

Understanding Care Leavers in Assam

A research report by LIFT Fellow Priyanka from Assam

May 2024

Introduction

“It feels very disheartening when you are left alone in the world to survive and fend for yourselves at a tender age”

The above statement echoes with most young persons who have left institutional care in Assam. For most of them a Child care institution (CCIs) provides an emotionally-stable ecosystem where the child grows into a positive adult under ample care and resources. Unfortunately, someday this dream also comes to an end, especially for those who live in a child care institution.

For young adults who have been in CCI s’ care since their childhood, like me, there is extra stress and often, they start to feel that they never had, nor will have, the opportunities and family support that their non-fostered peers have.

Terminologically, ‘Care Leavers’ are those young individuals who, after reaching the age of 18, are no longer allowed to live in alternative care and are compelled to leave the care setting on attaining adulthood.

After living in a protected and supervised environment till attainment of 18 years, they find it difficult to live independently in the society. The change from living in a care facility to an independent-living with limited resources brings to light the difficulties faced in the absence of a family ecosystem available at the care . This results in loss of opportunities for continuing education and learning basic life skills thereby losing their confidence, finally losing faith in their aspirations.

From an early stage, they are pushed into getting menial jobs that are considered stigmatic in the society. Not having experienced stability, they undergo immense mental health issues and get no access to support services. Lack of data, evidence and documentation on care leavers leaving the care system on turning 18 and the lack of extended support, leads most care leavers unemployed and homeless. They engage into unproductive or illegal activities such as substance abuse even leading to suicidal tendencies at times.

The situation of the vulnerable youth of our world, those who have been left with a high risk of physical, psychological, financial and social harm, has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. It has resulted in a high rate of job loss and unemployment, along with food, housing, physical and mental well-being crises.

This makes the Care Leavers one of the most vulnerable youths in society, forcing them to become dependent on others for support at individual, societal, national and international levels.

Aftercare is vital for the children who used to live in CCIs because living independently without family support is a challenge for the Care Leavers. In such challenges, many grow to become unwilling of continuing with their normal life and end up quitting their education or job. To live independently, they need to enhance their core skills through education. Care Leavers who don't have parents have nobody to guide them when they come out from Aftercare (CCI).

Although 73% of Care Leavers (Pg no 55, "Beyond 18-Udayan Care" report on Aftercare 2019) have received access to aftercare and Welfare Services from Child Care Institutions, more need to be supported. The Aftercare system to support the Care Leavers, from CCIs, is seemingly weak.

The education and skills acquired by the Care Leavers does not match their academic needs and aspirations. It has been reported that over 56% of the Care Leavers discontinued their education during the transition out of care (Pg no 82, "Beyond 18-Udayan Care" report on Aftercare 2019). The reasons for it being dropping out due to lack of financial support, lack of time or absence of guidance, poor academic performance and child marriage which is done forcefully by the female care leaver's parents.

The cost of higher education is high so with limited Aftercare allowances, it is a challenge. This is evident in the observation that the present level of educational qualifications acquired by CLs does not match their employability status. As per reports 42% CLs felt that their educational qualification and skills are inadequate to meet their career goals.

Skills find priority over higher education as earning is non-negotiable for a CL. Although some training is received by the Care Leavers in the Care Institutions, there is still a visible skill deficiency which might be due to discontinued education during transition. Many times CLs lack accessibility to choose their skills according to the market value and the future opportunities available to them.

Besides, the vocational skills at CCIs are not accessible across the country. Planning of long-term growth for CL by CCIs and their stakeholders are lacking. However, under the National Skill Policy, several ways have been drafted to provide for the growth of CL in career and eventually in their lives. Alongside there is a need for greater inter-ministerial cooperation and collaboration to converge schemes such as PMKVY, NULM and NCS as a part of the aftercare policy framework.

Methodology

The study is to access the Care Leavers who were living in the Assam child care

institutions. It aims to assist the understanding of trends of the facilities provided to the care leavers in the child care institutions with a special mention of the impacts on care leavers during pandemic and post-pandemic.

The study includes Quantitative data collected by a Care Leaver from Care Leavers of different districts of Assam who were in the Child Care Institutions and who left the Child Care institution. It also includes insights from secondary sources such as journal articles and studies on the Child Care Institutions, issues faced by Care Leavers and solutions to improve the conditions.

Findings

1. Age group:

Among the total of 30”

- 37% were below the age of 20,
- 53% were between the ages of 20-25, and
- a mere 10% were above the age of 25.

2. Reason for joining CCIs:

Out of the 30 individuals, **almost all recalled** the reasons for landing in a CCI.

Everyone had different reasons, most of them being:

- Single parents (60%), their family members could not even give them food twice a day and what they thought about their future
- Out of this, 8 lost their parents in childhood, due to which they were enrolled in CCI by someone else.
- 30% were left by their own family members in their childhood and they did not even have a home to eat, to wear, or to live in, so there were some people in the society who enrolled in CCI for this.

3. Situation of Care Leavers:

- Majority were not having a satisfying response as they were yet to receive even the basic education.
- Some of them were even deprived of elementary education too.
- Some individuals had only completed their 5th class only!

10 CLs were HSLC passed, 7 were HS passed, 6 CLs were graduates, 2 were pursuing higher education, such as an engineering, MBA. and 5 CLs under HSLC passed till enrolled in vocational training. **Most of the individuals were unable to complete their tertiary education** due to the reasons of financial issues, marriage life responsibilities, lack of education opportunities. Etc.

According to a care leaver: *“I was forced to do a work that I didn't wanted to do and the work I wanted to do I was not allowed to do.”*

Most were not happy with the job opportunities that were provided to them as they were not of their interests or they were forced to do that work.

Current Employment Status: 43% of the individuals are employed under different sectors such as working at a News Channel, a lecturer in a university, working in a hospital. etc. The remaining percentage is either unable to find job opportunities for themselves or are involved in settling with a family.

Salary Satisfaction: Nearly 70% of the individuals working are not satisfied with the salary they are earning from their jobs.

- Only 5% of the individuals earn more than 5000 rupees as it is not sufficient for them to sustain themselves

Current Marital Status: Nearly 95% of the individuals are unmarried whereas 5% of the individuals are married. The ones who are married are currently doing small business jobs and handle family responsibilities.

Current communication status with CCI: 40% of the individuals expressed that they received support and are still in touch with their CCI while the remaining 60% expressed that they are not still in touch with CCI and didn't receive support from their CCI.

Housing: Few care leavers suggested it's hard to find accommodation right way after leaving CCI, so if government can consider somewhere in any scheme or any kind support where care leavers have easy access to government housing facility with assisting for loan process, so that after leaving care, they find place to stay after period of time.

Conclusion

The findings show that Care Leavers in Assam are not supported and their adult outcomes are compromised. A lot needs to be done in terms of policy and practice improvement. It is hoped that data supported action is taken by the Assam Care Leavers Network to support care leavers in the state with support from other stakeholders.