



COVID-19 AND CARE LEAVERS

Prerana's Interventions

Introduction

Rekha (name changed) was enrolled into Prerana's Night Care Center (NCC) and Educational Support Program (ESP) when she was 7 years old. Her mother had been trafficked and sold into the sex trade, and kept in a brothel in Kamathipura. As a child, Rekha was emotionally attached to her mother's brothel keeper, since the brothel keeper looked after her when her mother went to solicit. When Rekha was about 15 years old, the social workers at the NCC began to observe gradual changes in her behavior. It was observed that she had begun to skip school, and was spending more time with the brothel keeper. She would often argue with her mother, and go to live with the brothel keeper for the night. She had developed an interest in applying make-up, and would often be seen standing and talking to women near the by-lanes of the red-light area. Rekha's mother shared with the social workers, that she feared that the brothel keeper was grooming Rekha and might be planning to induct Rekha into the sex trade.

The situation was presented before the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) by Rekha's mother and the social workers from Prerana. After due inquiry and on the recommendation of the CWC, the case was referred to a voluntary organization, and Rekha was rescued from the red-light area. She was subsequently admitted to a Children's Home (CH).

During Rekha's stay in the CH, the social workers developed her Individual Care Plan (ICP), a document mandated by the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015, that traces the evolving needs and development of a child placed at a Children's Home. During this process, Rekha shared with the social worker that she did not feel safe going back to live with her mother after she turned 18, as her mother was still living in a brothel.

Thus, Rekha was introduced to Prerana's Assisted Living Facility (ALF) and informed about how the Aftercare team closely worked with the girls who have completed 18 years of age and have exited Child Care Institutions (CCI) after an extended or short-term stay. Subsequently, the social workers shared Rekha's concerns with her mother and helped her understand Rekha's needs.

Prerana's Assisted Living Facility

A residential setup where a group of 4-5 girls who have exited from Child Care Institutions after completing 18 years of age stay together. Prerana provides financial assistance to the girls in setting up the home in the initial months, however the assistance is gradually withdrawn once the group becomes financially independent. The girls are also provided with psycho-social support and are linked with adequate educational and vocational resources.

Prerana's Model of Aftercare

In Prerana's model of Aftercare, the girls opting for Aftercare are helped through a group living experience, to enable smooth transition into the mainstream society by being provided assistance to evolve, develop and reach the stage of self-sufficiency. They are supported, and mentored in their pursuit of education, skill development, job placements, addressing their mental health concerns, and procuring identity documents, to help them move towards social reintegration.

Girls living in Child Care Institutions are introduced to the concept of Aftercare, and are oriented with Prerana's model as well. These orientations also include a brief discussion about their educational, and career plans.

The Aftercare Orientation

Prerana provides Aftercare orientation services to girls living in CCI's and are 15 years and above. It has been observed that a child might require more support for their rehabilitation, and thus after assessment, if a need for continuum of care services is observed, aftercare is provided. After the orientation, if a girl expresses her interest in opting for the Aftercare services after she completes 18 years, the same is discussed with her case worker in the CCI and this need is reflected in her Individual Care Plan. It has been experienced that girls with no family, or who do not feel safe to go back to their family, or their family does not want them back do sign up for aftercare services.

The Aftercare Induction Orientation Phase

Our work to the induction in the Aftercare services begins with girls who are 17 and above and feel the need of opting for Aftercare services. These girls are often in need of assistance with housing, developing independent living skills, and other financial, mental health or material support. Through the induction orientation phase, the Aftercare team begins to orient them about their stay in the Assisted Living Facility and assists them in constructing their future plans.

Life in Aftercare

After the orientation sessions, Rekha shared with the social workers that she wished to move into an ALF after she turned 18 years. Along with Rekha and the social worker from the Children's Home, the team reviewed Rekha's ICP. During this process, Rekha shared that she was not interested in pursuing her education further; instead, she wished to pursue a career in beauty care. She shared that she had attended summer classes in the same field during her stay in the Children's Home and was interested in pursuing it further. Based on the ICP, the CWC directed for Rekha to be discharged and handed over to her mother after she completed 18 years of age.

In September 2019, Rekha completed 18 years and was handed over to her mother after which she moved into an ALF where a group of three young women were residing. Through this group living experience, Rekha was to be assisted in developing her independent living skills, pursuing job opportunities and transitioning into the mainstream society.

Based on her interest, Rekha was enrolled in a three-month vocational training course in beauty care. Once in the training it was observed that Rekha was finding it difficult to balance her class timings, with the household chores, due to which she would often skip meals, and fall ill. Rekha was eventually shifted to the next batch of the training. During the three-week gap before the next batch would begin, the Aftercare team helped her in planning daily tasks, and understanding the importance of having regular nutritious meals. Rekha completed her training in beauty care in February, and was to receive her job placement in March 2020. It was around this time that the COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, and the lockdown was imposed by the state.

The Pandemic and the Care Leavers

Initially announced for 21 days, the lockdown has continued for nearly over five months , in modified ways, and is still counting. These unprecedented circumstances highlighted the situations that no one from the team had anticipated, including the need to work remotely. While Rekha's job placement was on hold, the girls at the three ALFs had been asked by their employers to stay at home. Most of the girls were employed in the service industry, such as retail stores and beauty parlors. Work-from-home was not an option for them. In March 2020, Prerana was providing comprehensive assistance to Care Leavers (CL), who were spread over three ALFs. By the first week of April, it was clear that the COVID-19 situation was getting intense and the care leavers might not be able to return to their jobs soon.

At this stage, we decided to reach out to young CLs who had moved on to independent living in the last two years. During our first call, they shared that they had sufficient groceries to sustain through April. Most of them had been asked by their employers to proceed on leave without pay, and the little savings that they had were being used to pay rent, and other dues. However, towards the end of April, this group reached out to us seeking assistance. As the first call of action, in coordination with the District Officer of Raigad, Department of Women and Child Development, the CLs were provided with groceries that would help them sustain through May 2020. Subsequently, as the need persisted, we coordinated with another voluntary organization and partners and they were supplied with groceries for June 2020 to August .

Addressing the needs of the Care Leavers

The team observed that providing only material assistance to the CLs was not enough. The lockdown brought along uncertainty and instability, which was causing mental distress among the CLs living in the ALF and those who had transitioned as well.

During the follow-up calls, the CL would portray anger, fear, stress, depression, and share about the difficulty in sleeping and concentration, and were faced by the lack of a routine in their lives. Hence, psychosocial support, regular follow-up calls, and group meetings were organized where they were provided a platform to discuss the issues they were facing. Due to limited information on COVID-19 (precautions, symptoms, etc) discussions on the same were initiated. Along with sharing information, these discussions filled the void that had been created by the lack of human interaction during the lockdown. It was observed that after the meeting initiated by Prerana, some CLs took these discussions ahead and continued it by themselves in smaller groups.

During such discussions some older CLs shared about the difficulties they were facing in paying their housing rental expenses. Those who were saving up to pursue higher education had to use the money for their daily expenses. Staying indoors with limited scope of socializing was also impacting their mental health. One CL who was living in a working women's hostel shared that *"...we were asked to pay rent in March and April. It was only after the intervention of the Superintendent of our former Children's Home, those who had lost their jobs were exempt. But still, we do not know if we will have to pay the rent for May and June if and when we get another job"*. She continued to share that *"we had just begun to save for ourselves and now in this condition, we do not even know how we would survive another month without any income."* This also led to the realization among the CLs, of having an emergency savings fund. Many of them shared that they would maintain it once they regain their financial stability.

Rekha was a part of these group discussions, and she realized that being a fresher, the chances of her getting a job in the beauty care industry under such circumstances were bleak. During conversations with CLs, they often spoke about the helplessness they felt in the current situation and were concerned about their future. One CL shared with the team that *"I worked in a retail store and lost my job, as the hostel I live in, has restricted us from coming in or going out under any circumstances. Even if I get a job through an online interview, I still cannot join anywhere. With no earnings, how will I pay my bills?"*. Another CL working with the back-end office support of a reputed IT company, shared that the staff of her company was asked to report to work or their days of absence would be deducted from their entitled leaves, hence treating their absence as unpaid leaves. She shared her concern that when the office was not ready to arrange for their travel, in the absence of public transport, she had no means to travel about 52 kms, across districts, every day.

Realizing the issues pertaining to job losses, the Aftercare team linked the CLs and girls residing in the ALF to a non-government organization that could help them access jobs and regain their financial stability. Two rounds of orientations were organized and the job options in non-COVID hospitals, BPOs and the retail sector were discussed. While Rekha understood the importance of having a job as a source of income in such times of uncertainty, she was skeptical about opting for re-skilling. She shared that she was scared to work in a sector that was different from the one for which she had been trained. The

social worker arranged for an individual orientation for Rekha with the facilitator of the NGO that was helping the other girls with their jobs. Rekha shared her concerns, and the facilitator explained the process of the online training that the girls would be given, before their joining. The social worker also shared that she could always opt to strengthen her skills in beauty care, whenever it would be possible. Rekha registered for a job in the retail sector, and is currently receiving training for the same. 14 girls including Rekha were linked with the organization for pre-placement, skilling, and re-skilling training courses. Though the CLs difficulty to pay their rents and other expenses still continued, the possibility of getting jobs proved to be helpful in regaining their confidence and reducing their fear and stress. Simultaneously, different job vacancies were also circulated through a WhatsApp group and the CLs were asked to apply as per their interest, qualifications and aptitude.

By July, six young women from the ALF and four CLs had begun to work again. In the words of one CL *"Though protection from COVID-19 was important, it is also important for us to earn. We can still protect ourselves from COVID-19 by following the necessary precautions, but staying at home was not helping us survive and pay the bills"*. Recognizing the need, the social workers carried out regular interaction with the young women to help them cope with the change. During such interactions, the social workers made sure to discuss the preventive measures for COVID-19 once the young women resumed their jobs.

The Emergent need of Mental Health support and Online safety

While the social workers from the Aftercare team were helping the young women living in the ALF and CLs with accessing jobs, along with arranging for supplies, and other support they needed, a social worker received a call from Shikha (name changed), a resident at the ALF. Shikha shared with the social worker that one of the CLs living with her had tried to physically harm herself. The social workers initiated case work counselling with the concerned girl, and it was known that the action had been taken in a moment of rage after she had an argument with her intimate partner? The girl was referred to a counsellor to help her stabilize, and de-escalate her emotions. Subsequently, regular self-care sessions with the girls residing in the ALF were scheduled. It was also realized that the lockdown had led to an increase in the screen time of the CLs, and also their activities on social media. Hence, the team regularly spoke with them on online safety, and an informative group session on the same was facilitated.

Networking and Partnerships

Simultaneously, Prerana also decided to call a meeting of all Aftercare service providers in the state of Maharashtra on 12th May 2020, to discuss the challenges faced by the CLs who they were supporting and understanding their responding strategies. Concerns regarding mental health, financial instability, difficulty in procurement of resources of CLs were raised and seemed to be recurring among the CLs. Some organizations also raised concerns regarding the protocols to be followed, if a CL was infected with COVID-19, as well as the financial difficulty that some organizations were facing due to a decline in donations.

A need to bring all service providers at the national level was felt and the same was discussed with Udayan Care, a Delhi based voluntary organization providing Aftercare services. The National Alliance in India for COVID-19 Response to Aftercare (NAICRA) was thus started with the objective of collectively addressing the issues faced by CLs, by approaching the relevant stakeholders and strengthening the systems and ensuring COVID-19 crisis does not undo the momentum built on aftercare in India in the recent years.

Thus, beginning with providing immediate assistance for groceries and ration and moving towards assistance in accessing job opportunities and psycho-social support, to taking the issues faced by the CLs at the national level, the CLs living in the ALF, as well as the team have gradually adapted and evolved, to manage through the unprecedented times. The current crisis has also helped identify the concerns which those who exit the juvenile justice system and receive Aftercare services might face. It highlights the need for safety nets such as health insurance, financial support for times of emergency and easy access to psychosocial support among CLs.



P.S. We are sure that most of you must be doing such data gathering and analyzing exercises at your end too. If you are, please do share the same with us. We shall be more than happy to share it on our website

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