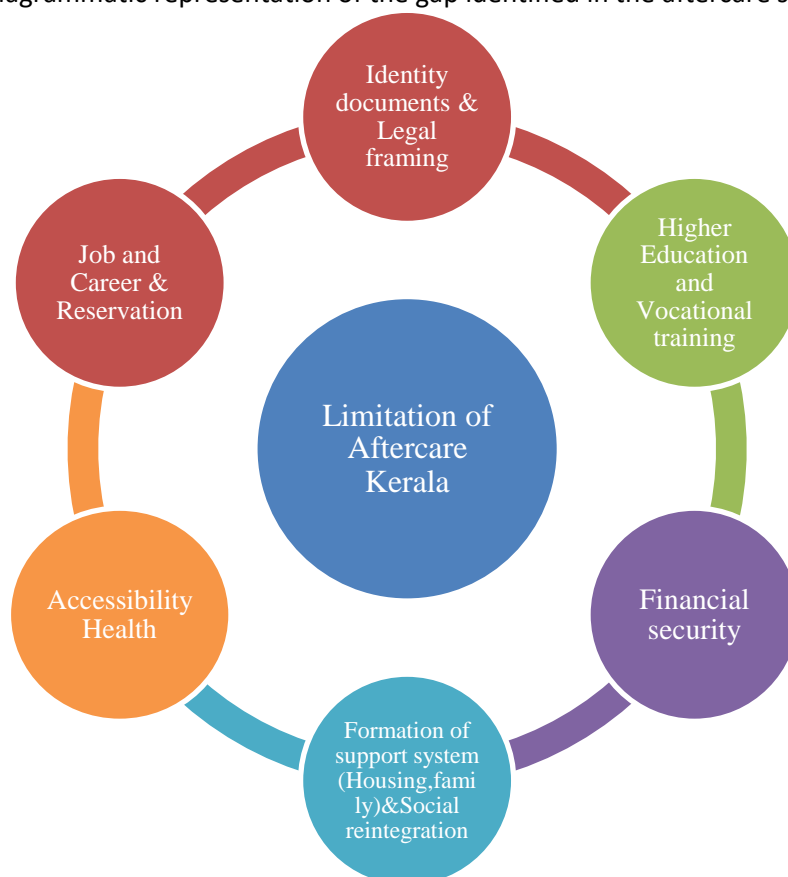
The National Youth Policy, which is due for revision, having completed seven years in 2021, the National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015, and other national youth policies should include Care leavers and Aftercare leavers as a vulnerable category. Such mandate their inclusion in provisions of schemes and programs formulated to implement these policies. The national and state plans and programs for housing, health, education, skill development, support, and entrepreneurship training must include provisions for Care leavers. In addition, employers must recognize CCLs and Aftercare avails as a vulnerable category of youth. Revision of the existing JJ Act, 2015 JJ Model Rules, 2016 and Child Protection Services (CPS) to make Aftercare more comprehensive. The MoWCD should announce a complete policy on Aftercare in India. This policy should lay down the commitment of the Government of India concerning all children without parental care and hence living in Aftercare. The policy should clarify the approach towards gatekeeping, family strengthening, family-based care, community child care, deinstitutionalization, and non-institutional care forms such as foster care, group foster care, small residential long-term care, and Aftercare. The MoWCD should amend the JJ Act to expand the definition of Aftercare so that children who turn 18 are based on their individual needs. Aftercare should be comprehensively integrated Care Leavers into the mainstream of society.

Formation of support system

Housing: States should promote institutional and non-institutional housing support for Aftercare across districts in Kerala state. As the transition planning becomes robust in CCIs, non-institutional housing should be prioritized, and hence scattered-site housing must be promoted and strengthened at the district level. The

convergence with existing housing schemes at national and state levels should be explored to increase access to independent housing to Care Leavers and Aftercare avails.

Higher Education and Vocational training: Care Leavers should be provided with requisite support, guidance, and counselling to make academic and skill development choices based on their needs and aspirations. Vocational training and skill development should focus at the CCI and during Aftercare, with dedicated funds for skill-based training. Education sponsorships, subsidies for loans, etc., should be explored from state and private sources.

Identity documents & Legal framing: The National Legal Aid Services Authority (NLASA) should ensure that the state and district legal services authorities have a mandate of extending assistance to CLs in legal documentation, legal awareness, and provision of legal aid for CLs, along with support in developing domicile certificates, identity documents, and training on the use of Government systems and schemes.

Financial Security: Workshops should be organized for youth where the opportunities for Aftercare avails must be explored at all levels, especially with state departments and corporates. Paid apprenticeships, internships, and training with such entities will ensure that Aftercare avails are encouraged to develop their career paths. In addition, they must have preferential treatment with financial support to promote self-employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Social Aspects: The study strongly recommends the need for every Aftercare avails to have individual mentors in their lives. Mentorship through individuals and collaboration with professionals and corporates can help them gain social exposure and better reintegration with the community. Mentors must be attached to Aftercare avails to assist them in learning skills on conflict resolution, effective communication, leadership, trust, team-building, knowing their legal rights, responsibilities, social duties, and self-esteem. Peer social support networks can provide opportunities for the Care Leavers. Such groups should be safe, encouraging, and act as self-advocacy groups.

Recommendations

Preparation for Transition: JJ Rule mandates the preparation of a pre-release plan to plan and prepare the CLs for transition. The preparation for transition refers to a series of efforts made by the CCIs and child protection system to develop the vision, skills, community integration, and readiness for future independent living, enabling them to recognize their path to independent living. The preparation process should equip CLs with information on individual rights and entitlements, basic life skills, community exposure, etc.

Post-Aftercare follow-up and support: Due to the lack of accurate data and follow-up, many Care Leavers had not received any Aftercare support or services. District Child Protection Officer (DCPO) and Child Welfare Committee(CWC) members implied that they were either restored to family members without adequate follow-up after that or left to live independently without any institutional support from the government. Staff in CCIs, DCPUs, CWCs, etc., must maintain valid data on each child and youth as they transition out of care. And also, they can use virtual platforms to maintain communication.

Increase investment in Aftercare: The Juvenile Justice Fund should have a dedicated Aftercare fund at the state level and disbursed to the district to cater to the Aftercare program. Provide support Centre for Aftercare in every community, recruitment of Aftercare personnel at State Child Protection Society and a District Aftercare Officer, and the cost of Aftercare services to all children exiting CCIs, who need Aftercare. The current allocation of Rs. 2,000 per month per child under CPS is inadequate and needs to be increased to cover a range of services across domains of Aftercare.

Reservation: Our states haven't yet looked at comprehensive aftercare programs for care-leavers but have different schemes for vulnerable children that provide skills training, jobs, scholarships, housing, health care etc. However, more such projects with clear guidelines and accessible access are needed, which should be implemented in our state.

Ensure the availability of mental health services: Access to mental health services among Child care leavers drastically declines during the transition from care to Aftercare. Firstly, there is a stigma related to psychological disorders that discourage them from seeking assistance. It has also been found that self-stigma affects adolescents' self-identity, self-efficacy, and interpersonal relationships. Secondly, mental health professionals and related services are expensive for Care Leavers and Aftercare avails unless offered through their Aftercare Programme, discouraging them from obtaining professional assistance. Thirdly, there is a lack of awareness and

sensitivity amongst staff, children, youth, caregivers, functionaries, and the community regarding issues faced in Aftercare, which makes it all the more difficult to recognize symptoms of distress and address them on time.

Toll-free number and Website: There is a need of implementing a toll-free number and make an update in the website of the Ministry of Youth to address the requirements, problems and challenges of the Care Leavers after attaining 18 years of age. It may improve the interaction with the authorities and government.

Increase the age limit for availing Aftercare: While analyzing the data, we realize that most Care Leavers receive Aftercare with a minimum gap of two and a maximum of four, which makes a lot of confusion and makes lapsing the grants provided by the government. JJ act 2015 defines the maximum age limit of receiving the Aftercare services as 21. But most of them are exceed this age when they reach Aftercare.

Conclusion

The qualitative research study on youth in aftercare services in Kerala was carried out using in-depth interviews among seven youths in Kerala aftercare services. Researchers developed themes and subthemes that intend to provide insight into the experiences and impact of the childcare care institutions and Aftercare on Youth, social aspects that necessitate their social integration and social support, revealing the social exclusion and stigma in society. The study contributes concepts like mental health and social identity to explain the various aspects of youths' experiences. Youth in need of aftercare support does not just belong to 18 and under 21 years. Many need handholding even after the age of 26 years, which indicates that the need for Aftercare transcends the legally prescribed age limit for the purpose. Existing aftercare interventions are not holistic to support the requirements of aftercare infrastructure, services and support. Lack of pre-aftercare interventions that prepare care leavers for independent living and adequate transitioning services at the time of leaving care cause fear, anxiety, stress and other adverse effects and place care leavers in a vulnerable population once again. Unless appropriate mechanisms are implemented, refining aftercare programmes shall be challenging. However, the inclusion of care leavers under various government schemes and entitlements has not been efficiently planned and or implemented. Challenges in securing legal documents make access more difficult for them, systemically leaving them out of education, skilling, and employment opportunities.

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