

Prerana's Anti Trafficking Center



Falling through the Cracks in the System

Falling through the Cracks in the System: Limitations in the existing Child Care and Protection Services

 **Trigger Warning: Child Sexual Abuse, Commercial sexual exploitation, Self harm**

As part of Prerana's interventions with child victims of commercial exploitation, we work with child care institutions to assist in the rehabilitation of the victims after their rescue. Prerana assists in cases as and when they are referred by the Child Welfare Committees (CWC).

During a routine visit to the child care institution, a social worker came across a child, sitting alone and crying. The child, Zara, seemed visibly distressed and was incoherently speaking about how something was disturbing her. The social worker sat with the child for a while, and helped her calm down.



The social worker later followed up on this case with the Probation Officer at the institution, and brought it to the notice of the Child Welfare Committee (CWC), requesting for Prerana to be appointed to work on the case. After due consideration, Prerana was directed to submit a Social Investigation Report (SIR), and subsequently follow-up on the case to help the child in the process of rehabilitation. In January 2019, Zara's case (name changed) was referred to Prerana.*

Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation - The child's narrative

As per the information gathered from the first interaction with Zara, she had been sexually abused by her father in January 2018. She had tried sharing this with her mother but her mother had not been supportive. Her mother had warned Zara to not share this with anyone or the mother would tell her father and the child would have to bear the consequences. The incident had caused significant emotional distress for Zara, which was worsened when she sought her mother's assistance. Feeling helpless in the situation, she ran away from her house. She found it difficult to make sense of the abuse and the subsequent reaction of her mother. She blamed herself for the same and began to have thoughts of self-harm.

*name has been changed to protect the identity of the child

A few days after she had run away, the police found Zara at a beach near her house. She narrated her ordeal to them and the police took her to a hospital for medical examination, where she was found to be pregnant. According to Zara, the pregnancy was terminated medically, and she was placed in a child care institution (CCI). A case of sexual abuse under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSOA) was registered against her father. Her father was arrested by the police and taken into custody. In June 2018, Zara was restored to her family by an Order passed by the CWC. However, once restored, her mother began to physically abuse her as she blamed Zara for her husband's arrest. She wanted Zara to withdraw her statement against her father. Seeing a hostile environment at home, Zara ran away again within days of being restored.

In September 2018, Zara met a boy at a railway station where she had been sleeping. She befriended him but this boy later sold her off to a woman, Mamta, who pushed Zara into the sex trade. Zara was also sexually abused by Mamta's husband and pushed into the sex trade. Mamata also made a fake Aadhar card of the child, with a photo where the child was made to wear a mangalsutra (wedding locket) and sindoor, to pass her off as an adult. Zara was sexually exploited for a few months before she was found by the Police. In January 2019, Zara was found unconscious by the police on the road. She was presented before a different CWC which was closer to the district where she was found. This committee placed her in a CCI in their district. Since she was presented before a different CWC than the previous one, neither the CWC nor the CCI where she was placed subsequently, had any information about her case history. It is here that Prerana's social worker met her for the first time.

Indicators of psychological distress - The family's perspective

After the referral was made to Prerana, a social investigation was conducted where the social worker met with Zara's mother. The mother spoke of Zara running away from home with her brother when she was young. They added that when she was younger she had attempted suicide when she was younger but it was prevented by the timely intervention of her neighbours. The family's narrative seemed to indicate a hostile view of Zara. They seemed to perceive her as a troublesome child suffering from a mental illness. Zara's maternal aunty explained that on numerous occasions, they had observed Zara talking to herself, which could be indicative of hallucinations. According to the family's narrative, Zara could not maintain her health and hygiene, and would go days without bathing or combing her hair.



Zara was also said to have a history of self-harm which included cutting her wrists and arm, and had also required hospitalization on one occasion. At the time of the visit, it was observed that the family was going through financial difficulties and health issues. They found it difficult to understand and manage the 'different behavior' of the child. They could not understand that the child's peculiar behaviour was an attempt to cope with her traumatic experiences. Instead, they saw her behaviour as 'attention seeking' and troublesome. The mother shared that they would try to intervene and assist Zara, however she would often respond aggressively. The mother wanted Zara to be well, and was willing to assist in her rehabilitation but did not feel prepared to have her restored to the family. She also believed that her husband had been falsely accused. She did not believe in the narrative shared by the child. Following the visit, a Social Investigation Report was submitted to the Child Welfare Committee, suggesting the need for immediate psychological intervention.

Soon after, Zara was referred to a counselor to stabilize as well as to assist her in reprocessing her traumatic experiences. During the counseling sessions, Zara shared that she felt betrayed by her loved ones, especially her parents. While her father violated her, her mother had forsaken her by disbelieving her story. Despite these experiences, she had trusted her friend who she befriended at the railway station. He also deceived her by selling her into the sex trade. These experiences left a deep impact on Zara, who now found it difficult to build trustworthy relationships with others.

Mental Health in a Child Care Institution

Once in the CCI, the social worker began to regularly interact with Zara. During interactions, the social worker observed that Zara had difficulty in recalling the traumatic incident, and would often become agitated while talking about her family. Zara was troubled by the traumatic incidents and shared that she would often have nightmares of her father trying to harm her. These traumatic memories also affected Zara's interaction with others. The social worker observed that Zara was extremely fearful of men and was afraid to step out beyond the institution as she feared that her father would be awaiting to harm her. While interacting with Zara, the social worker observed that she would often repeat the narration of the traumatic experience as if re-experiencing the traumatic memories.



During the visits to the child care institution, the social worker would often hear the staff complain about Zara's behaviour. She shared with the social worker that she felt treated differently by the children and staff at the institution. She was referred to as a 'mentally unstable' child and was made fun of. She would innocently ask why she is being made fun of, and why she was being ridiculed by the caretakers of the child care institutions. These traumatic experiences affected Zara's perception and coping abilities. Zara would perceive even neutral comments and behaviours as threatening. During some interactions, the social worker observed that she would make violent and threatening gestures towards other residents if they would make some comments about her. She would often find herself emotionally overwhelmed by such incidents and found it difficult to cope with these overwhelming feelings, often resorting to self-harm or violent crying as a way of managing the distress.

Zara once confided to the social worker that she found the physical pain much more manageable than the emotional pain. Hence, there were severe incidents of Zara hurting herself by eating brick powder, cutting herself with sharp objects and banging her head on the door. Her narratives also began to move towards thoughts of self-harm and suicide. Zara would often share with the social worker that she did not feel worthy of living anymore. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital for assistance, thrice in a year because of self-harm.

While she was hospitalized, Zara reported that she underwent electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** once and was subsequently put on medication. It was observed that the medication stabilized the child, however it often left her feeling drowsy and weak. Nevertheless, the medication could not be stopped as Zara would often become violent but the dosage was reduced considerably, and she was also referred for psychosocial counseling.

Working towards Zara's Rehabilitation

A child in need of care and protection [under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015] cannot be rehabilitated solely by placing them in a child care institution. Hence, the Team tried to involve her mother in Zara's rehabilitation but that made her more violent and instances of self-harm grew. Zara's mother didn't seem to understand the trauma that the child was going through and thought of it as an attempt to seek attention.



**Electroconvulsive therapy is a medical procedure administered by a team of trained medical professionals. It involves a brief electrical stimulation of the brain while the patient is under general anaesthesia. It is most commonly used for individuals struggling with mood disorders and psychosis.

She also continued to believe in her husband's innocence and thus would be angry at Zara. Her mother's responses made Zara more agitated and she would seem indifferent to the casework interventions.

It was observed that the caretakers of the institution wanted to help Zara to the best of their abilities. However, when Zara would constantly keep crying for days, or harm herself, they would have to take her to the hospital, making them work extra shifts, and they began to get irritated. There were days when the social worker would visit the institution and see the child crying loudly sitting in one corner and the in-house doctor would term it as an 'attention seeking behavior'. There were days when Zara would roam around cheerfully in the institution wearing an outfit she liked but would end up crying as another child would make fun of her by saying things like "*Dekho moti pagal bhag rahi hai*" (*Look, that fat, mentally ill girl is running around*).

It was felt that Zara's mental health needed professional medical assistance as the hospital visits were not helping in stabilising the child. A complete psychiatric evaluation was facilitated by Prerana. The social worker, along with a police escort accompanied Zara to visit a psychiatrist at a private clinic in the southern part of the city with the permission of the CWC. A projective test to assess the child's personality was conducted. As the child required more visits to the psychiatrist, it became difficult for the Home Staff to arrange for a Police escort each time. Even if an arrangement for Police escort was made, the distance and time for traveling to the clinic was a challenge. Efforts were made by the Prerana Team, the Institution Staff and Child Welfare Committee (CWC) to find an institution close by where the psychiatric needs of the child would be catered to. However, there were no psychiatric professionals in the nearby area who would be willing to assist the child considering the financial constraints.

In September 2019, Zara was shifted to another child care institution because the Home Staff, Child Welfare Committee and the Prerana team felt that a new environment with better equipped health care facilities would be beneficial for the child. The institution that the child was to be transferred to had a nurse, an in-house doctor, a hospital nearby and visiting counselors. Days after her transfer, it was reported that Zara had tried to run away, bit a member of the staff when they had tried to stop her, kept banging her head on the cupboards, and refused to take her medication or listen to anyone. She was presented before the Child Welfare Committee once every two weeks as complaints of her getting into fights, not eating her food or taking her medication and hurting herself would come up.

Other child care institutions refused to allow the child to stay there, stating that Zara would be a threat to the other children residing in their institutions. The Superintendent of one institution had even suggested to the Team to 'let the child go' and fend for herself as that was the 'wish' of the child.

In February 2020, Zara was sent back to the psychiatric facility as she had been refusing to take in any solid food or take her medicines. Without her medication, Zara had turned violent and didn't communicate with anyone. She had begun to harm herself and the people around her. When children are in a certain state of mind, it's also very difficult to include them in decision making, in such cases the adult caregivers make decisions in the best interest of the child. The Child Welfare Committee passed an Order to place her at the facility till she got better. Meanwhile an institution in a different district for people with mental health concerns was approached for her placement.

This case highlighted the challenges of working with children struggling with severe mental health issues and the need for understanding mental and psychiatric health, and sensitization of caregivers and families to mental health concerns. Zara was shifted through a few child care institutions, and admitted to the psychiatric facility and hospital several times for harming herself. Her family failed to believe her and to understand the seriousness of the trauma she had been through. They did not have an understanding of mental illnesses and were not keen on understanding their child's mental health concerns. While the caretakers and staff at the institutions tried to be sensitive towards the child, they were not well equipped to deal with the child's emotions. They are also overworked, making it hard for them to provide adequate care to each child, and can be insensitive without understanding the impact that it can have on a child who is already going through a lot of trauma.

The other children at the institutions got annoyed with trying to make Zara understand how she "should behave" based on what was 'normal'. There is a serious lack of understanding and sensitivity in our society towards the concept of trauma and mental illness causing serious damage to people facing such illnesses.

Stigma and discrimination are negative consequences of ignorance and misinformation in society. Lack of understanding of mental illness often leads to insensitivity towards an individual struggling to cope with the same, causing more damage and re-traumatizing such individuals. For a child with mental illness to be able to process their emotions, and be responsible for taking their medication regularly, can be very challenging. Things get even more difficult for the child when there is a lack of understanding among the people responsible for taking care of the child. It is essential that the staff in a child care institution is made aware about issues of mental health, and signs of psychiatric ill health. It is also important that they are sensitive to the child, so that they do not cause further harm. Understanding and catering to mental health needs of a child is imperative to effective rehabilitation.



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

www.fighttrafficking.org

*Your trusted knowledge partner in the fight against
human trafficking*

20 
Years of ATC

Documentation

Aaheli Gupta and Azra Qaisar

(with inputs from Priti Patkar, Kashina Kareem and Priya Ahluwalia)

Design

Azra Qaisar

December 2020

Our mailing address is:

fighttraffickingindia@gmail.com

Copyright © 2020 Prerana, All rights reserved.