

Loyola knowledge hub for excellence in child protection (KHECHP): An academic model

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Introduction

Every child has the right to protection, development, participation, and survival and the States are bound to ensure all these rights to children through all stages of their life. The Indian Constitution guarantees these basic rights for its children and ensures their protection against all forms of abuse, exploitation, neglect, and violation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) also emphasizes the same. Child protection is a pertinent area of concern in today's context. Protecting children from all kinds of threats and abuses is as important as protecting the nation. In the recent past, many instances of children being exploited, abused and neglected in different ways have been widely reported through media. This increasing pattern of exploitation, abuse, and neglect against children keeps us pondering on the suitability of the society as a safe place for children to grow and live.

India being a signatory country committed to the cause of child protection has evolved numerous structural and legislative mechanisms that promote and assist procedures to ensure the protection of its children. However, these mechanisms need to be sensitive and functional towards the cause for which it

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exists. The dynamic nature of society and the contextual factors of influence in which children live pose a challenge to guarantee the protection of children. Child protection should be a concern not just for parents or governments but to all stakeholders who are part of the larger society.

In response to the prevailing situation of children and the need to ensure their protection, unique models of intervention have been implemented successfully by governmental and non-governmental bodies. One such effort was undertaken by the Department of Social Work at Loyola College. The department developed an Academic Model of Intervention to serve as a Knowledge Hub for Child Protection. This model has incorporated integral components such as Capacity building, Policy Advocacy, Legislative Advocacy, Research, and Knowledge partnership. The Government of Tamil Nadu Government has recognized the work initiated by the Department of Social Work, Loyola College as a positive model for child protection.

Children in India

Any person below the age group of eighteen years is called a Child (JJ Act, 2015). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) also emphasizes the same. India is home to many children and has the largest child population in the world. India has a population of 16.45 crores children in the age group of 0 to 6 years and has a population of 37.24 crores in the age group of 0 to 14 years. Of the total population, children between the age categories of 0-14 years constitute around 30.76% and among them, 48% are female children (Census of India, 2011). In India, a total of 99 million children have dropped out of school. More than half of the child population is involved in some form of labor. Around 10.13 million child laborers are between the age group of 5 and 14 years and 33 million working children are between 5 and 18 years respectively (Census of India, 2011).

Though the population of children is uniformly distributed all through the country, their status is not the same. The plight of children differs according to region, culture, gender, and many more such conditions. This calls in for

designing tailor-made interventions to suit the contextual needs of children by involving different mechanisms to ensure child protection.

Loyola KHEChP

Loyola College is one of the premier Institutions in India founded by Jesuits in 1925. The foundational premise of education at Loyola is to prepare students who are competent, committed, creative and compassionate men and women for and with others. Following the Jesuit vision, the Post-Graduate and Research Department of Social Work, Loyola College is committed to the formation of competent professional social workers to engage in societal transformation. The Department has been a trend-setter in offering unique specializations in social work such as the welfare of the weaker sections and Human Rights. The department of social work has always been a pioneer in responding to the needs of the time, to initiate innovative field-based interventions to positively impact communities. Following this legacy, the department harnessed the opportunity to work in the area of child rights training, advocacy and research and developed a unique academic model for child protection. The department established a center for this purpose named Loyola KHEChP- Knowledge Hub for Excellence in Child Protection. The center functions under the Department of Social Work and serves as a hub for Research, Training, and Advocacy on Child rights. It works with civil society organizations and governments to help develop human capacities for effective support and monitoring the child protection systems; capacitate child protection mechanisms through research and capacity building. The core areas of work undertaken through the KHEChPcenter are:

- Capacity Building for ICPS Functionaries
- Policy Advocacy
- Legislative Advocacy
- Knowledge Partnership
- Research & Training

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Capacity Building for ICPS Functionaries

KHEChP provides Capacity Building for Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) functionaries such as Police Personnel, Child Welfare Committee Members (CWC), Members of District Child Protection Unit (DCPU), and Child Care Institutions (CCI). The ICPS functionaries work very closely with children and serve as the first line of contact personnel in dealing with concerns related to child protection issues. The functionaries often encounter children who are in need of care and protection and those who are in conflict with the law. Appropriate handling of children who are under such stressful situations is pivotal to ensure their safety and gain confidence for further interventions.

The capacity-building programs of KHEChP focused on providing expertise for the ICPS functionaries on understanding the psychology of children, their needs and developmental requirements, practical skills and techniques of interacting with children, getting into their world, building confidence and use of the positive approach in handling concerns. The capacity building interventions were organized systematically and the functionaries were trained consistently. Continuous engagement with the participants ensured cumulative benefits among them as it created a space for introspective attitudinal change and willingness to modify patterns of behavior. This led to the inculcation of capacities essential for child care and protection among the functionaries.

Policy Advocacy

The second important component of the model is the interventions done in the area of Policy Advocacy. Policy Advocacy is an important component, especially in the Indian context as it represents, promotes and defends the ideas and opinions of the Government. Policy advocacy helps the Government to scrutinize their policies before implementation. A series of a consultative process involving experts working with children at the grass-root level

to implementing authorities across the State was organized by KHEChP. Based on these consultations, a summation of the active policies related to children and its implementation was discussed. A draft copy of the observations related to Tamil Nadu State Policy for Children, 2017; Tamil Nadu State Child Protection Policy, 2019 and State Action Plan for De-institutionalisation of children from CCIs in Tamil Nadu & Kerala was submitted to the Tamil Nadu and Kerala Governments. Registering voices of concern and suggesting ways for improvement in child protection through advocacy was the key area of focus of this intervention.

Legislative Advocacy

In its task of serving as a knowledge hub for child protection Loyola KHEChP undertakes regular Legislative Advocacy work. Periodic consultations and sensitization workshops have been undertaken to understand and analyze legislative mechanisms in place for child protection. Contextual discussions to comprehend the practical difficulties in implementation of Acts related to children such as Child and Adolescence Labour (Prohibition & Regulations) Act, 1986, Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 and Juvenile Justice (Care & Protection) Act, 2015 were undertaken. The challenges faced in practice, need to amend and rework the legislation were discussed and suitable recommendations to competent authorities were undertaken. Through Legislative advocacy, promotive work with Government agencies, Non-Governmental Agencies, practitioners, academicians, researchers and others who work with children was undertaken by KHEChP. Sensitization on legislative and policy frameworks available for child protection happened through this intervention.

Research

Research is a key method of knowledge building in any work undertaken. The KHEChP center undertook exemplary studies to gain clarity and bring out real situational analysis. Research collaborations were undertaken in the center along with the Government of Tamil Nadu, Department of Social Defence and State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR). Some of

the landmark studies include:

- Mushrooming of Child Care Institutions in Tamil Nadu
- A casual analysis of habitual offenders among juveniles in conflict with the law
- A study on the status of children sent out from the various closed child care institutions in Tamil Nadu
- Study on situational analysis of children who come in contact with Railway authorities at Chennai Central Railway Station

These research undertakings brought in new dimensions and real-time situations of children covered under the study. The findings of the study facilitated the Government authorities to plan further course of action to strengthen child protection mechanisms.

The Loyola KHEChPcenter has also published a Resource Directory which contains validated information on safe care homes and special homes available for children. This directory is of great help to the childline professionals in the railway station to help and direct children who stay in the railway station and those who come from different locations. These professionals follow the resource directory and refer the children to suitable places to ensure their safety. The directory is an instant know-how solution for the professionals as it easily helps in identifying a correct place for the child and preventing any chance of abuse or violence against the child.

Knowledge Partnership

Loyola KHEChPcenter aims to build a child-friendly society by engaging in activities that would promote positive outlooks in dealing with children. The center aims to undertake collaborative partnerships with key organizations that work with and for children. Networking with partner organizations helped the center to multiply resources and result in manifold outcomes on key areas of work.

Loyola KHEChP has strong partnership with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), The Department of Social Defence, State Commission for Protection of Child Rights (SCPCR), Juvenile Justice Committee of Madras

High Court, Directorate of Medical Education, Tamil Nadu Police Department, World Vision, International Justice Mission (IJM) and ChildLine India foundation. Knowledge partnering with key organizations enriched the work carried out in the center by sharing inputs on the focus and direction for activities to be undertaken; constructive suggestions for improved functioning and way forward in working for child protection.

Conclusion

Many children in India are found without shelter, family or food and in some instances, they are neglected, abused, exploited, orphaned, abandoned or destitute. It is the responsibility of everybody in the society to provide proper care and protection to the children who are in need. As an educated society, it is natural that we respond to such situations and make sensible contributions to change circumstances. The Loyola KHEChP Centre was established in response to the growing need in society to address the concerns of child safety and uphold their rights. The center serves as an indigenous model of child protection evolved from the contextual needs identified in the field. The activities carried out in the center showcase the fundamental connection in social work practice of theory getting translated as practice and practice leading to Knowledge building. The center is capacitated with academicians, practitioners, and researchers to cover the three core dimensions of higher educational excellence: Theory-Practice-Research. The Loyola KHEChP center is a model to be emulated by higher educational institutions, whereby they can serve the cause of Nation building through functional interventions.

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