

# CHILD REUNIFICATION PROCESSES IN INDIA



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**RAILWAY**  
**children**  
Fighting for street children

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. INTRODUCTION	12
The Problem: Children leaving Homes and Families	
Research Objectives	
The Process: Methodology	
2. UNDERSTANDING CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES	14
What contributes as a 'good environment for a child'?	
Contextual Vulnerabilities: A General Description	
3. CHILDREN: THE KEY FINDINGS AND LEARNING FROM THEIR JOURNEYS	18
What are the factors that influence children to leave their homes?	
What are the factors that contribute to children staying back at home or in contact with families?	
4. GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS AND CHILD REUNIFICATION PROCESSES	25
Child Welfare Committee (CWC)	
Railway Protection Force (RPF)	
Government Railway Police (GRP)	
District Child Protection Unit (DCPU)	
Childline	
Special Juvenile Police Unit (SJPU)	
Child Care Institutions (CCIs)	
Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)	
5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS	48
6. IN CONCLUSION	54



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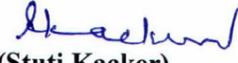


## Message

Children on their own are vulnerable. They get enmeshed in the net of violence, abuse and other greater risks. While there may be bigger and contextual vulnerabilities at play, the environment they end up in is important, as the child would be forced to work, may suffer emotional and physical abuse. Thus, we all have an important role to play in ensuring their protection as concerned citizens and child caring communities. We are both enablers and protectors of a system where a child remains safe till reintegrated or reunited with his/her family, if it is in the best interest of the child.

Often when children run-away from their homes they use the railway system for both transportation and sustenance. Railway Children India is an NGO that identifies and protects these children who have come in contact with the railways across different railway zones in the country. Their role begins from the first point of contact with the child and continues till the child is safely reunified with family. Through this study, an analysis is drawn about few such children who had left homes and were reunified (at least once). The reunification process requires consent of child, commitment of family and community towards children, proactive civil society organisations ensuring that children are safe within families, and community-based child-oriented systems. This study makes inroads into the factors that contribute to children leaving homes and the interplay between the contextual dynamics as factors contributing to their staying back with their families. The study notes not just the polarities of poverty and self-sufficiency, but also the deep need for a safety net. The study is important in documenting the awareness and roles that each of the stakeholders play in the process of identification, protection and reunification of a child. It defines the coordination required between stakeholders and hints upon the need for safe transition of children through various stakeholders. It alerts us on the need to be aware of our own legislations for child protection, our approaches to be more sensitive and increased commitment to their overall development.

I congratulate Railway Children India for their work on protecting children coming in contact with railways and not just reunifying, but reintegrating them with families, and society at large, so that no child has to live on the streets again. This study, therefore, is an important document to look at policy level changes in the way each stakeholder interacts with a child and strengthen the reunification processes in the country, including a careful and continuous follow up system that enables a child to grow into a wholesome individual.

  
(Stuti Kacker)

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# ABOUT RAILWAY CHILDREN INDIA

Railway Children India (RCI) is the Indian entity of the Railway Children International with a vision of creating

**'A WORLD WHERE NO CHILD HAS TO LIVE ON THE STREETS'.**

RCI is registered in India under Indian Companies Act, 2013 of Section 25 (now section 8). RCI works with children who are in need of care at and around railway stations and strives for sustainable changes in the lives of children who are alone and at risk on the streets as well as Railway Stations.

## OUR PRINCIPLES

1. We respect the dignity of every child
2. We always put the best interests of the child first
3. We build on the abilities of each child while being aware of his/ her limitations
4. We create an environment that encourages and values the voices and decisions of children
5. We know that children have evolving and resilient capacities
6. We have a zero-tolerance approach to neglect, abuse, and maltreatment of children in care and protection processes
7. We ensure that we do not re-traumatize a child
8. We have a zero tolerance to exploitation
9. We nurture the individuality of children by investing in diverse resources and opportunities
10. We form authentic and empathetic relationships with every child
11. We do not judge children
12. We believe that all children should experience permanence in shelter, health, education, achievement and relationships (as opposed to uncertainty and multiple transitions)
13. We use innovative processes, which are quality assured, to reach out to children.

## OUR APPROACH

We work at three levels for long term change.



**At railway stations:** We aim to transform stations into 'Child Friendly Spaces'. This would involve a team of outreach workers (ORW) being based at the station 24/7, looking out for children as soon as they arrive alone. They then make sure the child is safe, fed, clothed, has water, medical help and whatever counselling support is needed. Each location operates a Child Help Desk, where the outreach workers are based, and can cater for every child's needs, referring them to shelter accommodation or care institutions where appropriate, and beginning the process of family restoration whenever possible.



**In communities:** We work in local communities, targeting the locations where large numbers of children are found to be leaving their family, to create a safety net to stop this happening. We believe in empowering communities and families and strengthening their resources so they have the responsibility and ability to properly care for their children and keep them safe.



**With governments:** Strengthening the existing government system and structures is key to ensuring long-term, sustainable change which is what we always aim for, and what allows us to have the greatest impact, where it is needed most.



# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AP: Andhra Pradesh

CCI: Child Care Institution

CHES: Community Health Education Society

CINI: Child in Need Institute

CIT: Community Information Tool (developed for and used in this research)

CMPO: Child Marriage Protection Officer, appointed under The Prohibition of Child Marriages Act, 2006

CNCP: Children in need of care and protection

CONC'RN: Care of Needy Children Rightfully Nurtured

CWC: Child Welfare Committee

DCPU: District Child Protection Unit

DLSA: District Legal Services Authority

GRASM: Gramodaya Samithi

GRP: Government Railway Police

ICPS: Integrated Child Protection Scheme

JJ Act: Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000 (This is for the purpose of the present report. Although the current legislation in force is the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, this research was conducted during the period in which the previous legislation was applicable.)

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

PCMA, 2006: The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006

POCSO Act: Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO Act) 2012

RC: Railway Children

RPF: Railway Protection Force

SATHI: Society for Assistance to Children in Difficult Situation

SJPU: Special Juvenile Police Unit

SOP/SoP: Standard Operating Procedure

WB: West Bengal

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## I. Introduction

Every child deserves an environment, which ensures safety, addresses their needs, and offers opportunities for their growth and development. However, realities are generally different for several children, whether they are at home, at school, or any other location. As children leave home or go missing they are likely to come in contact with various stakeholders within or outside the Juvenile Justice System. This system also works towards reunification of children with their families as well as assessing their post-reunification situation. At present, there is inadequate research (especially in depth) on reunification processes and the lives of children who have been reunified. Railway Children (RC) and its partner organisations in India recognized this research gap and affirmed that a research study on this topic was very important to strengthen their family reintegration programme as well as improve the knowledge base in the sector at large. Additionally, there is limited research on the roles of various stakeholders in the reunification process, or how the law and concerned SOPs of various stakeholders are translated into practice. The present research aims at understanding these processes—right from the point of first contact of various stakeholders with children till the point of reunification and then post reunification follow up and support provided to children or their families.

**Chapter 1 identifies and assesses the issue of children leaving the safety of their homes and the processes of reunification.** It also establishes the broad objectives of the research to understand the processes involved in reunification of children with their families, the range of contextual vulnerabilities and resources/strengths present in lives of the selected children who have been reunified with their families at least once and provide recommendations to state and non-state stakeholders to create an environment that sustains the reunified children's continuity with family. The research adopted a qualitative methodology and involved the following stakeholders: children and their families, NGO staff, CWC, DCPU, SJPU, GRP, RPF, Childline, CCIs (largely Govt. Homes), communities from where children came (at the time of first contact with NGOs) or where they were reunified, or where they were living at the time of this research. The focus was on children reunified in the following districts of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh between June 2007–May 2008 and June 2012–May 2013: Chittoor, Mahbubnagar, Jalpaiguri, Kolkata, and North 24 Parganas.1 Children interviewed in the research also turned out to be from Kadapa and Darjeeling. Among these 21 individuals, 14 were 18 years old or below at the time of this research.

## II. Key findings

**Chapter 2 establishes the context that defines the vulnerabilities of families. The chapter discusses the perceptive definitions of the factors contributing to a 'good' and a 'safe' environment for a child.** An attempt was made to define contextual underpinnings or similarities of context as driving factors for children leaving homes or staying back with families. It is interesting to note that the case analyses drew parallels and hinted at similarities of context and family situations—parents and reunified children/individuals perceived the following elements to be essential in making children's lives good—education; health and nutrition; stay with families (instead of hostels); good relationships in the family, sheltering children from family conflict, a stress-free environment at home as well as related to studies; presence of recreational spaces and opportunities. Along with the aspects already shared by reunified individuals and their families, various stakeholders also emphasised on addressing contextual patterns (e.g. child marriage, child labour) to ensure a better environment for children.

At the same time, the vulnerabilities of context had a similar theme:

- Unstable nature of livelihoods, inaccessibility of healthcare (including mental health care), and the lack of leisure and recreational facilities for children.

- In all the rural areas where agriculture was the main livelihood, cultivation was largely rain-fed resulting in unpredictable outcomes. Most communities reported that they were unable to access agricultural inputs at subsidised rates through government channels such as farmer credit schemes. Lack of vocational training opportunities also contributed to unstable livelihoods. While formal education exists—in some form or other—in all the sites, vocational and/or industrial training facilities were available only in one area of urban AP in Tirupati town, Chittoor district and possibly in Kolkata—being a metropolitan city (although none of the reunified individuals talked about taking advantage of any training facilities).
- All the urban communities were missing open spaces for children to play, due to congestion. The provision of parks also does not ensure the safety of young children. In rural areas while there were some open spaces, these are also deeply gendered, with girls mostly denied the opportunities to use these to play (especially after adolescence).
- Migration, indebtedness, addiction, child labour, child marriage, and human trafficking.
- Access to education, in several communities, had barriers such as distance from institutions, lack of transportation facilities and corporal punishment in schools. Hostels and cottage homes were used as resources for education and boarding.
- Remoteness of most of these communities became a barrier in access to several resources.
- Knowledge of child protection mechanisms was negligible in most of the communities covered in this research.
- Communities also reported problems related to water and sanitation, especially in terms of lack of potable water, frequent water logging in rain, and lack of sanitation facilities.
- Inadequate electricity supply impacted livelihoods and lack of street lights contributed to lack of safety, especially of girls and women.

**Chapter 3 discusses the complex array of questions at play that lead to children leaving the safety of their homes.** It is the particular interaction of these factors—both contextual and individual—which creates a situation where some children leave home. In the individual or family context as well as the larger community context, following factors were identified as factors contributing to children leaving homes:

- Distance/lack of attachment figure/loss (temporary/permanent) of primary caregiver.
- Marital difficulties among parents.
- Alcoholism in family, lack of peer group.
- Adult figures do not have the time to watch over the children.
- Mental health status of the child and family members: while mental health problems of children can contribute to not staying at home or school, mental health problems of family members can influence the quality of care giving.
- Child's perception of family environment and consequences, e.g. fear of being punished.
- Leaving home as strategy to achieve objectives, e.g. wanting to leave studies/start work.
- Incompatibility between parents' expectations and children's experiences, e.g. parents think that children are studying well in hostels, whereas the situation in hostels is not child-friendly.
- Different messages from parents, e.g. whether studies are important.
- Insecure livelihoods of family contributing to migration of caregivers and therefore neglect of children.
- Lack of child-friendly systems, especially in education system.
- Lack of consistent intervention/collaboration with family in cases where child has already got involved in activities such as addiction.

- Age-related needs and lack of age-appropriate opportunities (for education, recreation) resulting in engagement in work or leaving home.
- Although sexual abuse has been found by others as one of the factors that leads to children leaving home, this did not emerge from the sample in our research. One of the potential reasons for this could be that stakeholders involved with victims of sexual abuse may not have reunified them with their families considering the child's choice and their best interest. Hence, these children may have been excluded from our sample as our research focused only on those children who had been reunified with their families at least once.

On the other hand, the following factors were found to contribute to children staying with families/home:

- Continuation of life or daily activities without significant disruption
- Negative impact and perception of life on streets
- A strong sense of responsibility towards family
- Presence of attachment/support figures in family/community
- Contentment with present options in life
- Parental understanding of their children's needs to have been initiated by them or their families.

Chapter 4 defines the stakeholders and the environment that form the universe of a child. The roles that each of the stakeholders play in the reunification process may be direct or indirect but is equally important. The chapter documents the processes followed by different stakeholders when they come in contact with children who have moved away from homes and the challenges that these stakeholders faced therein. The processes that happen subsequent to their contact with stakeholders determine the protection of their best interests.

Chapter 5 outlines the recommendations for successful reunification and ensuring smooth and safe transition of children through various stakeholders in the reunification process. The recommendations are based on the findings of the study as well as deliberations of a workshop held on 28–29 September 2015 with RC and the its partner NGOs that were part of this research: CHES, CINI, CONC'RN, GRASM, Praajak, and SATHI. The recommendations are broadly categorized as following:

#### **1. Reviewing and redefining successful reunification**

- Retention of contact with family does not amount to a successful reunification. Although while working with children for reunification and following up till 1 year, a stakeholder may perceive stories to be 'successes', the long-term outcomes may be different from our initial perception. Hence, all systems (not only those specifically for child protection) for children within and beyond their communities have to be adequately strong to take over follow-up and support, and that these systems have to work together to create an environment enabling the healthy development of each child.

#### **2. Recommendations for ensuring smooth and safe transition of children through various stakeholders in reunification process**

- A smooth and safe transition of children in their journey through various stakeholders not only needs sensitivity and awareness related to child rights, but also a strong understanding of one's own role by each stakeholder.
- All stakeholders need to be aware of legislations and rules that are relevant for responding to children they come in contact with. For example, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 and its amendment in 2016.
- As findings of this research indicate that stakeholders who come in contact/interact with NGOs (working on child rights) more frequently are more aware and sensitised, this aspect can be promoted further. Examples can be drawn from active engagement of RC partner organisations with stakeholders at Railway Stations. Information about steps to follow when one came in contact with a child, and trainings on communication skills (to be used with children) were some of such examples.

- A smooth and safe transition also implies supporting other systems that children were part of before leaving home and after reunification. For example, the family system can be further strengthened through engagement with families at pre-reunification stage, a strong vulnerability assessment process, and an active component of 'family strengthening' during the follow-up phase, as followed by some of the partner organisations of RC.
- Post-reunification direct work with child and family should not be dependent only on NGOs that were initially involved, as this strategy cannot be used in a long-term manner.
- In order to respond to children's needs, stakeholders may need to engage in on-going self-reviews and be innovative. This also includes review and replication of useful practices followed by different stakeholders.
- Documentation process has to be strengthened at each level (and by each stakeholder) to ensure that information on each child, who comes in contact with the child protection system, is maintained and can be accessed when needed.

### 3. Recommendations for 'family strengthening' as a process of pre- and post-reunification intervention.

- It should involve following aspects—Family Vulnerability Assessment; linking the child and/or family with the resources, institutions and systems that are best equipped to address their needs adequately; going beyond one-time contact to link the child/family with appropriate resources, and focusing instead on an on-going engagement so that resources, institutions, and systems become more child-friendly. This strategy, in the long term, will ensure that the responsibility to address the needs of children and families gets shared across a range of stakeholders who are not restricted to the child-protection sector. In the long term, it also potentially reduces the burden on each individual agency for physical follow-ups and support for family strengthening. Potential role of DCPU in implementing such a strategy needs to be reflected upon.

### 4. Recommendations for addressing contextual vulnerabilities

- It is important to recognise that cross-sectoral work is not limited to linking family with various schemes. Although linking families with their entitlements through schemes is an important step, this needs to be considered as the minimum that one can do. One has to also engage with other sectors more closely, understand their concerns and strategies, and gradually add child rights to their concerns with acknowledgement that all domains are important for a child to develop.
- Advocacy for creating an enabling environment for all children requires an active knowledge about what is happening at different levels vis-à-vis implementation of various schemes and policies, not only on child protection specifically, but also on other systems such as health, education, water and sanitation, skill enhancement, livelihood opportunities, financial inclusion, agricultural development, disaster preparedness, etc.
- Advocacy should be at various levels: village, mandal/block, district level, state, as well as national level. We need to influence trainings and perspectives of administrative officers through continuous engagement with them, especially at District level.
- It is important to create an environment where people question the instances when children go missing or their rights are not ensured.
- Advocacy requires use of data and hence there is a need for continuous documentation of engagement with various stakeholders, processes that have been found to be useful in working with children, and outcomes of various interventions.

### 5. Way forward to address mental health needs of children

- Although mental health is often perceived as a specific need that can be fulfilled by counselling and treatment, it is imperative to recognise that work on mental health involves much more.
- We have to work on two aspects: creating an environment that protects and promotes mental health; and addressing mental health problems through interventions, including access to treatment for people with mental illness.

- Stakeholders need to first familiarise (and train) themselves with the concept of mental health and how it can be ensured for all. Mental health needs of children require participation and activation of all systems and stakeholders, not just child protection agencies.
- As we plan to move forward to create enabling environments for all children, we have to acknowledge that as stakeholders, we need to know and engage with much more (than what we may be doing at present). We have to become more aware of the present scenario related to various factors that influence life of children. This includes an understanding of barriers affecting implementation of various policies, legislations and programmes that have the potential to improve the life of each child. We need to formulate a potential course of action based on a strengthened understanding of these barriers as well as the potential challenges for ourselves.

### Chapter 6, while concluding the findings dig into food for some more thought. It can be said that

- Contextual vulnerabilities impact children's lives before they leave home as well as after their reunification with families.
- Families may need support to fulfil their responsibilities towards children.
- Education of children remains an important area of work, as poverty is not the only reason that contributes to children dropping out of school.
- Mental health needs of children should be recognised and addressed.
- There is a need to review the process of follow-up after reunification and the roles of various stakeholders.
- It is important for each stakeholder to be aware of their role and be prepared to respond to a child's needs.



# 1. INTRODUCTION

## I. The Problem

Every child deserves an environment that is safe and offers opportunities for his/her growth and development. However, not every child has access to such an environment. Children may witness domestic violence and conflicts within family; their key needs such as education, nutrition, leisure and recreation, and relationships may not be fulfilled; they may be coping with the loss of a loved one, especially a parent; and if specially-abled, they may face lack of access to entitlements and services. Many children, in fact can be considered in need of care and protection as per the JJ Act if they live without a means of subsistence—they work; they are at a risk of being killed, abused or neglected; they have no one caring for them; their parents are not able to fulfil their child-rearing responsibilities; they are vulnerable to drug abuse or trafficking; and they may be victims of armed conflict, civil unrest or natural calamities. In such circumstances, some children also leave their home or go missing. These children remain at risk and hence the role of various stakeholders in their environment gains significance. Systems such as local police, including SJPU, GRP, RPF, CWC, Childline and others come in contact with such children and work towards ensuring their safety and well-being. The system, with involvement of these stakeholders also works towards reunification<sup>1</sup> of children with their families as well as assessing post-reunification situation for them. Experience of organisations working with children suggests that not every child (who has left home) is reunified with family. In addition to this, not every child stays back with his/her family after reunification. Through this study, Railway Children (RC) and its partner organisations in India have tried to throw light on the processes involving reunification of a child in India. The study, conducted over a period of one year from November 2014–November 2015, aims at understanding these processes—from the point of first contact with various stakeholders to the point of reunification and post reunification follow up and support provided to children and their families. Through this study, an attempt has been made to examine the factors contributing to children leaving the safety of their homes and the factors that create a safe environment enabling them to grow and develop properly. The complete study report, including a **Compendium of Case Studies**, that documents in detail, the stories of 38 children who were reunified by RC and its partners at least once is available on request. A corollary to this Compendium is the analysis of the study that assigns each one of us a direct or an indirect bearing in creating a protective and safe environment for a child.

## II. The Objective

The study aims to understand the processes involved in reunification of a child with his/her family and the range of contextual vulnerabilities and resources present in the lives of the selected children who have been reunified with their families at least once. Through the study we aim to provide recommendations to state and non-state stakeholders to create an environment that sustains the reunified child's continuity with family and create an environment that promotes his/her survival and development, protection, and participation.

As this research focused primarily on the lives of reunified individuals and their families, it has not been able to accord a similar level of in-depth engagement with other stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup> The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, as well as The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 use the terms—restoration, reintegration, and rehabilitation. These legislations do not use the term 'reunification'. We define the processes of reunification as Reunified children/individuals: involving children who have been reunified 'at least once'; Reunified children's continuity with family: child living with the family; child living with the extended family but in contact with own biological family; child who may have decided to leave the family again (after one or more than one attempt of reunification by an organization) but remains in contact with the family through different means/processes. Reunification process is defined as the process beginning from the point of first contact between the child (who had left home) and any stakeholder in child protection system till the point of post-reunification follow-up. Child protection system includes NGOs, CWCs, Childline, DCPU, RPF, GRP, SJPU, government Homes and any other government personnel who may come in contact with, or work with children on the street, railway platforms and any other location where a child may be.

## III. The Process

Primary focus of this research is on learning from the lives of individuals who had been reunified in the past. Using qualitative approaches, the emphasis was laid on an in-depth exploration of processes and dimensions related to reunification of children. The narratives and perspectives of children, their families, communities, as well as other stakeholders have helped in gaining a better understanding of various dimensions and factors related to reunification and post-reunification scenario in children's lives. The research focused on children reunified by RC partner organisations in the period 2007–14 that includes

- Children reunified between 2007–14 (through interface with RC partner organisations)
- Families of reunified children (2007–14)
- RC partner organisations and other civil society organisations
- Government Institutions and Personnel involved in child protection system
- Communities of reunified children

The focus of the study was on children who were reunified in the districts of West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh— Chittoor, Mahbubnagar, Jalpaiguri, Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, between June 2007– May 2008 and June 2012 – May 2013. A few of the children interviewed hailed from Kadapa and Darjeeling. 14 of the 21 children interviewed were 18 years old or below at the time of this research.

A multi-stage purposive sampling process was used to select states, districts, and the sample of reunified children and careful consideration was given to maintaining diversity of the sample. The samples were traced and 38 children who had been reunified at least once and had, at some stage, come in contact with Railway Children's partner organizations were followed up. The process of follow up was conducted by the core Research Team along with members from 6 Partner NGOs who were also engaged in the data collection process. After a preparatory workshop, the Partner NGO Teams traced and followed up with these 38 children (using the Follow up form), completed information gathering in 30 communities using Community Information Tool (CIT), and interviewed (using Interview Schedules) RPF, GRP, SJPU and total 9 CCIs in the selected districts. Simultaneous interviews with children and their families, NGO staff, 5 CWCs, 5 DCPUs and Childline were also conducted. A total of 21 family units (children and/or their families) were interviewed which included 6 units from children reunified in 2007–08, 14 from the ones reunified in 2012–13 and 1 reunified in 2013–14. Within these 21 family units, 17 reunified children/individuals were interviewed, as the rest 4 were not available for interview on the day of team's visit.

Through a workshop held in September 2015, the analysis of the study was disseminated to the partner NGO teams and detailed feedback, reflections and discussions followed to identify the factors that contributed to children leaving homes. The responses and reflections have also been incorporated in the study.

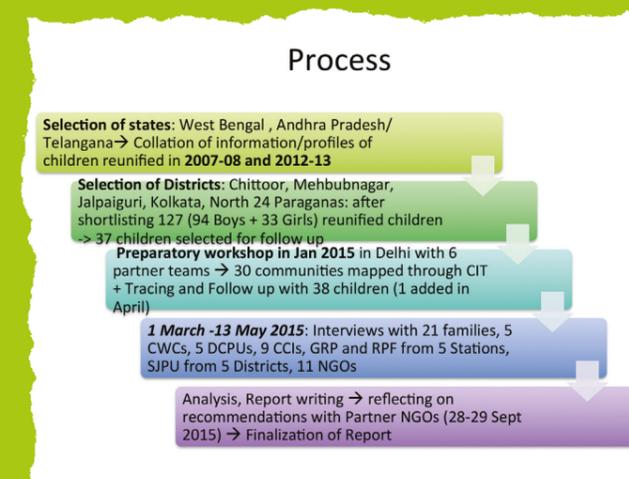


Figure 1: The overall process

## 2. UNDERSTANDING CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES

### I. What contributes as a 'good environment for a child'?

It is not easy to define the factors that contribute to an environment that is 'safe' or 'good' for a child. Certainly, not plausible in the backdrop of the vulnerabilities manifesting as externalities or difficulties. The study aims to understand this dichotomy of a 'good' or a 'bad' environment by contrasting the views of the parents and the children from each of the selected sample districts. In that context, the participants were asked to define perceptively, the factors that they thought constituted a good environment for a child to grow and develop. The following themes resonated:

- **Education:** Education emerged as one of the essential elements that contributed to making children's lives good. It was usually mentioned as the pathway to improving life chances by preparing children for good jobs. For example, in one of the case studies, R14VM's mother had said, "...Children must be taught to study well. If they study well they will get good jobs." While a few children thought education as a contributor to one's safety.
- **Health and Nutrition:** Parents talked about the need for good health and nutrition as a basic prerequisite for a good life, without which children could not function in their studies. In most cases people also emphasised that good health did not only mean adequate nutrition and staying without illness, but also the need to have peace of mind, which they felt should be achieved in different ways, discussed below.
- **Stay with families:** Children who had left home or been sent to stay at hostels emphasised that the family or home was the best place for them as they felt cared for in that environment.
- **Relationships with parents:** Both children and parents talked about the need for good relationships amongst themselves, especially emphasising that parents needed to listen to their children so that they (children) can discuss what is bothering them when such situations arise.
- **Perception of institutional stakeholders:** The key points that institutional stakeholders emphasised upon were largely the same as those shared by parents and children. Here too, there was a primary emphasis on adequate education and nutrition and health. Emphasis was also laid to the need for addressing contextual patterns (such as child marriage, child labour) to ensure a better environment for children. Role of parents and their level of awareness about children's needs and issues is considered significant.

**"WHAT THEY [CHILDREN] NEED ....IN MY OPINION...IF WE LIVE THEM WHAT THEY WANT, THEY WILL BE HAPPY WE CAN ALSO BE HAPPY. WE HAVE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY WANT. INSTEAD OF FAMILY, WE HAVE TO BE LIKE FRIENDS. NOW, LIKE [MY] MOTHER, MY ELDER BROTHER AND ME. IF SOMEONE SEES ME MY MOTHER AND BROTHER THEY WILL MISTAKE US FOR JUST FRIENDS. THEY WILL NOT THINK WE ARE A FAMILY OR MOTHER AND SON. WE SHARE OUR PROBLEMS AND EVERYTHING ...THAT'S WHY WE ARE AT THIS STAGE."**

### II. Contextual vulnerabilities

The study attempted to map the reasons for children leaving home with the contextual vulnerabilities of the selected districts and states. Through this an attempt was made to see if similarities between the cases existed—to assess how the externalities of birth, nativity, occupation contributed to the existing vulnerability of a family and thus a child by descent. Even though the communities of reunified individuals and their families were a mix of rural and urban areas and varied in size and spread, their remoteness and resultant access to public services, and their socio-economic makeup, some common themes emerged:

- **Livelihoods and employment:** Unstable livelihoods were a defining feature of all the respondents' communities. This was true of both urban and rural areas with a few exceptions (e.g. in two urban areas in North 24 Parganas and Kolkata). In all the rural areas where agriculture was the main livelihood, cultivation was largely rain-fed resulting in unpredictable outcomes. Most communities did not have irrigation facilities and where these existed, they were constraints of cost or unpredictable electricity supply. In most communities, therefore, agriculture (which is not adequately remunerative) is supplemented with additional work, which is usually some form of daily wage or contract labour, including by children. The third aspect of unstable livelihoods is intensive home-based work. Home-based workers are part of an informal labour force and usually dependent on contracts from middlemen. Another feature of the livelihoods landscape is the lack of vocational training facilities for young people. While formal education exists, in some form or other, in all the sites vocational and/or industrial training facilities were available only in one area of urban AP in Tirupati town, Chittoor district, and possibly in Kolkata: being a metropolitan city (although none of the reunified individuals talked about taking advantage of any training facilities). Thus, young people have recourse to only a few avenues for preparing for a stable livelihood and must instead start work as daily wage labour in insecure conditions.
- **Migration:** A significant impact of unstable livelihoods is the out-migration from the local area. The first concern regarding migration is safety, i.e. whether people know where and under what terms their family members are going away. The second concern is how it separates family members and especially the impact it has on children. This was evident in one case of a child, R15N, whose mother migrated for work. There are cases where entire families, and sometimes communities, migrate together in search of work. In AP, for example, communities who are dependent on collection and sale of forest produce for their subsistence do this, as was in one case (NR10GV's family/community). It impacts children's lives, denying them access to welfare provisioning from the government, e.g. ICDS or midday meals, or disrupting their education, all of which can influence their lives in the future.
- **Indebtedness:** Indebtedness is common across the communities that were studied, although it was more evident in AP and Telangana. It is associated both with unstable livelihoods as well as other social practices. On the one hand when livelihoods are unstable and income insufficient, people are forced to turn to private credit sources in order to survive. They are also forced to do the same when they are faced with sudden unexpected expenditure, such as for health reasons or, as in this study, when they have to look for a missing child.

### CHILDREN IN ONE (R1M'S) COMMUNITY IN WEST BENGAL:

Many children in this area are missing, according to R1M's mother. This area is not very far from Sealdah Railway Station. The majority of people in this area reported to be Muslims. The average age at marriage for girls is 15-18 years and 18 and above for boys. While boys go out for work and hence also drop out from school at the age of 10-12 years, girls are made to study till a particular level and then married off. Girls generally work after marriage. Families in this area are generally big and household expenses are met through multiple incomes. Hence boys get involved in work, also because there are many options (in the area) to get involved in. Some boys also work and study simultaneously. Occupations of people: Labour in shoe factories (small ones that are run from households); labour at construction sites; cycle van drivers (non-motorised ones to transport goods from one location to other); garment factory (undergarments) within households; making packaging boxes—e.g. jewellery box, box for sweets, shoe boxes; leather and foam bag making; kite making; bindi making; sorting shredded/cut paper; cleaning ginger and garlic for sale by others. Women also go to work as domestic workers in nearby apartments. Children are engaged in most of these occupations.

- **Addiction:** Substance addition of various kinds was reported from all the research communities. While AP and Telangana reported primarily alcohol addiction, in WB both alcohol and drug use were reported from both rural and urban sites. Substance use is common in both young children and adults in urban sites in WB due to the ease with which drugs, glue, etc. are available. In one case (R12BS) for instance, the child reported that he had home due to parental conflict, which seemed to be the result of his father's alcohol addiction and there may also have been violence against his mother.
- **Child labour:** Child labour was reported across rural sites in AP and Telangana and all sites—especially urban—in WB. Child labour is associated with unstable livelihoods and deprivation where a single income is not enough for household subsistence. Thus, children either support the family through home-based, agricultural, or outside work. They may do so in the local areas itself, within the extended family, or migrate to areas which are known to give better wages. In one case (R18JN and his siblings), had to work after their father committed suicide due to mounting debt; they did a combination of casual labour along with cultivating their own land during the farming seasons.
- **Child marriage:** Child marriage is the other major risk that children, especially girls, face in all the communities. Child marriage is also associated with poverty and traditional social norms. In almost all communities, one of the reasons that people mentioned for low marriage age was for protecting girls' from sexual harassment. In WB (Jalpaiguri) many of the child marriage cases are also of elopement and this was mentioned in at least three communities.
- **Trafficking:** Trafficking for labour and sex-work is the third risk that impacts children. This was mentioned in WB. In north Bengal, in particular, communities alluded to it indirectly. NGOs that work in the area noted that young girls were heavily made up at all times of the day and that it is known that agents regularly visit the areas to recruit young women. West Bengal also has high rates of trafficking, including of people from Nepal and Bangladesh. While trafficking for sex work was not reported from AP and Telangana, NGOs in both areas reported traditions that subject young women to sexual exploitation, such as 'devdasi padathi' and 'mathamma'; both existed in some of the respondents' communities. Both practices are reportedly on the decline as a result of long-term awareness by some organisations but have not yet disappeared entirely.
- **A few other factors** such as remoteness of communities, negligible knowledge of child protection mechanisms, problems related to water and sanitation, inadequate electricity supply contributing to lack of safety, especially girls and women were also common vulnerabilities in the sample communities.

The most persistent problem across these communities has been the unstable nature of livelihoods, inaccessibility of healthcare, and lack of leisure and recreational facilities for children. This, in turn, creates a context for other vulnerabilities to emerge, each of which has impacts on the lives of children.

How is the context or a situation influential in making children leave home? When a primary caregiver, for instance in one case (R15N), had to migrate in order to earn sufficient money, it had a bearing on the child. Children can feel neglected and leave home as a result of this. Another case (R20A) is also similar wherein he had left home to look for his father who was moving around for work. Rather than necessarily leaving home itself, he was looking for a caring figure in the home environment. A number of adult figures do not have the time to watch over their children and some children particularly need targeted attention. As in one case of (R9BRD), demonstrable evidence is that even when the child may have been categorised as a missing child (and hence assumed to not have run away from family), it did not mean that the child had not left home willingly with the purpose of fulfilling other needs. The child, and these children have needs which they might be trying to fulfil by leaving home, e.g. leisure and recreation. This raises questions about how to engage children in their own contexts so that this can act as a deterrent to their leaving home. There are also further questions regarding how the institutional mechanisms respond in local contexts; examples are their contextual institutional issues that are obstacles to following protocols in place for the protection of children as per the relevant laws. This issue arises, for example, in the case where a CWC described

that they were receiving the penalty being deposited by employers contravening the Child Labour Act 1986 and flags areas for further investigation and research.

While all the examples will necessarily be 'particular', the issues raised through them and the description of the contexts from which they emerge point to the need to look beyond the child-protection systems (such as CWC, Institutional care, and so on) themselves in order to make the environment safer for children. Pells (2012, p. 564) makes precisely this point when she discusses the multiple and compounded vulnerabilities that are created as a result of poverty and the kinds of structural socio-economic inequalities that have been mentioned above.



### 3. CHILDREN: THE KEY FINDINGS AND LEARNING FROM THEIR JOURNEYS

#### I. What are the factors that influence children to leave their homes?

At the time of the study, 21 family units were covered through in-depth interviews. Most children interviewed were between 10 to 15 years of age at the time of their reunification. At the time of data collection for this research, 7 out of 21 reunified individuals were above 18 years while 14 were below 18 years of age. There a complex array of questions at play that lead to children leaving the safety of their homes. The factors, are not all present in every child's life and even where present, may not always push a child to leave home. It is the particular interaction of these factors—both contextual and individual—which creates a situation where some children leave home.

Context plays an important role in shaping children's lives and their decisions to leave home. Contextual factors range through varying degrees of proximity, from the immediate family context to the broad socio-economic context of the community and district or even the state. It is important to remember, however, that these factors do not act in isolation but are in fact intertwined in complex ways.

#### • Individual and family context

- **Distance/lack of attachment figure/loss (temporary/permanent) of primary caregiver:** It was found that some cases the attachment figure, e.g. a parent, might be living separately or going away for livelihood purposes. In one case (R20A), for instance, the child had gone to look for his father who was moving around for work. His leaving home was not a conscious decision to do so but to seek out his father whom he missed at that time. As it happened, although he had done this on prior occasions, on this particular occasion he got lost in the process. In another (R15N's) case, distance from his mother who was a key attachment figure and also the primary caregiver was the reason for the child leaving home.
- **Marital difficulties among parents:** A conflictual marital relationship can also impact children's lives. For example, in one case (R12BS) the child had left home as a consequence of the incessant conflict (jhamela) between his parents.
- **Alcoholism in family, lack of peer group:** Alcoholism in the family was a factor in the leaving home of three children. Alcoholism itself has varying impacts on the family as the examples will show. In one case, (R4BSD) the child's father was (and still is) alcoholic. As a result of this, as reported by his mother, the father did not hand over his salary to run household expenses. This also appeared to have affected their marital relationship although this was not reported directly. The child reported that he did 'not like it' at home. As an only child he did not have siblings for company which made him lonely, and this coupled with the lack of consistent care giving made him want to leave home.
- **Adult figures do not have the time to watch over the children:** In some cases, the adult figures did not have the wherewithal to provide individual attention to children. A case in point is that of R9BRD who did not seem to get the attention that may be crucial to preventing him from leaving home frequently. Various factors are at play here: he lived in a large family with few resources; he lived in his maternal aunt's (and uncle's) household along with his own mother and sister; his aunt also cared for other nephews/nieces did not herself have many resources at her disposal; the child's mother had symptoms of mental illness and was not directly involved in her children's care giving; his aunt was the primary caregiver but had many demands on her attention with the number of children in and managing the household itself. Since the child also had companions within his family to go to railway station, it became a frequent recreational destination for him. This is probably also due to lack of recreational resources for children in the community and the fact that the station was close to their neighbourhood.
- **Mental health status of the child:** Mental health status of the child also bears on their behaviour and could be a factor in making them leave home. This was most evident in two cases—R5RB and R7K. Both boys had left their homes on multiple occasions, most often having stolen something valuable from the house so that

they are able to manage on their own for some time. Both R5RB and R7K also formed relationships with seemingly inappropriate people by whom they may be at least partly influenced. R5RB for instance reportedly struck up a close friendship with a much older boy, amongst many, with whom he would smoke and pursue girls; he would have been less than 15 years old at the time. In R7K's case his mother reported that he was a part of local gangs with whom he carried out petty thefts in the community. His employers confirmed these statements in their descriptions of his workplace behaviour. In addition, both boys had also shown patterns of lying and R7K also had substance addiction. In R5RB's case, his family took him for a psychiatric assessment, which indicated that counselling might be useful for him. The organisation that reunified and worked with R7K also had made a similar suggestion for him but this was not sustained. In both cases their needs and demands were met (by parents) almost completely, which too acts to reinforce their behaviours. In R5RB's case, however, there appears to be ongoing psychiatric intervention which has also resulted in more stable behaviour, with no recent reports of his having left home. R7K's actions continue on the same trajectory as in the past. Apart from the child's own mental health status, the mental health status of caregivers and family members too has an impact on their availability and hence on children leaving home.

- **Child's perception of family environment and consequences:** A few children reported that they had left home partly because they were avoiding going home because they feared being punished rather than a decision to specifically leave home.
- **Leaving home as strategy to achieve objectives:** At least in three cases, the children had left home in a strategic manner in order to achieve some of their objectives. For instance, R8SR, R14VM, and R21S had left home to achieve their aim of starting work. R8SR, for example felt the need to take responsibility after his father's death and the only way in which he could do this was by starting work.
- **Incompatibility between parents' expectations and children's experiences:** The expectations that parents have of the hostels where children can board are often not borne out by their children's experiences. Parents choose to send their children to such hostels for various reasons: either there are not sufficient educational facilities close by; commuting to schools is difficult; both parents are engaged in work and cannot devote time to looking after the children; or parents are not themselves educated and hope that their children will get better educational support at the hostels. While parents send their children to hostels with such hopes, the fact is that this is rarely the case. In fact, children often face corporal punishment, which Morrow and Singh (2014) document, and choose to leave from the hostels. R14VM is one such case in point. He had been sent to a hostel and even though he slept the night at his maternal grandmother's home he still chose to leave from the hostel.
- **Different messages from parents:** In the case of R2S, he left with his friends to roam around in the station after which his friends left him and he could not find his way back. In R2S's case, the significant factor that affected him are the very divergent messages that his father and mother were giving him about studies. His mother wanted him to study while his father focussed on overall learning. Nobody amongst his elder siblings was going to school and therefore, no such atmosphere existed at home to promote education.

**"IT WAS WEDNESDAY... SHE [A FRIEND] SAID THAT HER COUSIN IS COMING... SHE TOOK ME TO THE PARK. THAT TIME WE GOT LATE, IT WAS ALREADY DARK, I WAS SCARED THAT MY PARENTS WILL SCOLD ME OR HIT" .... (R10P)**

**"WHEN I CAME BACK I LOST ALL MY INTEREST IN STUDIES I WANTED TO WORK... I FELT I HAD TO WORK AND EARN FOR MYSELF...I HAD NO INTEREST IN STUDIES... WHEN I TOLD THIS TO MY FAMILY THEY DID NOT AGREE. THEY SCOLDED ME AND BEAT ME SO I THOUGHT IT WAS NOT GOOD TO STAY AT HOME ANYMORE AND LEFT"... IN R14VM'S CASE, WHEN HE LEFT HOME FOR THE SECOND TIME (AFTER BEING REUNIFIED) HE DID SO WITH THE SPECIFIC AIM OF MAKING THEM AGREE TO HIS STARTING WORK.**

- **Circumstances from the broader context**

- **Insecure livelihoods:** Insecure livelihoods are a major factor that impact families, resulting in circumstances that cause children to leave home. Migration, for instance, takes place to secure better livelihoods and this impacts care giving for children. R15N's mother, for instance, went abroad in order to earn better. She was also the primary caregiver, a role which her husband could not fulfil. It was this sense of being uncared for that resulted in R15N first leaving from his own home, and then from his relatives. Migration also removes key attachment figures, as in the instance of R20A who went looking for his father and then got lost. Insecure livelihoods also influence family income and hence circumstances for children.
- **Lack of child-friendly systems:** Lack of child-friendly systems is most evident in the education system, which does not always make allowances for different circumstances of the children (that are in the system) and their varying needs. The educational system often does not seem to accommodate children with different needs; for example, those who may be returning to education after a gap or who may have mental health difficulties that affect their abilities and behaviour. An example of this is R9BRD, who has been admitted to different schools at different times but was unable to sustain his studies probably because there have been many gaps in his education. Pells, describing the life of Mohan in AP, discusses how even a short gap from schooling prevents children from going to back to school because children might fear that they will no longer have any friends. Furthermore, the system is not geared to accommodate the needs of children who also need to work to help their families (Pells, 2012). One case, NR10GV reported that he did not like any of the hostels where he was admitted and was constantly homesick. Even though his parents constantly shifted him from one to the other he eventually left from the hostel. NR15YN is an example of the lack of child-friendly system in schools as he was punished because his parents had been unable to pay the fees on time. It was this that triggered his leaving home. In this case his parents needed extra time to pay the fees for all their children but the school was adamant. Schools as well as hostels, while catering to needs of children, also frequently resort to corporal punishment thus making the environment hostile. This too becomes a trigger for children to leave.
- **Lack of consistent intervention/collaboration with family in cases where child has already got involved in activities such as addiction:** In the case of children who are already facing significant vulnerabilities, the nature of intervention requires many systems working together at the level of the community rather than any single NGO working through its own programme. The story of R7K, who had initially left home because he was scolded by his mother (according to documentation), also suggests a clear pattern of unhelpful behaviours: he leaves home after invariably stealing something valuable from home; he leaves home at regular intervals; he goes to far-off places such as Mumbai, Asansol; the family also focuses almost exclusively on his needs and demands at the cost of his sister's, which tends to reinforce his behaviour. Amongst the factors that contribute to his behaviour is the fact that he was part of a gang. His pattern of behaviours suggests the need for a mental health assessment and intervention but this has not happened. His mother, however, had tried to use her network to get him a job. In this case there was a need to link the family to some mental health resource that R7K could use in a sustained manner. While it is important to work with the family to ensure that his sister's needs are met, it is also important to work at the community level to understand what can keep young people engaged so that there are other options for healthy relationships apart from gangs.

**“WHAT ALL I HAD DREAMT OF FOR THEM- THAT IF THEY STUDY PROPERLY, THEY WOULD GET SOME JOB. EVEN IF THEY DON'T WORK AND GET MARRIED, EDUCATION IS IMPORTANT. IF YOU HAVE STUDIED THEN YOU CAN TEACH YOUR CHILDREN AT HOME ONLY AND HELP THEM IN THEIR STUDIES. NOW THEY HAVEN'T EVEN COMPLETED THEIR SCHOOLING, SO YOU TELL ME WHAT WORK CAN THEY DO? IF I WASN'T WORKING IN THE TEA GARDEN, THEN WHAT WOULD WE EAT? ALSO, IF I WAS EDUCATED I COULD HAVE TAUGHT MY CHILDREN AT HOME ONLY.”**

**R10P'S MOTHER CONSTANTLY TALKED ABOUT THE PRESSURE TO WORK WHICH PREVENTED HER FROM BEING AROUND TO CONSTANTLY WATCH OVER HER CHILDREN.**

- **Lack of age-appropriate opportunities and hence engagement in work or leaving home for leisure and recreation:** Engagement in work often starts early for many children. R1M is one such example; after his father died in 2001, when he was very young, all the children/siblings in his family had to work to help their mother manage household expenses. R1M was engaged in making boxes. As he did not want to work, he left home. He may have lost his way as well (as his mother stated) on the first occasion when he met the NGO team. Later on, however, he kept returning to the NGO centre as he enjoyed being there. There were opportunities to play and there were other children his age as well. The significant factor in his case was the lack of age-appropriate opportunities in his community, for playing, studying, learning, having friends. As it was common in his neighbourhood for children to be involved in work from a young age, there was a sense of cultural acceptability. This was compounded by the family's poverty, which limited the resources that could be accessed. His intellectual impairment may have also contributed to the kind of opportunities that were being made available to him.
- **Needs such as leisure and recreation:** Very often children may be categorised as missing or lost but may in fact have left home with the aim of fulfilling specific needs. One such common example of specific needs is their need for leisure and recreation. This issue came up repeatedly in several communities since there are limited, if not non-existent, resources to engage children. Most communities reported limited spaces for play and recreation and this raises the question of how children can be engaged to prevent them from leaving the context. For example, R10P left home with a female friend twice. Her area was vulnerable to trafficking. On one occasion, she also reached Delhi where she reported that she was locked up with many other girls in a single room. The most important problem was that there was nothing else to do in her area after dropping out from school. She was also easily influenced by suggestions of visiting big cities, such as Delhi or even nearby market from where it was easy to go further. She seemed to be a child with a regular need to go out or roam around, but who also got into risky situations, perhaps without being able to completely assess the risk. Other children also expressed how they decided to roam around because they had heard of some place or the other and wanted to explore. This need to explore, both new and known places, also reflects the inadequate leisure resources in the communities.

Among the factors that contributed to children leaving home, many are in alignment with findings by others. For example, the factors associated with situations in family; children facing lack of affection, attention, and care in families; push factors in schools; adversities in communities in terms of disasters; (Aggarwal, 2002; Alex, 2007; Bal Sakha, 2014; D'Lima & Rima, 1992; McFadyen, 2005; Panicker & Nangia, 1992; Save the Children, 2008). **Therefore, to say that poverty is the primary cause of children leaving home may not be all correct—contextual vulnerabilities, need for love, care, recreation, ambitions, abuse, familial situations may be stimuli to children leaving homes. We all are equal and direct or indirect contributors to situations that propel children to leave the safety of their homes.**

## II. What are the factors that contribute to children staying back at home or in contact with families?

The post-reunification findings were from a living sample of 25 children who were traced and were either living with families or were in regular contact.

- **Continuation of routine life aspects/activities without significant disruption:** In majority of cases, routine life aspects in life of reunified children/individuals continued without much disruption and largely as before but with higher alertness from parent(s). In the case of R6BD for instance, he continued with his studies, which he had been involved with earlier too, but with heightened attention from his mother who monitored his movements so that there were no subsequent opportunities to leave home. In the case of NR15YN too, his parents wanted to avoid reminding him of the time he had left home and to continue with his studies as he had been doing earlier. Another reason that routine aspects continued in the life of many reunified children as earlier was because the broader family and community contexts rarely changed. In R18JN's case, for example, his family's circumstances were unchanged after his returning home and once more the family, including him, took a decision that he would have to start working in order to help manage the household expenses especially as he was also uninterested in attending school. This was also found in R20A's story where, even after being reunified with his family, his life remained exactly the same as it was, i.e. he was already working from a very young age in a community where there were no opportunities for children and even though he had moved to another community, he continued to do exactly the same work. R7K's life was very much as it was even though this was also compounded by his own mental health difficulties—he kept leaving home and coming back. For some children, the continuation of the same routine aspects of life could mean coming back to stable routine schooling and other age-appropriate aspects. However, it is obvious that this continuation may not necessarily lead to better opportunities or life options for all reunified children. For some others, this continuation of life trajectory would only mean coming back to vulnerabilities, and either becoming part of family's solution to problems (e.g. income generation), or going further into risks, while staying connected with family.
- **Negative impact and perception of life on streets:** In some cases where children spent more time on the streets or a government home, this made them feel that they were safer and better off at home and this therefore sustained their continued stay at home after reunification. This was most evident in the cases of R15N and R21NS. While R15N experienced the difficulty of life on the streets which made him decide he would not leave home again, R21NS had vivid negative memories of the government home in Chennai that decided for him the future of being at home.
- **Responsibilities towards family:** In many cases where the individual (often a child who is now almost or is an adult) feels a strong sense of responsibility to their family, sustains their continuing with the family. This was most evident in the cases of R4BRD, R8SR, R14VM, and R18JN. In all their cases they had a sense of financial responsibility to their families because of difficulties at home. This had been a major factor in their continued stay with their families. Even in cases where they had left home again, as in the cases of R8SR, R14VM, and R18JN, it had been with their families' knowledge. Scenarios where children tend to take on responsibilities of family early in life, however, should also be seen with concern about potential impacts on children. Parentification, i.e. children taking on caretaking roles in their families, has been considered sometimes to be normative in families and sometimes as a disturbance in family functioning (McMahon & Luthar, 2007). There are cultures, such as in India, where children helping in household chores, taking care of a younger sibling or a parent, or helping with care of an older person is not always challenged as an unhelpful pattern. In scenarios of family crisis in fact, it may be considered as an adaptive response. However, in instances where children may have had to defer their developmentally appropriate needs by prioritising family needs, we do need to reflect on the lost potential opportunities for such children. In the current research, a parentification process in the lives of R4BSD and R8SR was seen, both of whom are presently engaged in work. According to McMahon and Luthar (2007), based on their study on the caretaking burden on children (aged 7–17 years) in an urban poverty area in UK, a moderate level of involvement in caretaking is

normative and associated with positive parent-child relationships, and fewer behavioural or emotional difficulties among children. On the other hand, over-involvement as well as under-involvement in the emotional caretaking process can be linked with family disturbances, relatively poor parent-child relationship, and difficulties in children's psychosocial adjustment. Engagement in instrumental caretaking (i.e. helping with household chores) and support in caring for siblings was, however, not found to be associated with any psychopathology or to compromise social competence. At the same time, however, it is difficult to establish causality and to consider the caretaking burden as the only significant factor associated with psychosocial impacts in a child's life. It is therefore difficult to clearly ascertain how the caretaking role/responsibility impacts the child. However, every child deserves access to opportunities to grow and evolve a career path. If responsibilities within family curtail or strongly negate this path, probably there is a need to reflect on the role of duty bearers in our society.

- **Attachment/Support figures in family/community:** In cases where the child has clear attachment and support figures in the family or community, this seems to have influenced them to stay on with their families. R9BRD, for instance, often turned to an older person in the community whom he talked to and who also sometimes gave him money to spend on himself. His sister also garnered her attention on him. His connection with his sister, and the older person (in community) with whom he has sustained relationships rooted him to his community. Morrow and Vennam (2012) argue that these relationships are also sustained by children taking over responsibilities towards the families and in fact describe 'work' as fundamental to strengthening these relationships. This was evident in the case of R14VM, a child who had proudly taken partial responsibility for the household.
- **Contentment with present options:** In some cases, children stayed back with their families after reunification because of contentment or satisfaction with options (possibly limited and restricting) that were available. While availability of limited options could be seen as a negative thing it can also result in people being content with their lives and what they were doing. R20A, for example, had not planned for the future and was content doing this work.
- **Parental understanding of needs of their children:** In at least two cases—of R14VM and R21NS—the families' understanding of their children's needs had played a role in their staying back home after reunification. In both cases the boys did not want to study and wanted to work instead. The fact that their families were able to ultimately accept this, and both boys were able to then do things that they enjoyed doing, was a crucial factor in enabling them to remain with their families.

It can be said that the factors associated with children leaving home, as well as their staying connected with families, are present at the levels of individual (e.g. mental health, or various needs), family, immediate neighbourhood, as well as the larger context. Gender also plays an important role—the emphasis on boys doing well or contributing to family income may or may not benefit the boy, but it definitely is disadvantageous for girls in families. Girls also faced a higher level of stigma as a result of having left home. Various stakeholders have the potential to play an important role in the lives of children who leave home and then are reunified with families. It can also be said the life trajectories generally continue in the lives of reunified children, along with the same risks and resources that were probably present in their lives earlier too. Returning to the same context does not, therefore, imply a 'new start' for several children. It is here that post-reunification follow-up and support plays an important role. However, follow-up only through phone calls may not always provide a complete picture of children's lives. Additionally, various needs may emerge long after follow-ups are over. The context, therefore, too needs to be equipped in dealing with such needs. For example, children may drop out from school. Hence, the quality of education, experience of children in educational institutions, and return on education are all aspects that need to be improved so that it is more attractive for children to be in schools and for parents to send their children to school.



## 4. GOVERNMENT AND NON-GOVERNMENT STAKEHOLDERS AND CHILD REUNIFICATION PROCESSES

Children who move out of their families interact with various stakeholders at different points of time. The processes that happen subsequent to their contact with stakeholders determine the protection of their best interests. These stakeholders could broadly be put into three categories. The first includes those who have come into existence with a primary mandate of child protection. These include the Child Welfare Committee, Childline, and Child Care Institutions (CCIs). The second category of stakeholders comprises those who have been given an additional mandate of child protection. The Railway Protection Force (RPF), Government Railway Police (GRP) and Police fall within this category. The third category includes those who chose to work on child protection issues although it was not mandatory for them. NGOs come in this category. While for the stakeholders that fall in the first category, the processes to be adopted are clearly outlined, for the second category the processes are evolving and the third category generally innovates and evolves its processes continuously according to the emerging needs and lessons learnt. The second category also sees frequent changes amongst those who have been entrusted with the responsibility child protection. Through the study we have attempted to understand the processes followed by different stakeholders when they come in contact with children who have moved away from homes and the challenges that these stakeholders faced therein.

### • Child Welfare Committee (CWC)

Child Welfare Committee (CWC) is the competent authority in respect of children in need of care and protection. It has been visualised as having the greatest remit once a child is considered to be in need of care and protection with rehabilitation being a part of this. CWC performs a limited role in the preventive domain although it has powers to intervene in case of any child in need of care and protection in their district. In this study, members of five CWCs (one of which was an ad-hoc CWC) were interviewed to understand the process they adopt to facilitate the reunification of children; their relationships with other stakeholders; their concerns regarding the functioning of the CWCs; and suggestions regarding how the CWC's functioning can be strengthened. They were also asked about their perceptions of contextual vulnerabilities which put children at risk.

The descriptions given by the CWCs that were interviewed in this research indicate that the reunification process is broadly similar in all the districts where the research was conducted. The process usually begins with the first step of the organisation's or home staff (where the child may be staying or with whom child may have come in contact with) establishing a relationship with the child in order to understand what the child has been through, ascertain their address, and trace the child's family. The second step generally is that this information is presented to the CWC and a home visit is usually conducted (generally through CWC's orders), in parallel, to confirm the information and enquire whether the home and family environment is conducive for the child to return. This visit and the subsequent report, termed as home visit report or social investigation report, is usually conducted on the CWC's instructions either by the DCPU or by an NGO which is working with the child either in the government, or its own CCI. There are two processes that are ongoing in the next step. The first is that the CWC usually ascertains from the child whether they do indeed want to return to their family. Alongside this, the child's guardians are asked to appear before the CWC where their documents are verified. The CWC takes a decision about whether the child should be reunified based on the combination of their conversations with the child and guardians/parents, and the recommendations of the home visit or social investigation report. The Chittoor CWC specifically added that the child undergoes a medical check-up and counselling sessions once they are in the CCI. CWC, North 24 Parganas mentioned that it is important not to push the child into sharing information before they are

ready. For instance, a girl in class eight who had left home with a boy and was pregnant at the time when she appeared before the CWC was given time to share her experiences when she felt ready to do so. The North 24 Parganas CWC mentioned that their decisions vary based on specific categories of needs. In cases of children with addiction, they are referred to a de-addiction facility when they deem it necessary. In cases of children who have gone missing, their names are added to the missing children's portal and a first information report (FIR) is lodged; such children must be reunified through the CWC. The Kolkata CWC too stated that the specific process could vary according to how the child is referred and what category they fall into. For instance, when children have run away from home, Childline is entrusted with the responsibility of tracing their address; if necessary the child may also go along to aid the process. In cases of children with addiction, the Kolkata CWC sends them for treatment; the next course of action is decided after treatment is complete and based on what the child wishes. They added that in trafficking cases, the details with respect to the child are ascertained through a process of counselling and appropriate steps are taken thereafter.

There are also some cases in which the child may approach the CWC themselves. For example, North 24 Parganas CWC reported an instance where a girl presented herself to the CWC stating that she was facing violence at home. Childline was directed to send a counsellor to visit her home. In the meanwhile, the girl was transferred to the government home. The counsellor found that the girl's mother had remarried and that had been the cause of the girl's concern. The mother decided to break off her second marriage and took back her daughter. In this case the girl's background—that she was from a reputed school—made her aware about the CWC.

In cases where the CWC is unsure whether it is in the child's best interest to return home, they delay handing over the child. The Mahbubnagar CWC, for instance, said they make further inquiries while instructing that the child be lodged in a CCI in the interim. The North 24 Parganas CWC reported that where they feel the child is vulnerable even if the biological parents are present, they have been placing children in foster care. The child is placed after the foster family has been investigated and they continue to follow-up until the child attains majority. They believe that children, who have attained majority, should themselves decide where they want to go. They also mentioned that they attempt to select foster families from among the higher socio-economic strata. There were no specific details from other district CWCs about what they do in such situations.

There are instances where families refuse to take children back. The Mahbubnagar CWC mentioned this in the context of child marriage cases where the families refuse to take their daughters home. In such cases then, the CWC attempts to proceed as per the girl's wishes but as a last resort they may have to order her stay at a CCI until she attains majority, which is when a final decision about her future is taken. The North 24 Parganas CWC reported that when families refuse to take children home the CWC attempts to find out the reasons for this and counsels families and offers support where possible so that they agree to take their child home. They reported an instance where the parents refused to take their daughter home because she was purportedly disobedient, saying "apni manmani karti hai" (she does as she pleases). The family was encouraged to take the child back and offered support regarding how to address the issue.

In cases where the child is produced before a CWC which is not in the domicile district, both Chittoor and Mahbubnagar CWCs mentioned that they transfer the case to the domicile district CWC. Chittoor CWC mentioned that they contact the family with the help of the DCPU outreach staff. If the parents are unable to travel to Chittoor, however, the CWC transfers the case to the domicile district. In absence of a CWC in that district (this may happen if it is a different state) they will entrust a local NGO with the responsibility of tracing the family and support the reunification process. The North 24 Parganas CWC mentioned that they consider Childline's home investigation report (HIR) essential in cases involving inter-district/state transfers. In case the domicile district CWC does not have scheduled sitting in the near future then this CWC sends the child to the family with a copy of the restoration order being sent to the CWC of the domicile district. In such cases the

follow-up is done by the CWC of the domicile district. The Kolkata CWC added that the expenses of inter-state transfers are borne by Childline and the child transferred to the domicile state.

As far as follow-up is concerned Mahbubnagar CWC reported that it is undertaken by ICPS staff who could, in turn, seek assistance from local ICDS staff. The North 24 Parganas CWC felt that follow-up is critical as risks do not suddenly end. They seek NGOs' assistance for this purpose and sometimes even call the families to the CWC to monitor follow-up. If the family cannot afford to travel then they are asked to present themselves to the pradhan of their panchayat; however, it is unclear how this process is monitored. The Chittoor CWC said that after reunification the district protection office is expected to send them a monthly status report about children who have been reunified. The North 24 Parganas CWC said that while they seek the assistance of NGOs, this is dependent on the NGOs' resources and capacities. The Chittoor CWC also seeks the assistance of NGOs, especially to verify location of families, etc. They also find the resources' directory (prepared by RC partner) useful in identifying potential resources.

#### **Challenges**

The challenges faced by CWCs are many. For instance, the Kolkata CWC had suggested having thorough investigation of the child's address, etc. in case of inter-state transfers in order to ensure that the child is transferred to the correct domicile district rather than simply to the state capital. They cited an example where a child from Delhi was referred to the Kolkata CWC based on the fact that he spoke Bengali. After interacting with the child, the Kolkata CWC understood that he was from Bangladesh. He was sent back to Delhi so that he could then be repatriated to Bangladesh. The Chittoor CWC also pointed certain challenges of insufficient resources for their functioning requiring them to mobilise resources from the community. They also felt there were insufficient sittings given the number of children presented before them. They also pointed to gaps between line departments and the need for police sensitisation. The low number of CCIs with fit institution status was another challenge that they highlighted.

#### **• Railway Protection Force (RPF)**

The Railway Protection Force Act, 1957, and its subsequent amendments enjoin the Railway Protection Force to perform the following three core functions (Ministry of Railways (Railway Board), GoI, n.d.):

- To protect and safeguard railway property, passenger area and passenger.
- To remove any obstruction in the movement of railway property or passenger area.
- To do any other act conducive to the better protection and security of railway property, passenger area and passenger

The SoP issued by the Railways for care and protection of children in contact with railways widened the scope of their work (Bureau of Police Research and Development, MoHA, GoI, 2015). In light of the responsibility they bear in this matter, it is critical to understand their perspectives and their efforts to offer care and protection to children who come in contact with the Railways.

#### **Trainings Received on child-related Issues**

All the RPF representatives reported having been trained on the JJ Act. The Kolkata representative also reported having been trained on interacting with children at railway stations. The Jalpaiguri representative also mentioned having received trainings on POCSO, and on the child tracking system for missing children. RPF representative from Chittoor had received training on child rights. The Mahbubnagar RPF reported an informal system of training wherein CWC members visit the station to interact with them although the exact content of these interactions is not known.

#### **Perception regarding responsibility towards children**

The RPF personnel had varying perceptions regarding their responsibilities towards children. The North 24 Parganas representative was unclear about their exact responsibilities and seemed to be unaware about the provisions of the SoP. He

felt that care and protection of children in contact with railways was the GRP's responsibility. Similarly, the Mahbubnagar representative too felt that the RPF did not have a specific responsibility towards the children at the station. They understood their primary role as keeping the station safe and secure for people. However, they do rescue any children they find at the time of checking at the main gate. The remaining three RPF representatives at Jalpaiguri, Kolkata and Chittoor, undertook their responsibilities for children who were found to be in need of care and protection. The Chittoor representative mentioned making announcements for children who were found missing on the platforms. Children without parents were further referred to an NGO which takes the process forward. The Kolkata RPF, after interacting with children, referred them to the NGO team working at the railway station or to Childline. These varied responses from RPF may have been influenced by the fact that Mahbubnagar and North 24 Parganas railway stations were small, and most likely these personnel were coming across only a few missing children in the year. Additionally, no NGO was reported to be active at/ near these railway stations although children were being referred to NGOs/Childline as needed. This was in stark contrast to stations in Kolkata, Jalpaiguri and Chittoor Districts, all of which record much higher numbers of missing children and have one or more NGO(s) working actively with them. This suggests that presence of or close coordination with NGOs (or other stakeholders) has potential to influence perspectives and level of information of personnel working with Government bodies/institutions, especially of those who come in direct contact with children.

#### **Perceived Reasons for children to be found on stations**

Based on their experiences, RPF cited different reasons due to which they perceived that children come in contact with them at the station. These were as follows:

- Children losing their way on account of boarding wrong trains;
- Familial problems;
- Children leaving home for sightseeing;
- Children unable to bear the educational pressures; and
- Absence of a friendly environment in their own locality and limited guidance.

#### **Procedure/steps/process followed when child is referred or comes in contact**

Although there did not appear to be a standard protocol that the RPF personnel were supposed to follow on coming across a missing child or a child who had left home, it emerged that all except one work closely with local NGOs to whom these children are referred. RPF personnel were aware of safe spaces for children and worked towards convincing children to go there. In Chittoor, a local NGO's help desk was being used as a referral point. The RPF personnel at Jalpaiguri referred children to either to an NGO run home or centre. Missing children at Kolkata were first reported to a senior officer, and were thereafter referred to a local NGO, which was also running Childline. Mahbubnagar RPF personnel reported that they gave information regarding the missing children in the newspaper and also referred them to the NGO.

They also appeared to be taking responsibility for family reunification through the orders of the CWC. The RPF representative in Mahbubnagar mentioned that in the year 2014, 12 children were reunified after counselling, through CWC orders. The RPF personnel at Jalpaiguri were taking an active role in child reunification. Citing an example, the representative stated that in one of the cases the child was accused by a passenger of stealing something. In this case, the child was transferred to the safe custody of an NGO run centre and then to an NGO-run home. Thereafter, the RPF personnel traced the home address of the child, with child being reunified with the family. RPF personnel from Chittoor reported a case where two children had arrived with their parents from Tirupati and had got separated from them. Despite announcements on the platforms, the parents could not be traced. The children were referred to the local NGO that contacted the parents, leading to their restoration.

#### **Challenges**

Amongst the respondents, two of them had not directly dealt with children and were thus not in a position to respond on questions related to challenges in dealing with such cases. The Mahbubnagar RPF representative mentioned that they remained in their uniforms on the station when they came in contact with children whereas the CWC expected that they should be in civil dress while dealing with children. The Jalpaiguri respondent felt that it was challenging to handle children since they were "disobedient". According to the respondent, it was under the influence of parents that children were coming to the station. The RPF personnel from Chittoor mentioned the challenge of working with girl children in the absence of any specific facility for dealing with female.

The research revealed that there was no clear protocol regarding what the RPF is to do on finding a child on the station. Although all RPF representatives reported having received training on the JJ Act, only the Kolkata RPF reported having been trained on interaction processes with children. This training could be important for all stakeholders who interact directly with children. The varied responses regarding their perceived sense of accountability towards children who come in contact with the railways indicated the need for a greater sensitisation for the RPF along with explaining the background and mandate of the SOP.

#### **• Government Railway Police (GRP)**

The Government Railway Police's duties, in their areas of jurisdiction, correspond to those of the District Police in the areas under their charge. In addition, they are expected to manage passengers within station premises; control vehicular traffic in the vicinity of station premises; maintain order in passenger trains halting at stations; prevent overcrowding in carriages; arrest persons guilty of committing nuisance; remove persons with infectious diseases; keep station premises clear of beggars; remove bodies of persons who die in trains or station premises; examine empty train carriages for property left behind by passengers; enquire into accidents on railway; and look into prevention and detection of crime on railways (Ministry of Railways (Railway Board), GoI, n.d.). However, with the announcement of the SOP for Railways to ensure care and protection of children coming in contact with railways, the GRP has been formally conferred additional responsibilities—the directions of the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi in Writ Petition No. 5365/2012 spell out the responsibilities that need to be assumed by the GRP/RPF in respect of children who are found in contact with railways. Similar to the case of RPF, in light of the responsibility they bear in the matter of care and protection of children who come into contact with the railways, it is critical to understand perspectives and efforts of GRP as well.

#### **Trainings Received on Child Protection**

The representatives from Jalpaiguri, North 24 Parganas and Chittoor reported having received specialised training on child protection issues. The Jalpaiguri representative mentioned that in the previous year they had received training on child tracking system. Further training had also been conducted on POCSO Act, JJ Act and the issue of Human Trafficking. The Chittoor representative had received training on child rights in general and the JJ Act. The representative from North 24 Parganas did not explicitly mention the content of training. In the case of Mahbubnagar, it was reported that Childline had organised a meeting with several stakeholders, even though not all personnel could attend it. The GRP Kolkata reported that even though no specific trainings were organised on child rights, regular meetings were organised on children related issues on a monthly basis with representatives of GRP, RPF, an organisation working on de-addiction (Mukto Rehabilitation Centre), an organisation working with slum children (Immanuel Ministry), and CINI. The representative added that during the GRP induction training, discussions on the issue of children were restricted to laws and specific sections rather than broad discussions on children.

### **Perceptions about the role of GRP with respect to children**

There appears to be a wide variation in the perception of GRP personnel regarding their responsibility towards the children. The representative from North 24 Parganas and Mahbubnagar felt that their duty towards children was restricted to referral to relevant agencies.

Clearly the perception in both the above cases reflects a limited mandate. As discussed in the section of RPF, this could be linked with the size of station, lower footfalls and hence low number of children who need to be dealt with, along with lack of regular interaction with local NGOs (as these NGOs are not working on the station).

The Chittoor representative who has been the CWO since September 2014 mentioned that she guides the other staff of GRP to identify new children who may have arrived on the platform. She also mentioned that she observed children on the platforms to identify if there are any vulnerable children. If she has a doubt, then she talks to the child and collects information about the child. If the child provides her the contact address or phone number, she contacts the family. In case of a missing child, if the parents arrive then the child is handed over to the parents after checking the documents and talking to the parents. In case of a child who had left home, the child is sent to the local NGO. Female children are referred to a short stay home (located near Tirupati Railway Station) through the same local NGO.

### **Perceived reasons for children to be found on Stations**

The reasons for children to be found on railway stations as perceived by GRP personnel interviewed are as follows:

- Lost during travelling (Jalpaiguri)
- Parents forgetting their children at the station (Jalpaiguri)
- Children coming in from remote villages to watch trains and then getting lost (North 24 Parganas)
- Rag Picking
- Begging (Mahbubnagar)
- Left home on account of being beaten up by the family (Kolkata, Chittoor)
- Children want to see the city and thus left home (Chittoor)
- For sleeping on the platform (Chittoor)
- Parent's insistence on education and children not wanting to study or study in Hostels (Chittoor)

**“OUR ONLY DUTY IS TO REGISTER GDE (GENERAL DIARY ENTRY) AND THEREAFTER HAND OVER THE CHILD TO CHIDLIN. WE DON'T HAVE ANY OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES.” (GRP RESPONDENT FROM NORTH 24 PARGANAS)...**

**“WE DO NOT WORK SPECIFICALLY FOR CHILDREN ONLY. RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS STATION PASSENGERS, AND RELATED ISSUES (PICK-POCKETING, ACCIDENTS) ARE MANAGED ALONG WITH RESPONSIBILITIES TOWARDS CHILDREN. BUT IF A CHILD IS FOUND, WE CALL UP CHIDLIN. WE DO NOT KEEP CHILDREN ON STATION AS THERE IS FOREST NEARBY AND THERE ARE SNAKES.” (GRP RESPONDENT FROM MAHBUBNAGAR)**

**IN CONTRAST TO THE ABOVE, THE RESPONSES OF THE REPRESENTATIVES FROM JALPAIGURI, KOLKATA AND CHITTOOR DESERVE MENTION:**

**“POLICE HAS VERY IMPORTANT ROLE FOR PROTECTION OF CHILDREN. IF A CHILD IS MISSING WE NEED TO KNOW THE REASON BEHIND IT. LEGAL PROCEDURES SHOULD BE MAINTAINED. THEN ADDRESS SHOULD BE TRACED OUT BY TAKING HELP FROM CWC AND NGOS.” (GRP REPRESENTATIVE FROM JALPAIGURI)**

**“FIRST, PROTECTING CHILDREN IS OUR MAIN RESPONSIBILITY. THEN TALKING TO THE CHILD, WHERE IS HE/SHE COMING FROM AND WHAT IS THE REASON THAT THE CHILD LEFT HOME AND CAME HERE. THEN AFTER GD(GENERAL DIARY) ENTRY, THE CHILD IS REFERRED TO CINI SO THAT CHILD IS SENT TO SAFE SPACE. CHIDLIN 1098- BEING A TOLL FREE NUMBER IS A FACILITY (SUVIDHA) FOR US. SO IF WE MEET A CHILD, WE CALL CHIDLIN. ALSO WHEN PARENTS COME SEARCHING FOR THEIR CHILD (WITH A PHOTO), THEN TOO WE CALL UP CHIDLIN. THEN PARENTS GO TO CHIDLIN TEAM FOR INQUIRY.” (GRP REPRESENTATIVE FROM KOLKATA)**

Emotional reactions of children when they are found on the Station by GRP. Understanding of emotions of children would influence how one responds to them. According to GRP personnel interviewed, children found on railway stations were perceived to be:

- Traumatized
- Frightened on account of not knowing the language
- Scared
- Confused

This perception suggests that the respondents had some interaction with children, and hence probably an understanding of what a child may go through when away from home. These emotional reactions would generally be of those children who are missing or separated from families and also of those children who may have intentionally left home but being in a different place would still have a negative initial impact on them.

### **Procedure/Process/Steps followed when a child comes in contact**

Similar to the case of RPF, in the case of GRP as well, there did not appear to be any protocol which needed to be followed with respect to the children coming in contact with them. However, some of the illustrative processes adopted by them are as follows:

- **Rescued Child:** The process involved sending the child to a safe shelter (Government or Non-Government) through a verbal order of the CWC. Medical or legal process was undertaken by the police but reunification process was taken over by the NGO (Jalpaiguri).
- **Handing over the child to the ChildLine for further intervention (North 24 Parganas, Mahbubnagar).**
- **Child with Addiction:** The process of dealing with them involved referral to local NGO (Kolkata).
- **Unaccompanied Children:** In case of separation of children from families at the railway station itself, the process for making announcement (at the railway station) is followed. If parents were found, then child was handed over to them after proper verification. Direct restoration was undertaken after verifying the documents in case the parents were not found but the child was able to provide the address, and if the address was close by. In case, the child was unable to provide the address or if the residence was far away, then the child was being referred to Childline. (Kolkata)
- The GRP attempted to ascertain preliminary information about the child through rapport formation with the child. If the child was found to be in the need of short stay, the child was being sent to local NGO working at the station and thereafter the process was being taken further by this NGO. However, the GRP was kept informed about the CWC's orders. The restoration process would, in such cases, happen at the NGO centre or at the GRP but in both the cases the CWO (GRP) was present at the time of restoration.

**When the GRP representatives were asked to share examples of reunification work undertaken by them, it became clear that all reunifications were not necessarily happening through the CWC, with the GRP doing some directly, with the intention of hastening the process and to avoid inconvenience to parents. The Mahbubnagar representative shared a case of a child whom the GRP had met in March 2015:**

**“A CHILD CAME FROM A DISTANCE OF APPROX. 3 KM HE HAD NO FOOD, DID NOT HAVE SLIPPERS/FOOTWEAR. FAMILY WAS CONTACTED. FAMILY WAS GOING TO COME IN ONE HOUR. GRP DID DIRECT HOME PLACEMENT. IF THE CHILD IS REFERRED TO CWC TODAY, IT MAY TAKE FEW DAYS. MOREOVER, POOR FAMILY MAY NOT BE ABLE TO COME AGAIN AND AGAIN.”**

The Kolkata representative gave a similar account with the maximum reunifications taking place through GRP itself. Once the child shares the details of the family the GRP calls up the local police station in order to ascertain the family's

details. Further, it was stated that they verify the family's credentials from a representative of a local political party. They felt that this was important in order to ascertain the possibility of the child running away again. Where there is apprehension about the family's background, the child was handed over to Childline through whom the child was produced before the CWC and proper home visit was carried out. This was particularly done in cases where there had been instances of the child running away in the past as well.

#### **Challenges in handling cases of children**

The GRP personnel who were interviewed shared the challenges they faced in dealing with children who came in contact with them. These are as follows:

- Safeguarding children from unlawful activities was one of the challenges. The Jalpaiguri team mentioned that children are involved in stealing from passengers and at times these are precious articles.
- Children who were victims of substance abuse, sexual abuse, etc. (Jalpaiguri, Chittoor)
- Children engaging in begging and on being tracked they try to run and in the process end up harming themselves. (Mahbubnagar)
- Managing small/young children before they are referred to an appropriate agency is challenging since the children keep crying. (North 24 Parganas)
- Challenges in managing girl children since there is no female staff. (North 24 Parganas)
- Referring children who have mental/intellectual disabilities since the homes are already full. (Kolkata)
- Identifying children who are missing or in need at Tirupati Railway Stations was termed as a challenge. The concern was that the child should not get into any problem. (Chittoor)
- Identifying girls who are being trafficked through Sealdah station to Bihar for dancing. Despite informers, the team was finding it difficult to trace individuals who take the girls. (Kolkata)
- In the absence of a separate space for keeping children temporarily, children get exposed to the adults involved in unlawful activities and the process through which they are handled. (Kolkata)
- Work overload which prevents adequate time from being devoted to the child. Consequently, the attempt is to refer the child to the next agency at the earliest. (Kolkata)
- Children returning to the station even after being reunified with the family. (Jalpaiguri)

#### **• District Child Protection Unit (DCPU)**

The District Child Protection Unit has been created in each district as per section 62A of JJ Amendment Act, 2006. It had also been proposed in the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (which was implemented later on from 2009–10) in order to converge the efforts in the area of child protection. Additionally, it is also aimed at building up a district wise data-base on child vulnerabilities and resources. The information regarding the role of DCPU in child reunification is through the interviews that were conducted with the DCPO in Chittoor, Mahbubnagar, North 24 Parganas and Kolkata. The DCPU Chittoor was found to be the only one which was completely staffed. Surprisingly, DCPU Kolkata mentioned CWC among their staff. Although the reasons for this could not be explored due to the respondent's unavailability, this indicates, to the research team, potential misunderstanding that can arise between the DCPU's actual organisational structure vis-à-vis the administrative arrangements for funds disbursement and management. Although the DCPU has fiscal responsibility including for expenses related to CWC's functioning this does not automatically imply the CWC's subordination to it.

#### **Trainings Received**

None except the Chittoor DCPU team reported having received training on child related issues, although the Mahbubnagar team mentioned having participated in several state-level meetings. These meetings could be helpful on their getting updated information. The Chittoor team had been trained in documentation skills (i.e. preparing case studies), gathering information, and conducting interviews. The team members interviewed both in Jalpaiguri and Chittoor Districts had prior experience in the child rights sector before joining the DCPUs. Such specific information is not available about the Kolkata DCPU.

#### **Nature of work being undertaken to reduce child vulnerability**

Based on information from respondents in interviews, this information is being shared district wise below.

##### **Mahbubnagar**

- Adoption
- Sponsorship
- Identification of children living with HIV
- Establishment of village child protection committees
- Interventions to prevent child marriages
- Rescuing children and either reuniting them with their parents or sending them to an institution
- Placing children in hostels through consultation with parents

##### **Jalpaiguri**

- Sponsorship
- IEC material for trafficking, child marriage, POCSO Act, functioning of JJB and CWC
- North 24 Parganas
- Registration of homes under JJ Act
- Regulation of Special Adoption Agencies by cancelling their registration and inviting new applications
- Rehabilitative Sponsorship scheme in application and not preventive sponsorship
- Initiated the process of forming Child Protection Committees through engagement of local Kolkata
- Working towards bringing about a uniformity in the functioning of the Child Care Institutions
- Identification of recipients of sponsorship scheme

##### **Chittoor**

- Taking preventive and response interventions related to child marriage: Guidelines were circulated to marriage halls/Banquets, temple pundits and other relevant individuals through the District Collector regarding the documents they need to verify before they conduct any marriage. In cases where violations are reported to Childline, they contact DCPU who in turn contact the Child Marriage Protection Officers (CMPO) and police for taking action.
- Identifying high-risk mandals and villages in the district vis-à-vis aspects such as child marriage.
- Formation of Village Child Protection Committees
- Help desk at major religious festivals to identify and restore missing children
- Sponsorship
- Adoption
- Stakeholder trainings
- Preparation of child care plan for children appearing before Child Welfare Committee
- In cases where information with respect to child sexual abuse cases is given to DCPU through Childline, DCPU offers legal support and compensation is also channelized through DCPU.

### **Childline**

Childline is a 24-hour, free, emergency phone service for children in need of aid and assistance. Childline, along with responding to emergencies, also links children to services for long-term care and rehabilitation.

### **Procedure/Process adopted in cases of children referred to them**

- In cases where the child was rescued by Childline, they referred the case to CWC and followed the instructions of the CWC (Mahbubnagar). There are also instances where the cases were referred to Childline by the CWC.
- Childline Mahbubnagar also got calls for hostel admission. In these cases, they investigated the economic condition of the family to understand whether hostel facilities should be provided and based upon that the recommendation was being made.
- Childline Mahbubnagar also intervened if a case of child marriage was reported to them by involving all the responsible officials.
- In cases where a call regarding child labour was reported to them, the Childline informed the labour department and visited the site with an enforcement team from the labour department. (Mahbubnagar)
- In cases of children who kept coming to the station, the Siliguri team reported that they were being referred to the NCLP schools (National Child Labour Project run by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India) or an organisation that provided coaching or that functioned as a local club. Children were also being referred to a drop-in centre for children from the station or to a day care centre. The family-strengthening component of a project supported through RC also supported the work of organisation running Childline in conducting interventions with the children.
- Although Alipurduar district had been carved out of Jalpaiguri recently, the Jalpaiguri team was still responding to calls when needed from the Alipurduar areas.

### **Processes adopted in cases of family reunification**

- The Mahbubnagar Childline reported that when they received a call, they investigated whether the address was traceable or not. Further if the reunification process was to happen, then they called the parents to the CWC and after checking of all the documents with respect to the child's identity and if the child wanted to go with the parents, the child was being handed over to the parents. In case where the child did not want to go, the CWC referred the child to a hostel.
- In case of a missing child, the Mahbubnagar Childline reported the matter to the local police station so that the child could be reunified or traced based upon a report filed in any other police station. They also placed advertisements in the newspaper and if the parents contacted them, they were sent to the CWC.
- The Siliguri Childline reported that Home Investigation Report was prepared prior to restoration, a copy of which was given to the CWC and if the child was willing then the child was restored with the family. For restoration in different districts, respective Childline was contacted and they continue to provide updates.
- The Childline Jalpaiguri, went a little further in their mandate to understand whether there was a possibility of the child moving away from the home again. If that was the case, then to the extent possible an attempt was made to address those concerns. This was evidently based on the strengths and larger mandate of their organisation.
- The North 24 Parganas Childline representative mentioned that they initially invest a lot of time in understanding the child and ascertaining what would be in the best interest of the child. Then the child is produced before the CWC. Prior to family reunification a home visit is made to ensure the proper process of reunification. Based on this report CWC takes the decision.

The process followed by Childline at different locations appears to be by and large the same with the exception of Jalpaiguri where efforts are made to address the concerns of the family so that the vulnerability of the child could be reduced and thereby the possibility of the child moving away from the family.

### **Role of Childline in Follow Up after Reunification**

Follow up seemed to be a purely individualised process and did not follow any standard guideline beyond the three months mandate of Childline.

**Mahbubnagar:** In case of placement of a child in a childcare institution, the Childline kept in touch with the superintendent through the DCPU. Follow-up was not done beyond three months as the Childline has a mandate to close the case within three months. Home visits for the purposes of follow-up were made based upon the location of the child. If the child was located close by, home visits were made and in cases where the child was located far away, the follow-up was done through an anganwadi, mandal office, other local NGOs.

**Siliguri** (for Darjeeling District but located near New Jalpaiguri Station): Three follow-ups were done at 15 days, 30 days and then after 60 days. In certain cases, follow-up may be more such as in cases of children who left home intentionally, cases of child labour or sexual abuse cases.

**Jalpaiguri:** Follow up was done after 15–30 days of reunification but by and large it was governed by the need of the child. The team gave an example of a girl who was reunified a year ago but was being followed up since she was being provided a sponsorship through the DCPU.

**North 24 Parganas:** If a child was placed in a shelter home, visits were made by the Childline to expedite the child's returning home. The Childline also coordinated with Childline teams in other districts so as to be able to locate the address of the child.

### **• Special Juvenile Police Unit (SJPU)**

This research included police personnel designated as JWO (or CWOs) from police stations in the selected districts. In cases where there was no designated CWO/JWO, any available staff was interviewed to understand their perspectives and interventions with children.

### **Trainings on child rights issues**

Trainings were reported as an ongoing process at Jalpaiguri on various child rights issues. The SJPU (JAPU), Chennai reported one-day trainings on child rights, protection of children, role of police in child protection under JJ Act and POCSO Act. The North 24 Parganas reported a special workshop on JJB and Child Protection issues for two days. The Chittoor JWO reported that he had not received any trainings and he attributed it to his tenure, which had been six months at the time of the interview. The Kolkata SJPU in-charge mentioned that several trainings had been organised covering trafficking, POCSO, JJ Act. SANLAAP, Central Detective Training School, CINI and International Justice Mission had conducted these trainings in Kolkata. The CWO in Kolkata mentioned about the 1-2 days trainings related to child labour, child marriage, trafficking, and sexual abuse.

### **Perception of Responsibilities towards children**

The Jalpaiguri JWO felt that their foremost responsibility was to provide safe custody to a rescued child and to thereafter inform the CWC. The Chennai JWO felt that their role was also in rescuing children who were in need of care and protection and those who were in conflict with law. Further they also saw it as their role to support children's families and other JJ Stakeholders. CWO from Kolkata stated following to be her responsibilities towards children: child care and protection, engaging in rescue operations, production of children in front of to CWC and JJB, case profiling and family visit, and family counselling. The Chittoor JWO, due to the location that received a high volume of pilgrims, was involved in conducting special drives on streets and other crowded locations to identify children who were orphans, those who were in conflict with law, those who had left home and children who were in other kinds of risks. The identified children are linked to NGOs and other child-care centres. Month-wise data collection regarding these identified children was also undertaken by each of the JWOs for their jurisdictions.

### Procedure/Process Followed when child comes in Contact

**Jalpaiguri:** Subsequent to rescuing a child the parents of the child were informed and Childline was also intimated. Citing an example to this effect, the JWO reported a case of sexual abuse that was lodged under POCSO Act. With the help of a female police personnel, the victim was taken for a medical examination and after registration of the case, was staying at her home with her parents at the time of this research.

**Chennai:** The team reported regular patrolling areas around bus terminals, railway stations, beach, parks, malls and theatres to look out for child without adult support. Once a child was rescued, they were brought to their centre where background information regarding the child was obtained. Subsequently, caregivers of the child were informed and depending upon the nature of the case the child was presented before the CWC/JJB. They did not undertake direct reunification but informed the parents where the contact details could be ascertained and asked them to visit the CWC.

The team mentioned facing challenges when they rescue child labour and coming across cases of child sexual abuse or children with disabilities. Getting their medical examination done and placing children with intellectual disability (the phrase 'children with special needs' was used in the interview schedule) in specialised centres was challenging especially due the lack of such centres for these children. However, although there were centres for children with other disabilities/impairments and these were used by SJPU and CWC when needed. For children in conflict with law, the work began from initial information collection to presenting the child before the JJB. The process of family investigation was also carried out by them. They mentioned that even while they felt they needed to work very closely with the Probation Officers, they were not able to do so and restricted themselves to cases of a serious nature.

**North 24 Parganas:** The JWO reported that the cases of children were being monitored by him but otherwise being handled by the respective Investigating Officer. He had additionally taken on the initiative of providing books to children since he was very fond of books himself.

**Chittoor:** The process adopted by the team was more or less similar to the other places. For a child in need of care and protection, they initially tried and ascertained the address and if they were able to do so, they reunited the child with the family. In other cases, after production before the CWC, the children were sent to homes. It is, however, not very clear whether they were informing the CWC in all cases whether they did any direct reunifications.

**Kolkata:** It was clear that the SJPU produced children (in need of care and protection) before the CWC, although it was not clear whether they also directly reunified children. The CWO did, however, mention that they engaged with families. The CWO also described a slightly different process for cases related to child marriage, which were treated as cases of kidnapping. An FIR is registered and the girl is rescued. After medical assessment, the case is referred to an NGO-run home. Further, directions are taken from the CWC or—in case it is not a working day for CWC—the victim is produced in a magistrate's court. If the child's guardian so desires, and if the CWC orders, the girl is handed over to the guardian. There are, however, instances when they find that the girl is almost around 18 years old and has married someone who might be favourable for her. In such cases then no case was being registered.

### Challenges

- Kolkata respondent mentioned that the hospitals frequently asked for FIR prior to medical aid. This was perceived to be unethical by her.
- The Chennai team reported facing challenges in finding specialised centres to address needs of children with disability.
- Children not being able to recall their address. (Jalpaiguri)
- Language issues in case of children coming in from other States or from the adivasi community. (Jalpaiguri)
- Chennai JWO mentioned not having space for interacting with children until recently.

### • Child Care Institutions (CCIs)<sup>2</sup>

This research included Child Care institutions from the following districts: Chittoor, Mahbubnagar, Jalpaiguri, North 24 Parganas, and Chennai. Among 9 Homes for children covered, 8 Homes were Government-run, and 1 was being run by an NGO. While 5 of these institutions were for girls, 4 were for boys. The numbers of children reunified from each home were as follows:

- In a home with 60 children; 16 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 13 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (March 2015)
- In a home with 70 children; 47 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 33 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (March 2015)
- In a home with 60 children; no new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 2-3 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (March 2015)
- In a home with 48 children; 24 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 20 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (April 2015)
- In a home with 75 children; 80 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 53 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (April 2015)
- In a home with 130 children; 53 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 40 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (April 2015)
- In a home with 80 children; 35 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 24 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (April 2015)
- In a home with 198 children; 38 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 43 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (May 2015)
- In a home with 74 children; 82 new children admitted from 1 January 2015; and 54 children reunified from 1 January 2015. (April 2015)

### Processes in place for children referred to the institution

In all the homes, children were being admitted with CWC order. Some of the homes, however, also accommodated children in conflict with law for short term (Chittoor) or long term (North 24 Parganas, Jalpaiguri), who came through the Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) order. Children were being brought to the Homes (along with CWC order) by Childline, DCPU team, Police, or NGO staff.

In Chittoor, when children came in according to a CWC order, then the process started with a medical checkup. After this, they were sent to the Reception Unit (RC unit) and kept here for observation (and separately from children who were already in the home). Children who did not fall under the jurisdiction of this district home (for example children from other districts or states) were kept in the RC unit until they were transferred to a home within their home district. Process followed in Mahbubnagar was also similar. However, they also mentioned that when DCPU or Childline came with a formal letter/CWC order, then Home staff also follows the practice of calling up CWC before admitting children. If children were found to carry any money along with them, the Home kept it safely and gave it back when the child was reunified.

As a part of the Process, taking a photograph of the child at the time of admission was also mentioned by Jalpaiguri Home. Once at home, the child was provided with clothes and food, and other needs, if any, were also addressed. This was followed by making a profile (documentation) of the child and engaging him in the counselling process. If the address of child was traced, then this was followed by a home visit (by the NGOs—two are working in this home) and reunification. Else, the child was provided with long-term shelter and also admitted in a regular school.

Although a process similar to the one shared above was described by an NGO-run home as well, the respondent of this home also mentioned that

**'CHILDREN ARE FREE TO MOVE IN THE HOME AND MAKE FRIENDS WITH OTHER RESIDENTS AS THEY CAN GET FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE IN THE HOME.'**

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'Homes' and 'Child Care Institutions' are being used interchangeably

This suggested how environment of the home was considered important for children by this stakeholder. While the Government run home at Jalpaiguri accommodated children in need of care and protection and children in conflict with law in separate wings, the same was not found to be true for the home for girls in North 24 Parganas. Here, children were reported to be segregated only age wise.

Children when admitted, were given a welcome kit, offered time to take bath and provided with food. After that basic information about child was obtained for official purpose. The child was then referred to a Resource Centre (run by NGO) for further intervention where children were engaged through various participatory activities including group sessions, life skills, peer education and recreation. Detailed case profile was prepared for every child by the Resource Centre team and further intervention was planned based on information gathered.

The kinds of groups mentioned in the Chennai Home were also run in some of the other Homes covered in this research. Such groups, however, were being primarily run by an NGO, similar to the scenario in the Chennai Home.

It is also important to note that the process of admission for boys' home in Chennai was different from the home for girls—primarily due to the absence of NGO-run resource centre there. The Home for girls, however had two residential facilities namely the reception (Short Stay) and the cottage (Long-term Care). Children admitted into this home were also admitted in the school functioning within the premises. Information about the child's admission was shared with Probation officer who was responsible for conducting the Social Investigation Report (SIR). Admissions into the home were for at least 3 yrs based on the concerns that need to be addressed for admitted girls.

**“THE ASST. SUPERINTENDENT ENTERS THE CHILD’S NAME ALONG WITH THE P.S. (POLICE STATION) ADDRESS IN THE ADMISSION REGISTER. JUNIOR SOCIAL WORKER OR STAFF PRESENT GENERALLY TAKES INFORMATION ABOUT THE CHILD (PRIMARY INFORMATION CONSISTING OF 12 POINTS) IN A FORMAT. WE ASK THE CHILD WHETHER SHE HAS ANY MONEY OR MOBILE OR ANY GOLD JEWELLERY OR ANY COSTLY THING WITH HER. IF WE FIND ANYTHING, WE KEEP THAT THING IN OUR CUSTODY AND MENTION IT IN THE REGISTER. WHEN THE CHILD IS REUNIFIED OR TRANSFERRED THAT TIME WE RETURN IT BACK TO HER. AFTER THAT THE CHILD IS HANDED OVER TO THE CARE GIVERS (MATRON, ASSISTANT MATRONS).” THE PROCESS OF ADMISSION OR INDUCTION SEEMED MORE CHILD FRIENDLY IN THE CHENNAI-BASED HOME (FOR BOYS)**



#### Problems that children faced

- Resource shortages: Many of the CCIs reported that they faced resource shortages. These commonly included shortage of clothes, shoes, soap and toothpaste. There were negligible, if any, resources to provide girls with sanitary protection. While some organisations made these available on an ad-hoc basis, they might not be available throughout. There were no entertainment facilities, e.g. TV, in the homes. In many cases there were shortages related to food or lack of appropriate food according to age and nutritional needs of the children.
- Medical issues: There were inadequate medical facilities in the home, with many homes not having a doctor on call. This was especially a problem when medical emergencies occurred at night. Visits of doctors at the Home ranged from weekly to monthly. In one of the bigger institutions, need was perceived by staff for a doctor who would stay on campus.
- Lack of engaging activities: One of the Homes in North 24 Parganas mentioned that there were not enough activities to cater to the varied needs of children of differing ages. This manifested in boredom amongst the children. In the absence of age-appropriate activities such as studying/ vocational training, etc., children were not adequately prepared for returning to school or taking up work when they left the homes.
- Age-related limitations: In one of the homes in Mahbubnagar, there was no option for vocational training. If a child completed class 10th, they were sent for further studies to Hyderabad as children could stay here only up to 15 years of age.
- Adjusting to home environment: Many children faced difficulties in adjusting to the environment in the home. This was perceived to manifest in difficult behaviours such as greater aggression and fighting amongst peers and bullying of younger children. The problem was further accentuated by the fact that there was inadequate staff to pay attention to the needs of all children.
- Use of physical violence against children was also reported in two homes. Sexual abuse was also reported (not directly by the respondents) in one of the homes.
- Information about release from home, in some cases: In one of the homes (West Bengal), it was reported (by an NGO working there) that when child entered the institution, generally no information in terms of induction was given. For example, one girl got admitted at the age of 17 years and was above 20 years of age at the time of this research. Although she asked about her reason to be kept there, she was not informed. The NGO later got to know that she was a witness in a rape case and hence was being kept in a secure location. Nothing was being done for her education or livelihoods.

#### The Process of Reunification

The reunification process began with a counsellor meeting the child. This was done in order to build a relationship with the child; find out the reasons for the child being away from home; and to find out information, e.g. address, about the family and child's background, etc. In the homes covered in this research, the person talking to children as a counsellor or psychosocial support worker could be from the Home, or DCPU or an NGO working at the Government Home. If the child shared an address then this was reported to the concerned agency (generally the organisation that is working on reunification of children in the home) so that their team could conduct a home visit to determine whether it would be suitable for the child to return to the family. They then produced the home visit report or Social Investigation Report (SIR) on the basis of this visit. In most cases, homes seemed to have limited staff and this task was usually entrusted to the probation officer or to NGOs working in the home. The home also took the help of Childline, the DCPU, local police stations or the CWC to trace the address. In case of an NGO-run home, reunification process was largely done by them only as they perceived Childline to have a lot of work pressure.

As a parallel process, in one case, the home also reported that they were attempting to re-establish children's links with their families by calling the families to visit the child at least once in three months (if the child is at the home over a long period). In some homes, pending reunification, children were also involved in group activities through which process the home/NGO staff could elicit further information about their background.

Once the visit report was available then a meeting was held with the DCPU, Home In-charge and NGOs to discuss whether or not to recommend family reunification. The report was presented to the CWC, either by the NGO involved in the home visit or the home authorities. Once the CWC gave an instruction for reunification, then the family could be called directly to the home to take their child.

There were also examples where, as a part of the pre-release preparation, home authorities called the child's family to meet them after getting the reunification orders. At that stage, they once more asked the child whether they know the family and wished to return with them. Only after the child reconfirmed this does the home staff helped them to pack their bags.

Government Home in Mahbubnagar reported that they were not involved in the reunification process at all with this process being overseen entirely by the DCPU. Several homes reported that children who were from other districts or states were usually transferred as soon as possible to their home districts/states but this transfer sometimes took time.

Reunification did not always happen in a smooth and predictable manner. Many times, this process required a lot of effort and diverse methods. Following were few examples of the reunification processes found in this research:

- In the cases of children who were from Bangladesh (especially in West Bengal) the reunification process sometimes took a long time. In the case of one child, in which no order was passed, the NGO (that was running the Home) brought up her situation in a 'Janswarth' before the High Court. The court ordered that the local authorities should approach the Bangladesh High Commission so that her reunification could be expedited. Although the process still took more time, she was eventually sent home.
- In another case, when children from the home went on a visit to the zoo, a woman at the zoo was able to recognise a child (10-year-old girl) whose address had not been traced thus far. They found out the address through this person who had recognised the child. One of the NGOs working in the home found, on conducting a home visit, that the family environment would be unsuitable for this girl. The CWC accordingly directed that the child should continue to stay at the home and not sent back home.
- In the case of an out-state child who was unable to share his address except for the village name, the CWC, Childline as well as the local police were all unable to trace the family. The NGO working at the home sent a letter to the postmaster at the village. He was able to trace the address through the panchayat and found out that the child's family had moved to the neighbouring village a couple of months previously. The child was reunified soon after this.
- Reunification, however, may not always be necessarily possible. For example, a young girl had been living in a Home since three years. She had leprosy. She was from another district and parents could not be traced. In cases where the reunification had been pending for a long time then the home had to wait for the CWC's order regarding the child. However, on some occasions, the home authorities had to take the initiative to constantly raise the case with the CWC. For example, an NGO-run home in Jalpaiguri also took initiative to liaise directly with the police stations or the local (district) administration in the child's domicile area to find out more about the child's family/household. All homes reported that during this time of waiting for CWC orders, the child was involved in activities in the home. Where the facilities were available, the children were given life skills or soft skills training and if vocational training facilities were available then they were encouraged to join those as well. Children were also engaged in study classes if these were available in the home itself.
- Challenges pertaining to reunification processes
- Respondents shared the following challenges in the process of reunification of children.

- The first challenge that home authorities mention is that of tracing the address. This was especially difficult if the child was very young and could not remember their address or house location; if the family had moved from the area; if the family was a part of a migrant/floating population; or if the child was from another state and nobody was able to communicate effectively with the child.
- In some cases of older children, they refused to divulge their addresses or gave incorrect ones. It was possible that because they had left home on purpose due to a particular reason, they might not be willing to go back home soon. This might be especially true in the girls' cases. It was reported that where the child did not want to return home, this resistance sometimes manifested itself in harmful behaviours, such as cutting oneself, or fighting with other children.
- Sometimes the family was unwilling to take the child back. This was more so in the case of girls. In one instance, an 8-year-old out-state girl refused to share her address over a period of time and also did not want to be transferred to her home state. The CWC acquiesced with the request allowing her to stay on at the Government home for some years. Upon completing her education, she finally wanted to be reunified and her family was eventually traced. By this time, however, they refused to take her back even when they were told that she had been in a Government home for years.
- Few respondents in Jalpaiguri district felt that presence of Ad-Hoc CWC instead of a regular one, was disadvantageous for children. As this Ad-Hoc committee was working under pressure, their decisions did not seem to be always helpful for children.

#### • **NGOs involved in first contact and reunification**

The information presented here is based on interviews with six organisations.

#### **How do children come in contact with NGOs**

Based on interviews with NGOs, it emerged that children come in contact with organisations through the following mechanisms:

- Outreach team at station. One of the organisations stated that they take support of RPF and GRP (because they are uniformed) when they are unable to persuade children to come with them. Another organisation also reported that they take support from RPF and other stakeholders in their jointly planned field visits to strongly persuade children on platform, especially the ones engaged in addiction, to access services and treatment.
- Through Childline
- Local police station, GRP, and RPF
- Older boys that organisations may have worked with
- Vendors, coolies and others on railway station
- Drop in centre (near railway station) and Help desks/booths (on platforms) being run by the organisations
- Work of RC partner organisation at the Government home. CINI, Praajak, CONC'RN, CHES and Sathi are working in Government homes. While some organisations focus on facilitating quicker reunification, some also focus on psychosocial interventions at group level.

#### **Process followed when children come in contact with organisation staff**

Given below is a description of various components or steps in the process taken forward after staff comes in contact with a child.

### First contact with children

- **Contact at the railway station:** Outreach team at platform generally first tries to make the child comfortable, build rapport and assess their immediate needs and concerns that can be met by the team. For example, needs such as food are immediately met. One of the organisations also takes photographs of the children immediately. In case of a child with addiction, or someone who has left home on multiple occasions, one of the organisations refers them directly to CWC so that they can be sent to a Government Institution. The organisation then works with these children at the Government home instead of bringing them to their own shelter home. It is important to note that work with children engaged in substance abuse has been described as challenging by many respondents. Some organisations also run booths for children to access information or support; these booths are staffed around the clock, 24 hours a day. Some organisations also update previous records of children who they come into contact on multiple occasions. At Sealdah, NJP and Tirupati, it was found that help-desks were functioning. It should be noted that Sealdah and NJP are amongst the stations which have been selected to be monitored for child rights in the SoP dated March 2015. Amongst other activities Child Help groups are to be set up at these stations. Additionally, one NGO is to be selected to oversee and monitor these activities at each of these stations.
- **Early interventions with children from nearby areas:** Some organisations also carry out early interventions with children from nearby areas who are found at the station and want to go home. As part of this they complete a vulnerability assessment (also used in family strengthening process mentioned later) for the child and family. Some organisations have created a vulnerability assessment form/format to document the information from this process. The main themes under which (one of the organisations) the information is documented are: child's physical health status; child's safety in their environment; family's overall health status; child's mental health status; availability of identity and asset ownership documents; and access to government welfare entitlements. These indicators are treated as a baseline for future (post-reunification) reference (RC, 2014a). Information about all children who are contacted through this process is sent to CWC retrospectively.
- **Contact at Government Home:** Some organisations, by virtue of their work at Government Homes, come in contact with children there. Most of the organisations work individually with children to build rapport, trace their address and complete documentation related to these children so that the homes can take necessary steps as recommended by NGO. Two organisations, however, also work with children in groups as well and focus on more children than just the ones who need to be reunified immediately. The focus of these two organisations hence has also been on improving care and protection processes for children in Homes. One of the organisations shared how visits and interventions by outsiders (such as NGOs) at the Government Homes can make a difference because then Homes also become sensitised towards need for change and making environment habitable for children.
- **Children accessing NGO-run centre/shelter:** Most of the outreach teams working on the platforms, however, bring children to their drop-in centre or shelter. They build rapport and understand child's background, difficulties faced after leaving home, the reasons for leaving home. They also attempt to find address of the child. When child communicates address or phone number of the child, then the organisation call up parents or contact them through local police station and ask them to come. In some cases, Childline's help may also be taken to trace the child's family or address. At locations, where organisations are also running drop-in or short-stay centres, child is also involved in activities such as art and craft, and informal education. Individual and group level activities (e.g. Ehsaas<sup>3</sup> module, life skills sessions) are used with children for the purpose of encouraging them to share their reasons for having left home, their families/

**TALKING ABOUT WHAT WOULD BE HELPFUL FOR CHILDREN IN NGO-RUN CENTRES, R4BSD SAID, "IT WILL BE GOOD IF UNCLE AUNTY [I.E. STAFF AT THE CENTRE] TELL THEM [CHILDREN], 'IF THERE IS ANY PROBLEM THAT YOU FACE HERE YOU MUST COME AND TELL US. IF SOMEONE IS TROUBLING YOU LET US KNOW AND WE WILL HELP YOU.' THIS WILL BE GOOD FOR THE CHILDREN."**

backgrounds, and to help them decide a future course of action. Individual psychosocial support/counselling process is also undertaken to help the child prepare or become open to going back home. During this time, a parallel step is to produce the child in front of CWC. For children who are found to have mental health difficulties, such as addiction, the NGO attempts to ensure that child gets referred to institutional care so that the difficulties can be worked with.

- **Process of production of children in front of CWC** is not uniform for all children at all locations. For example, in one of the CWCs in Delhi the NGO produces every child met within 24 hours. However, in another CWC, child is not produced if his/her address is traced within 2-3 days of stay at the NGO-run shelter. In such cases, child is reunified directly with the family and CWC is informed retrospectively at the end of the month. A similar process seems to have been followed by the NGO at another location as well—from where children included in this research were reported to have been reunified without CWC's involvement (although CWC is generally informed retrospectively). One of the organisations in West Bengal refers all out-of-state children to CWC. However, for local children, a different process is followed. Local children whose address is traced or where parents come to the centre (if their child is here), they are handed over directly to parents care from the centre itself after documents are checked. CWC is then informed retrospectively. In addition to this, children who may be accessing drop-in centre frequently but not ready to go home, they are not produced in front of CWC. Instead, a list with information about these children is shared with CWC monthly. Parallel to this, however, the organisation continues to work with the child, traces the address if possible and conducts home visits to assess the situation as well as inform parents about location of their children. In such cases, parents of children may also be called at the centre to meet children. If the child then agrees to go with family, then reunification takes place from the centre. In case, parents refuse to take the child, then he/she is referred to CWC. A child can stay at the drop-in centre for up to three months in this organisation. Another organisation in West Bengal, similar to the one above, too shares the list of children accessing the drop-in centres, as per CWC's direction, at regular intervals instead of producing each child who may be accessing the centre but is not ready to go home. For children produced in front of CWC, often the NGO involved is also asked to prepare home investigation reports, support reunification as well as follow-up. In cases, where during home visit (Home investigation report-HIR), the organisation finds that family is poor or would be unable to take care of the child, then the organisation recommends (in report) the child to be referred to a CCI closer to home/in the same district.

Childline is invariably involved in the address/family tracing and reunification of all out-of-state/district children. Sometimes they may be involved at an earlier stage by the concerned organisation itself or failing this, CWC would involve them.

### Reunification process:

According to proceedings of a Knowledge Sharing Workshop of RC partner NGOs in February 2012, reunification was emphasised to be a multipronged process with following as its key elements: consent of child, commitment of family and community towards children, proactive civil society organisations ensuring that children are safe within families, and community-based child-oriented systems (RC, 2012). In this research, all organisations interviewed engage in individual and group level interventions with children as part of their preparation for reunification. They also reported to have adequate human resources as well as planned activities to do so. All organisations emphasised on child's choices and participation in decision making about going home. One of the organisations strongly felt that children should be provided with needed skills (literacy, vocational skills) where possible before reunification.

<sup>3</sup> 'Ehsaas' was conceptualised as a national training programme of RC. It is a training programme of psychosocial support focused on building self-esteem and addressing issues of sexuality in street children (RC, n.d.). According to RC India, Ehsaas modules have been found to be helpful by partner organisations as behaviour modification tools in working with children. Interactions with children through these modules ensure space to children to share about their families, to take decisions regarding going home and/or planning for needs such as education, vocational training, etc. Application of these modules also helps in addressing specific issues in families like addiction, domestic violence, abuse of children, etc

Preparation for reunification also includes engaging some children in a structured camp as is done by one organisation. This involves selecting children who are perceived to resist/or are not ready to be reunified. They spend time in a four-weeks long camp where they are involved in various activities. The aim is to help them recognise the need to return home. The activities are geared towards equipping with skills that will prepare them for their future lives (for details, please see Harper & Iyer, 2013).

In cases where the family comes to take their child from an organisation-run home, the concerned organisation may reimburse their travel expenses. One of the organisations always gives their own organisation detail and Childline number to all children and families with whom they come into contact. They also give an inland letter to the family which they request the family to send back; this has pre-written questions about the status of the child which the family is requested to fill up and return at a later date.

**Challenges in reunification are faced** in terms of language barrier (if child uses a different language than the NGO staff), time spent with child in gathering accurate information (some children may not want to share and some may not have the capacity due to age or disability), difficulty in working with children with intellectual disability, and finding escort for children who is needed to be sent to another state. One of the organisations managed language barrier issue by having a ready network of volunteers with multiple language skills. This helped in communicating with children coming from several parts of the country. One organisation also shared that security of staff may also be a challenge during reunification. For example, when taking a young child back home, the local community thought that the team member was the person who had kidnapped the child and therefore almost attacked him. Another organisation talked about the need for heightened sensitivity when tracing families of girl children especially so that community did not become aware of the purpose of the visit and that a girl had left home. This was considered to be important because of the much greater stigma that attends to girls leaving home.

Many of these challenges had also been reported in Knowledge Sharing Workshop of RC partner organisations in February 2012 (RC, 2012). Another challenge reported in that workshop was related to reunification of children from migrant families as their addresses were often temporary. Reunification of children who did not have parents or those who were living with adoptive families (with informal arrangement instead of legal adoption) was also considered a challenge by Partner NGOs in that workshop. This was due to the concerns related to future uncertainties regarding the care of these children.

**Interaction with parents:** Two organisations reported their involvement with parents before reunification. In conversation with parents before reunification, the organisation tries to understand parents' perspectives related to the incident of child leaving home. Reflective discussions are held with parents about child's needs, addressing factors that contributed to child leaving home and actions for preventing another incident of child leaving home. Documents (related to identity and address) brought by parents are also checked. Some organisations, however, engage with parents more through their family-strengthening component of the project or at the time of follow-up. Through this process there is also an effort to identify families' for specific forms of support so that they can be linked to suitable resources; this too forms part of the reunification plan (RC, 2014a).

**Follow-up process:** Follow-up with reunified children involves contacting child and his/her family, assessing situation of child at the time of follow-up, assessing needs of child or family that can be met based on information that emerges through follow-up. All the organisations follow-up for at least one year, at present. This generally includes four follow-ups at varying intervals. In some cases follow-up may continue for longer than one year/exceed four follow-ups as per the child's needs. One organisation shared that sometimes children also call back and continue to be in touch with staff after the follow-up has been formally closed (in 1 years' time generally). This information of child calling up, however, is not always recorded in files. Accessing documentation on a child, in some cases it was found, also becomes

challenging when each unit (working on different components) keeps their documents separate and collation of information does not happen in one location. One of the organisations reported that files of children reunified more than 5 years ago were not available.

Challenges in follow-ups arise in cases where a reunified child is far from an NGO's location, especially in a different state where language too may be different. NGOs generally deal with this challenge by using phone calls as a medium of follow-up, taking support of other NGOs who may be working in child's home state, and taking Childline's support if possible.

Some organisations also have a Family Strengthening component as part of the follow-up process. This involves assessing the family's emerging needs (generally using Vulnerability Assessment form) through home visits and planning intervention accordingly. However, one organisation uses this process to consist largely of helping the family to access documents (e.g. Aadhar card) and government welfare schemes. They also accompany families, if needed, to Panchayat so that they can apply for different schemes. They also link people with other NGOs for specific support. Although specific team members are involved in the family strengthening, discussions are also held with the outreach team to decide on the specific aspects and length of this process. Discussions on emerging needs of different families help them in planning monthly visits. The team also shared about recent awareness raising activities in communities, e.g. Childline.

One organisation shared an example of their family strengthening process. This particular girl, who was 10 years old at first contact, left home on multiple occasions. The team discovered that she did not get adequate attention from her parents as they were both not at home during the day. She also did not share a close relationship with her siblings as they did not play with her. The team then discussed with the mother how she could arrange to spend more time with her daughter. As a result of this discussion the mother decided to close down her tea shop and stay at home. This resulted in preventing the girl from leaving home again. The organisation discussed alternative home-based work (e.g. making paper packets at the rate of 20 per kilogram) with the mother, although these did not ultimately work out. The father's income had increased recently. Although this example suggests that engagement with family was useful in making changes that sustained the child in family, it also suggests that without stronger community-based systems to support care of children (e.g. crèches or day care centres for children who have working parents), family cannot be supported to the extent it deserves. In this example, family had to choose between forgoing a livelihood option and hence living with lower income in order to make care more available for the child. This suggests the need to re-emphasise on the following aspect that had already been part of discussions at a Knowledge sharing workshop of RC partner NGOs in 2014: 'family strengthening in order to succeed needs intensive work at various levels, often simultaneously' (RC, 2014a, p. 6)

**Post-reunification community engagement:** Some of the RC partners have taken the initiative to mobilise community level volunteer groups to involve them in the follow-up and monitoring process. They can help with address tracing, raise awareness about child rights, advocate with local systems, e.g. schools for admission or the local panchayat for enrolling families in government schemes. Praajak, for instance, which has initiated such interventions started what it calls 'civil society pressure groups' for this purpose, also involving existing women's self-help groups (SHGs) and youth groups in the process. This helps to build an awareness base in the community. The organisation Ehsaas has mobilised community volunteers while Balsakha also motivates the community to voice its needs (RC, 2014a).

#### **How has the process changed over years**

It emerged that while earlier CWC was not always involved by NGOs in the reunification process, it is now being involved much more. One organisation shared that earlier some children, who were assessed as being capable, were also sent home on their own. This practice was no longer being followed. Follow-up process had also been streamlined and strengthened along with documentation.

**Needs of teams:** Interviews with NGOs indicated that while each of them has strengths that others (other NGOs) could learn from, there were also few areas, which needed to be strengthened. For example, some organisations talked about need for capacity building on dealing with children engaged in substance abuse and those with disabilities. Understanding about mental health needs and capacity to screening a family (or being able to refer them for screening) for treatment of psychiatric disorders also emerged. This finding is in alignment with the following needs that emerged in the Knowledge Sharing Workshop of RC partner NGOs in 2014: capacity building on 'vulnerability assessment' and 'family strengthening' (RC, 2014a). As the outreach team seemed to be the backbone of interventions at several organisations, focus on their needs, capacities and burn out is essential. Burnout was evident in one of the teams that were interviewed.<sup>4</sup> It was evident that their focus on multiple tasks at the same time had potential to impact their continuity in work with children. Staff leaving suddenly or their prolonged absence without information would impact lives of children. Hence the NGO, in this case, probably needs to take up urgent measures.

One of the areas of concern for us was over-dependence on one strategy of psychosocial support (e.g. Ehsaas module) in one of the organisations. It emerged that this is also being used with adults even though other strategies could have been used to assess and address needs. Additionally, application of specific sessions was assumed to have addressed needs instead of the staff recognising that work/intervention can often involve more than one conversation on issues such as anger. This suggests further capacity building of certain teams on mental health interventions, which has already been expressed as a need (in terms of counselling) in a Knowledge Sharing Workshop of RC partner NGOs in 2014. As this research did not study the use of Ehsaas toolkit and its application in depth, our finding and reflection is based only on examples shared by one of the partner NGOs regarding its use.

Additionally, documentation patterns, although strengthened over the years, still need to be reviewed. This is suggested by the fact that some children/individuals could not be traced due to incomplete address or the fact that the location did not exist. Not being able to write name of district in the records accurately also made a significant difference. Also, collation of information about reunified children traced in this research was difficult at some locations as it was kept in different files/locations or with different teams.

It is also important to mention that one of the organisations had already initiated a process of different project teams reviewing each other's processes and giving inputs. This may be useful in other large organisations as well if found to be practical.

#### **NGOS: SOME USEFUL PROCESSES**

- **VOLUNTEER TEAM TO ADDRESS LANGUAGE BARRIER (WITH CHILDREN FROM DIFFERENT STATES)**
- **AT GOVERNMENT HOME, FOCUS ON IMPROVING CARE AND PROTECTION PROCESSES FOR CHILDREN. RECOGNITION THAT VISITS AND INTERVENTIONS BY OUTSIDERS (SUCH AS NGOS) CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE SENSITIZING HOMES TOWARDS NEED FOR CHANGE AND MAKING ENVIRONMENT HABITABLE FOR CHILDREN.**
- **FOR FOLLOW UP-TAKING SUPPORT OF OTHER NGOS WHO MAY BE WORKING IN CHILD'S HOME STATE, AND TAKING CHILD LINE'S SUPPORT IF POSSIBLE.**
- **EARLY INTERVENTIONS WITH CHILDREN FROM NEARBY AREAS (INCLUDING VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT).**
- **VULNERABILITY ASSESSMENT TOOL AND PROCESS (HELPS LOOK AT FACTORS BEYOND REASON REPORTED BY CHILD).**
- **INVOLVEMENT WITH PARENTS BEFORE REUNIFICATION.**
- **FAMILY STRENGTHENING COMPONENT, WHICH HAS POTENTIAL TO BE STRENGTHENED.**
- **PROCESS OF DIFFERENT PROJECT TEAMS (WITHIN AN ORGANISATION) REVIEWING EACH OTHER'S PROCESSES AND GIVING INPUTS.**

Every stakeholder who comes in contact with child has the potential to influence that child's journey. It is therefore, important for each stakeholder to be aware of their role and be prepared to respond to a child's needs as much as possible. Analysis of interviews with stakeholders suggests that the child protection systems have been strengthened over a period of time. Each stakeholder group tries to do what they can when they come in contact with a child who seems to be away from home (and visibly not from the geographical area where stakeholder may be based). The depth of intervention, however, seems to vary with various factors: what they perceive as their responsibilities towards children, their organisation's/institution's/agency's mandate, their skills, volume of children that they deal with in an everyday manner, level of burnout, level of association with NGOs working with children, and resources (human, financial, infrastructural) available with them. In order to make the environment protective and responsive towards children, all these factors need to be considered.



<sup>4</sup> According to RC (2014b), measures in the form of certain modules (e.g. Samyak) have been taken forward to build upon their strengths and address burnout issues among team members of partner organisations. The observation of research team at one of the organisations suggests that burnout was possibly linked with team/organisational processes instead of only personal capacities of staff to deal with stress.

## 5. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**“WHEN NOTHING SEEMS TO HELP, I GO AND LOOK AT A STONECUTTER HAMMERING AWAY AT HIS ROCK, PERHAPS A HUNDRED TIMES WITHOUT AS MUCH AS A CRACK SHOWING IN IT. YET AT THE HUNDRED AND FIRST BLOW IT WILL SPLIT IN TWO, AND I KNOW IT WAS NOT THAT LAST BLOW THAT DID IT, BUT ALL THAT HAD GONE BEFORE.”**

– Jacob A. Riis

Understanding what works or what would work to create change requires one to look at the processes and trajectories across time. Change may not come with just one intervention or an action/activity. It requires several steps and several stakeholders. This is evident from the quote of Jacob A. Riis shared above. We may need complex set of interventions for complex problems. Along with this, there is a need to implement capability among agencies and institutions that carry out interventions; and contextual compatibility of these interventions (Woolcock, 2016). With this perspective, recommendations have been presented here for state and non-state stakeholders on how to create an environment that sustains the reunified children's continuity with their families. Based on the findings that emerged, it was relevant to focus not just on a child's continuity with their family post-reunification, but also to look at the larger picture and focus on recommendations that were perceived to be necessary to create an environment that promotes children's survival and development, and protection and participation.

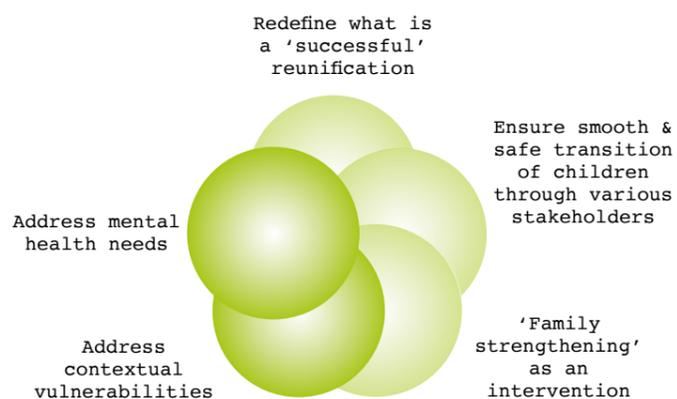
The recommendations shared in this section are based on deliberations of a workshop held on 28–29 September 2015 with RC and the following partner NGOs that were part of this research: CHES, CINI, CONC'RN, GRASM, Praajak, and SATHI. Concomitant to the process of sharing and discussions on findings of this research, deliberations on each of the nine reflections/questions took place over two days of the workshop.

### • Reviewing and Redefining Successful Reunification

Retention of contact with family does not in itself amount to a successful reunification. A reunification process can be termed 'successful' if it includes the following aspects as well:

- o It is based on a thorough understanding of the child's needs and their context.
- o It occurs with the involvement of key stakeholders, such as the CWC.
- o It ensures that the child participates in decision-making about the future course of action.
- o It involves active work (and follow-ups) with the child and the family, based on their needs, strengths, and vulnerabilities.
- o When all (including community-based) stakeholders function effectively and provide information and support to children and their families where needed. Resources and systems in a child's context are functional and accessible.
- o It creates options for child, i.e. the child is able to pursue their interests and access opportunities that enable them to achieve as much as possible of their potential.

### RECOMMENDATIONS: THE KEY THEMES



This also applies to those children who leave home for work. While some children may leave home based on their own decision to work, some leave home with parental consent/awareness/initiative, and some children engaged in labour are victims of trafficking. Quick reunification of these children with inadequate assessment and future plan is unlikely to change their life trajectories. Here the roles of the CWC and other stakeholders (child protection as well as other community-based systems) are significant. While the labour department has a role, it is important to minimise factors that push children out of education and into work. Hence, among various systems, the educational system too has to be especially sensitive to the varied needs of diverse groups of children, has to evolve different models and make the process sufficiently beneficial for the parents and child to see an element of purpose in it.

A stakeholder may perceive stories to be 'successful' while working with children for reunification and following up till one year. However, the long-term outcomes may not validate our initial perception. This suggests that all systems (not only those specifically for child protection) for children—both within and beyond their communities—have to be adequately strong to take over follow-up and support; these systems have to work together to create an environment that enables the healthy development of each child.

### • Recommendations for ensuring smooth and safe transition of children through various stakeholders in the reunification process

Each stakeholder understands their own roles: A smooth and safe transition in children's journeys through various stakeholders' needs each stakeholder to not only have sensitivity and awareness towards child rights, but also a strong understanding of their own roles. This includes the following aspects:

- Every stakeholder understanding the relevant legislations and acting in accordance with them: All stakeholders<sup>5</sup> need to be aware of legislations<sup>6</sup> and rules that are relevant for responding to children they come in contact with. This means that awareness on child rights and roles includes trainings not only on legislations such as JJ Act but also other related ones such as, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986 and its amendment in 2016, etc.
- Increased Commitment on the part of larger systems: The larger systems within which these stakeholders (e.g. RPF, GRP, Police) are located develop an increased level of awareness (among personnel) on child rights and their own roles, in order to effectively be a part of the change that is needed.
- Continuity and multiplicity of trainings: While human and financial resource gaps have to be filled within each stakeholder system, it is also important to review how trainings are imparted to different stakeholders. Maybe, formal trainings can be combined with inputs at internal meetings or discussions that are held periodically within each agency. There is also a need for continuity in the orientation and training process taking into account personnel transfers.
- Utilise the benefits of interactions between NGOs and other stakeholders: As the findings of this research indicate, stakeholders who come in contact/interact with NGOs (working on child rights) more frequently are more aware and sensitised to children's needs; this aspect can be promoted further. Examples can be drawn from active engagement of RC partner organisations with stakeholders at railway stations. Information about steps to follow when one comes in contact with a child, and trainings on communication skills (to be used with children) were some of such examples. These examples suggest that NGOs or a group of aware citizens/professionals can be engaged for an on-going interaction and work with various stakeholders. The ease of clarifying doubts about what needs to be done in different cases would also strengthen relationships between NGOs/child rights aware groups and other stakeholders.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the media is also one of the stakeholders. Hence, media needs to ensure that no child faces stigma and any risk due to it's actions.

<sup>6</sup> National Legal Services Authority and District Legal Services Authority may be involved to support this process in an ongoing manner.

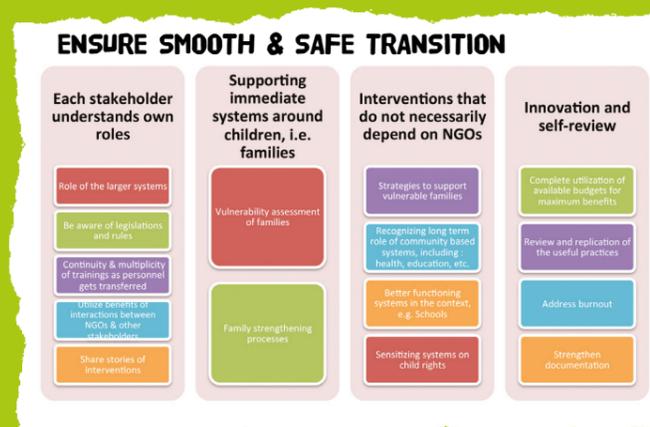
- Share stories of interventions: The systems/organisations involved in reunification should also share stories of children who have journeyed through various stakeholders, at regular intervals. This would create examples of how change happens when everyone performs their role as per law, with sensitivity to children's needs. The long-term outcome of this would be more aware and sensitive institutions and systems.

Supporting immediate systems around children, i.e. families: A smooth and safe transition also implies supporting other systems that children were part of before leaving home and after reunification. One such system is the family system. The family system can be further strengthened through engagement with families at pre-reunification stage, a strong and ongoing vulnerability assessment process, and an active 'family strengthening' component during the follow-up phase, as followed by some of the partner organisations of RC. It is evident that some families would be influenced by the fact that the returns through education of children are not as profitable as returns through child's work. What can be done to change this scenario? These questions bring up the need for reflecting on the family strengthening component in some of the intervention areas.

Interventions that do not necessarily depend on NGOs: Safe and smooth transition for children should also be ensured in the post-reunification stage. However, post-reunification direct work with child and family should not be dependent only on NGOs that were initially involved, as this strategy cannot be used in a long-term manner. As there can be limitations at the level of a particular NGO to address all needs of a family, it is important to think of strategies through which support for vulnerable families can be strengthened in communities. This involves recognising long-term role of community-based systems. While initial follow-ups may involve an active role for NGOs who were initially working with children, the actual long-term role lies with community-based systems. Support to children and their families can hence be ensured through advocacy for better functioning systems in their context. Community-based systems<sup>7</sup> not only include the protection and development related systems at village or neighbourhood level but also larger systems, such as health, education, rural and urban development, etc. Sensitising these systems on child rights will be useful. It is important to acknowledge that sensitising systems<sup>8</sup> towards children's needs and rights, and building their perspectives on what contributes to a child-friendly environment also creates opportunities to widen the range of potential stakeholders who could advocate on behalf of children.

Innovation and self-review: In order to respond to children's needs, stakeholders may need to engage in ongoing self-reviews and be innovative. This includes the following aspects (and more may be thought of):

- Utilisation of available budgets for maximum benefits within the Government systems: For example, instead of keeping the sponsorship money unused, strategies may need to be thought through by DCPU for its utilisation, probably beyond what is written in guidelines.
- Review and replication of the useful practices followed by different stakeholders: This is especially relevant in terms of how induction of child takes place in each system that he/she enters (e.g. CCI) and how is he/she gainfully engaged till reunification<sup>10</sup>.



- Address burnout: NGOs and other stakeholders may need to reflect on their own level of burnout and plan how to address it where needed.
- Strengthen documentation: Documentation process has to be strengthened at each level (and by each stakeholder) to ensure that information on each child, who comes in contact with the child protection system, is maintained and can be accessed when needed. This would help in ensuring that every child coming in contact with the system, benefits from it in a meaningful way.

- Recommendations for 'family strengthening' as a process of pre- and post-reunification intervention. Family strengthening process should involve the following aspects:
  - Family Vulnerability Assessment to understand the needs of the child and family: This is already being done in some partner organisations of RC as part of the 'Family Strengthening' component. As already stated in earlier sections, there are numerous family and broader community level factors at play in children's decisions to leave home. These factors need to be understood in order to sustain the child's remaining with the family (or retaining contact with them). Understanding the family's strengths, resources and vulnerabilities needs to be an ongoing process through follow-ups (whether the follow-up is initiated by the agency or the child/family), as these will continuously evolve over time.
  - Responding to specific issues within family system through information/intervention: Once the needs and vulnerabilities of children and their families have been identified, they need to be addressed through appropriate strategies. These needs may include counselling; addressing substance abuse; livelihood support; educational support (both financial and for admission, etc., or sensitising the local facilities); access to government schemes and other entitlements according to law<sup>11</sup>; skill-building, etc. As evident, parents may also need to be informed about how attachment and understanding their child's choices may be important. Hence, building parenting skills may also be one of the interventions with the family. The child and family should feel that they can get in touch with the child rights/protection system/NGO even after reunification and they should be made aware of this at the time of the reunification. However, it is also equally important not to raise their expectations about what the NGO can do for them and be clear about what the NGOs strengths, resources and capacities are. While being cautious about raising family's expectations it would also be helpful to guide children and families towards other resources in their local communities/ contexts
  - Linking child/family with resources/support systems: For several needs, it may be necessary to link the child and/or family with the resources, institutions and systems that are best equipped to address them adequately. These could be both government and non-government resources, which are better placed to work with communities locally, or provide services and benefits that the NGO (which has reunified the child) might not be able to do. It would also be useful to reflect on ways in which families can be prepared to take responsibility for seeking support when the need arises.
  - Ongoing engagement to make systems child-friendly: Linking with local resources involves going beyond one-time contact to link the child/family with them, but rather requires an ongoing engagement so that the resources, institutions, and systems becomes more child-friendly. This will also create possibilities for other children in the area (who may or may not have left home, but have similar needs) to access these resources. Linkages, awareness-raising, and sensitisation of the educational system are of primary importance so that they may evolve into more child-friendly facilities. Given the amount of time that children spend at school, it is important that a nurturing and caring environment is created in schools that provides opportunities for children to achieve their potential.

<sup>7</sup> It is relevant to mention that guidelines on child reintegration also state that "it is vital to involve a range of stakeholders in the reintegration process including children, families, communities, schools, the media, government actors, non-governmental organisations and the private sector. Mapping and coordinating reintegration and related services is important for effective collaboration." (Inter-agency group on children's reintegration, 2016, p.9).

<sup>8</sup> This strategy assumes even greater importance in light of the fact that as the CWCs' role in the reunification process has grown, the procedure often requires the parents/ guardians to appear before the CWC in order to take their child (rather than the child being escorted home by NGO/CCI staff). This implies that there are fewer opportunities for NGOs or governmental staff to visit each community and map the local resources themselves.

<sup>10</sup> Processes such as the following that are being implemented by some of the RC partner organisations need to be studied in depth for potential strengthening and replication: Reception Centre at a Government Home in Chennai being run by an NGO; use of volunteers to support pre-reunification and reunification processes for children using different languages; group level interventions by an NGO at government homes in West Bengal. The North 24 Parganas CWC's use of the foster care process should also be studied along with other locations in India where it may be in place.

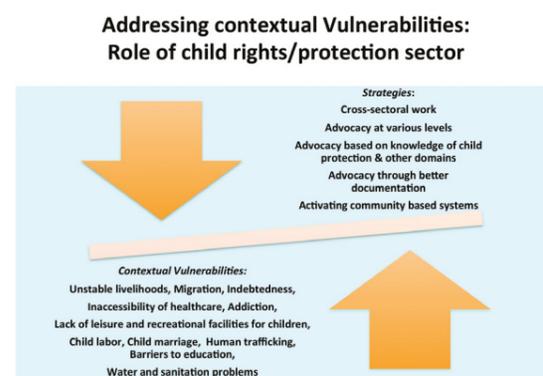
<sup>11</sup> National Legal Services Authority and District Legal Services Authority may need to be involved to reach out to people in remote areas as well so that families can be informed and supported to access their entitlements as per the law

- The twin strategies of family strengthening along with making other systems in community child-friendly, in the long term, will ensure that the responsibility to address the needs of children and families gets shared across a range of stakeholders. The stakeholders for child protection, hence, would not be restricted to the child-protection sector. In the long term, it also potentially reduces the burden on each individual agency for physical follow-ups and support for family strengthening. Potential role of the DCPU in implementing such a strategy needs to be reflected upon.
- Addressing contextual vulnerabilities: Role of child rights/protection sector

Working and linking with the context is one of the key aspects of long-term family support and strengthening, the responsibility of which has to be shared across stakeholders and systems. This is because even with an NGO following up a reunified child for a specific period, there can be no prediction of how future risks will impact these children. For example, even if village level child protection committees (CPCs) were strengthened under ICPS, what would this committee do, for example, about the lack of irrigation or about safe migration? Hence, there should be accessible community-based resources and support systems (in various domains such as health, education, nutrition, etc.). This strongly indicates that cross-sectoral work is inevitable/imperative to strengthen the work of the child rights sector. This possibility has also been demonstrated through the interventions that have been shared by some stakeholders in this research .

Following are some of the potential ways for the child rights/protection sector to address contextual vulnerabilities and undertake advocacy on the same:

a. Cross-sectoral work: It is important to recognise that cross-sectoral work cannot be limited to linking the family with various schemes. Although linking families with their entitlements through schemes is an important step, this needs to be considered as the minimum that one can do. One has to also engage with other sectors more closely, understand their concerns and strategies, and gradually add child rights to their concerns with the acknowledgement that all domains are important for a child to develop. For example, disability rights organisations/systems need to engage with CWCs and other stakeholders who continuously express difficulties in addressing the needs of children with disabilities. All children must be protected from risks such as child labour, human trafficking, abuse, and instead an environment for their survival, development, protection and participation has to be established/promoted. The responsibility of creating such an environment and reducing contextual vulnerabilities lies with all systems and stakeholders, and not just those who are working only on child protection. Advocacy by organisations can play a significant role in this.



b. Advocacy based on knowledge of policies, legislations, case laws , and schemes on child protection and other domains: Advocacy for creating an enabling environment for all children requires an active knowledge vis-à-vis implementation of various policies, legislations, case laws, schemes, not only on child protection specifically, but also on other systems such as health, education, water and sanitation, skill enhancement, livelihood opportunities, financial inclusion, agricultural development, disaster preparedness etc. for all (including women and people with disability). For example, where it is difficult to retain children in schools, this suggests a strong need both to work on education in sustained manner, and to change the current strategies of working on this issue. In one case, the long gap in getting back to school as well as mixed messages (from parents) on the need for education seemed to have kept the child out of school. As stated earlier, it is important to think of strategies through which education

can become a more profitable investment as compared to sending children to work or keeping them out of school. At the same time, children may need to be supported through specific inputs in case school education is not as facilitative as it should be. Sponsorship and its linkage to continuance in education could be a strategy even though that does not help to bring about long-term change that is required within the education system.

We need to remember that child is located in a context. Hence, risks, vulnerabilities as well as resources in that context are likely to influence a child's life. Among various stakeholders, DCPUs and SCPCRs too have to perform an active role in highlighting all issues that need action for creating a healthy and enabling environment for children.

- Advocacy should be at various levels: Village, mandal/block, district level, state, as well as the national level. We need to influence trainings and perspectives of administrative officers through continuous engagement with them, especially at the district level<sup>15</sup>. Interaction with district line departments should be an ongoing process. District planning committees headed by DMs also exist. Rights of children need to be integrated within the existing agendas of these committees<sup>16</sup>. Where possible, there is also a need to document roles performed by district advisory committee (not present in all districts) and advocate for their presence in other districts as well. These are only a few examples (and not an exhaustive list) of ways in which advocacy on child rights can take place at various levels.
- Advocacy through better documentation: Advocacy requires data and, hence there is a need for continuous documentation of engagement with various stakeholders, processes that have been found to be useful in working with children, and outcomes of various interventions. Within the documentation on reunification of each child, it is important to include specific interventions based on needs assessment with the child and family pre- and post-reunification, and the role performed by various stakeholders. Data or facts should be proactively used to advocate for change. This may include our documented experiential learning, research and baseline studies, as well as Government statistics.
- Activating community based systems: It is important to create an environment where people question the instances when children go missing or if their rights are not ensured. This needs activation and strengthening of village level systems such as the panchayats as well as the committees (including collectives or committees of/including children). For this, there is a need to think beyond the role of NGOs, and instead mobilise different sections of the community. Mobilisation of different sections of any community involves a continuous engagement with them. For example, for effective implementation of Right to Education Act (RTE), an engagement with CBOs/SHGs, village panchayat, and nodal officers at the block level is required. The school management committees should be strengthened. The process for strengthening education system and effective use of RTE may be piloted at certain locations and then replicated. Else, one can learn from already existing initiatives by those who have been actively working on education.

As we plan to move forward to create enabling environments for all children, we have to acknowledge that as stakeholders, we need to know and engage with much more (than what we may be doing at present). We have to become more aware of the present scenario related to various factors that influence life of children. This includes an understanding of barriers affecting implementation of various policies, legislations and programmes that have the potential to improve the life of each child. We need to formulate a potential course of action based on a strengthened understanding of these barriers as well as the potential challenges for ourselves. As shared earlier in this chapter: change may not come with just one intervention or an action/activity. It requires several steps and stakeholders.

<sup>15</sup> A district child protection plan.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Chandauli, child protection committees (CPCs) were activated through the intervention of an active DM.

## 6. IN CONCLUSION

- Contextual vulnerabilities impact children's lives before they leave home as well as after their reunification with families. Contextual aspects such as the unstable nature of livelihoods, inaccessibility of healthcare, lack of leisure and recreational facilities for children, corporal punishments in schools, and so on, can eventually contribute to children leaving home. After reunification, even when children continue to be with their families, their life possibilities may not turn out to be different from those of everyone else in their communities. Unless the contextual vulnerabilities are challenged, lives of many children could continue to be the same.
- Families may need support to fulfil their responsibilities towards children. In many families where both parents work, they may not be able to watch over their children and community resources for caring for children of working parents are rare. Formal support for addressing marital disputes may not be available and thus the conflict may continue to persist and have an adverse impact on children. This becomes important also in scenarios where families send children to work due to debt or lack of financial resources.
- Children's education remains an important area of work: As shown by this research, poverty is not the only contributor to children dropping out of school. Education systems are not child-friendly everywhere; there is often corporal punishment in schools and the environment in hostels, contrary to children's expectations, may not be 'family-like'. The fact that it is difficult to retain children in schools suggests a need to work on education in a sustained and thoughtful manner and to modify current strategies of working on this issue.
- Mental health needs of children living within communities as well as those in child care institutions need to be recognised and addressed. Along with the scenario in some child care institutions, this was specifically evident in case of three children in this research. A family member of one of the reunified individuals was among those who would have benefitted from mental health interventions. As the general level of awareness about mental health issues—both recognising and addressing them—is low or absent, families rarely seek treatment or interventions. In some cases, the family may not have the financial resources to do so. It is important to reflect on such cases. If it is recognised that the NGOs cannot reach out everywhere, then is there a need for community health resources to be strengthened? Should NGO staff also at least be equipped to screen for potential referrals (for mental health issues)?
- There is a need to review the process of follow-ups after reunification, and the roles of various stakeholders: Among 30 reunified individuals traced in this research, 3 were deceased; 4 were continuing with their education; 13 (excluding the one who was also studying) were engaged in paid work; 2 (female) were engaged in unpaid domestic work in own household; 1 was engaged in farming (own land); and 6 were neither studying nor working; and there was no information about one individual. Additionally, there was not much variation in outcomes (in terms of their occupational status or educational achievement) for those reunified with and without the CWC's involvement. While this suggests that other factors such as familial and community contexts might play a more significant role, it also suggests that post-reunification follow-up and support is greatly significant. The results of the present study have also raised the question regarding the pattern of follow-up as well as ingredients of follow-up. In the backdrop of limited organisational resources, it is critical to examine the state resources (for example, in the form of DCPU) and the role that they could play in the post-reunification stage to promote more healthy or positive outcomes for children. This also calls for a debate on what constitutes healthy and positive outcomes.

It is important for each stakeholder to be aware of their role and be prepared to respond to a child's needs. Various stakeholders' interventions were influenced by numerous factors: their perception of their responsibilities towards children; their agency's mandate; their skills and also trainings received; the volume of children that they deal with on a daily basis; level of burnout; level of association with NGOs working with children; and resources (human, financial, infrastructural) available with them. Therefore, preparation for responding to children's needs and making the environment safe for them, both need to be addressed.



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