



# STRENGTHENING CHILD WELFARE POLICIES FOR INDIAN ORPHANED AND ABANDONED CHILDREN: BRIDGING GAPS THROUGH COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

India is home to an estimated 31 million orphaned and abandoned children, many of whom remain vulnerable due to gaps in institutional care, adoption processes, foster care systems, and mental health services. Despite legislative frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009, systemic challenges related to implementation, inadequate funding, and lack of monitoring mechanisms hinder the effectiveness of child welfare programs. This paper critically examines India's existing child welfare policies, compares them with successful international models, and proposes evidence-based policy interventions to bridge these gaps.

Key recommendations include shifting from institutional care to family-based alternatives such as foster care and kinship placements, streamlining adoption processes, and introducing post-adoption support services. Additionally, expanding mental health interventions, improving social worker training, and leveraging technology for better monitoring are essential steps toward enhancing child welfare outcomes. Drawing insights from global best practices in the United States, Norway, and Finland, this study emphasizes the importance of decentralized governance, financial incentives for foster families, and AI-driven predictive analytics for identifying at-risk children.

Furthermore, the paper advocates for greater child participation in policymaking, legal protections against discrimination in education and employment, and corporate partnerships to provide scholarships and mentorship for orphaned youth. By integrating these measures, India can create a more inclusive, child-centered welfare system that ensures protection, stability, and long-term well-being for orphaned and abandoned children.

Ultimately, this study underscores the urgent need for a multi-pronged reform approach that combines policy enhancements, technological innovation, and community-driven solutions to safeguard the rights and futures of India's most vulnerable children.

**KEYWORDS:** Child Welfare, Institutional Care, Foster Care, Adoption, Mental Health, Policy Reform, India, Orphans.

## INTRODUCTION

*A newborn baby girl's grandmother had slit her throat and dumped her in a bin, leaving her to die, but miraculously she survived (Times of India, 2025).*

*A 3-month-old baby boy with limbs and bones broken from Osteogenesis Imperfecta was abandoned. He received dedicated care and is now an 8-year-old aspiring to be a policeman (GiveIndia, 2024).*

*Following the death of both parents due to COVID-19, a youngster assumed care for his younger siblings and overcame loss to save the family (Times of India, 2023).*

These stories are just a few among countless orphaned and abandoned children in India who face neglect, abuse, abandonment, the death of parents, and social exclusion. But in these stories, fortunately, they found a way, or one may say miracles happened, or they just accepted and showed resilience. However, not all children are fortunate enough or have the same destiny. Some survive the adversities, others go into depression, feel socially neglected, have poor mental health, lower self-esteem, and have difficulties in forming social relationships in their lives.

No wonder India has the highest number of orphans in the world. Surprisingly, there are an estimated 31 million orphaned and abandoned children in India (based on UNICEF data) (ILM UK, 2021), which is larger than the entire population of many other



countries, like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives, and the Netherlands. These estimated statistics have been mentioned in various research studies and articles for a decade, but no real number is known.

Despite the existence of child welfare policies, a significant number of these children still live outside the formal care system, leaving them at risk of homelessness, child labor, trafficking, and exploitation. This alarming scenario emphasizes the discrepancy between policy development and actual execution, therefore casting doubt on the adequacy of government initiatives in child care. India is home to one of the largest populations of orphaned and abandoned children globally, with an estimated 31 million children lacking parental care (UNICEF, 2023). Despite the presence of comprehensive child welfare policies, including the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), and the Right to Education Act, 2009, significant gaps exist in their execution. Many children remain outside the formal care system, leaving them vulnerable to homelessness, child labor, trafficking, and exploitation (Borgen Project, 2023).

This paper aims to analyze the present situation of orphaned and abandoned children in India using policy implementation deficiencies, institutional care's purpose, and the pressing need for alternative care models, including foster care and community-based rehabilitation. It also looks at the socio-cultural elements causing child abandonment—especially gender inequalities—and assesses the success of present governmental and non-governmental initiatives.

By addressing these key components, this study aims to change the dialogue on child welfare reform in India, therefore promoting more governmental responsibility, better allocation of resources, and sustainable support systems for at-risk children.

### **The Current Scenario**

With around 437 million children under the age of eighteen (UNICEF, 2023), child protection is an extremely important issue for India. Of these, over 31 million children are orphaned or abandoned (ILM UK, 2021), almost 7% of all the children in the world. This great frequency emphasizes the immediate requirement of thorough policies and institutional support mechanisms to guarantee their welfare. However, the statistics expose a clear disparity between the number of orphaned children and those in institutional care, suggesting major flaws in India's system of child welfare.

The gender inequality in child abandonment is especially alarming; 90% of the 11 million abandoned children are females (Times of India, 2011). This reflects ingrained socio-cultural prejudices in which elements like son preference, dowry obligations, and financial limitations help to explain the greater likelihood of female child abandonment. Such gender-based discrimination emphasizes the necessity of focused initiatives to safeguard and rehabilitate abandoned girls, thereby guaranteeing their equal chances for education, healthcare, and general development.

Even with the concerning number of orphaned children, institutional help still lacks enough availability. With only 9,589 Child Care Institutions (CCIs) (MWCD, 2016-2017), India has a disproportionately low percentage relative to the great number of children in need. Moreover, only 370,000 orphaned children are in institutional care (Borgen Project, 2023), leaving most outside of the official welfare system. This significant gap raises concerns about the fate of the remaining millions, who may be vulnerable to homelessness, child labour, trafficking, and exploitation. The discrepancy between the number of orphaned children and those receiving institutional support emphasizes the need for policy reforms, better funding, and alternative care models, such as foster care and community-based rehabilitation.

India's child protection system has to be improved immediately. The low number of CCIs combined with the great number of abandoned children point to a clear need for governmental action, more government funding, and more supervision of daycare facilities. Furthermore, correcting gender inequalities in child abandonment should be given top importance to provide enough chances and protection for orphaned girls. The information in this infographic provides strong proof of the need to extend and enhance child welfare initiatives to close current gaps and guarantee a safer future for India's abandoned and orphaned children.

### **Policies on Indian orphans: Difficulties and Critical Viewpoints**

#### **1. Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015**

The Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, offers a legislative framework for the rehabilitation, protection, and care of orphaned, abandoned, and turned-in young people. Under the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), it rules Child Care Institutions (CCIs) and advances foster care and adoption.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Notwithstanding its comprehensive character, the JJ Act presents many difficulties, including bureaucratic delays in adoption procedures, inadequate monitoring of CCIs, and inadequate financial resources. Furthermore, making it difficult for orphaned youngsters to find appropriate homes are corruption within adoption organizations and creates demanding legal processes. To guarantee the Act's efficacy, responsibility systems must be strengthened and adoption processes accelerated.



## 2. Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009

Established in 2009, the ICPS seeks to construct service delivery systems, training staff, and institutional and non-institutional care, thereby providing a secure and protected environment for children in need—including orphans.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** While the ICPS works to close gaps in child welfare services, it suffers from insufficient budget, a dearth of skilled social workers, and uneven application among states. Many Child Care Facilities under ICPS continue to be underfunded and insufficiently watched, which results in inadequate living circumstances. Services' quality has to be raised through a more open and strong financing source.

## 3. Adoption Regulations, 2017

The adoption of orphaned, abandoned, and surrendered children is ensured by these rules, which were established under the JJ Act, therefore simplifying the adoption procedure in India.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Notwithstanding its goals, the adoption process is still long and difficult because of protracted legal processes and ineffective bureaucracy. With an excessive volume of cases, the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) suffers delays in giving children stable homes and extended waiting times for potential parents. Simplifying legal formalities and increasing digital efficiency in the adoption process can address these issues.

## 4. Sponsorship and Foster Care Guidelines, 2015

These guidelines encourage alternative care systems such as foster care, sponsorship, and kinship care as viable options for orphaned children instead of institutionalization.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Due to society's hesitations, ignorance, and inadequate laws, foster care is still an underused choice in India. Cultural and economic limitations may cause many families to be hesitant to adopt orphaned children. Strengthening financial incentives, awareness campaigns, and monitoring systems helps develop care as a practical substitute.

## 5. Mission Vatsalya (formerly ICPS, 2009)

By combining services for children in need—including orphaned and abandoned children—Mission Vatsalya seeks to enhance child protection systems.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Though Mission Vatsalya sees a comprehensive approach to child welfare, weak inter-agency coordination, inadequate infrastructure, and scattered implementation compromise its effectiveness. To guarantee the success of the project, efficient monitoring, sensible financial allocation, and active NGO cooperation are desperately needed.

## 6. Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009

The RTE Act guarantees children's access to high-quality education by mandating free and obligatory education for all between the ages of six and fourteen, including orphaned youngsters.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Though the RTE Act offers a structure for educational participation, orphaned children often suffer from financial constraints, lack of appropriate documents, and prejudice. Bad infrastructure and insufficient teacher preparation make many institutionalised children unable to obtain high-quality education. Good policy execution should concentrate on removing administrative challenges and enhancing orphanage school amenities.

## 7. National Policy for Children, 2013

This policy seeks to provide children a foundation for their survival, growth, protection, and involvement in society as it acknowledges them as a priority.

- **Challenges and Critical Opinion:** Notwithstanding its all-encompassing strategy, the policy remains mostly declarative with little practical application. Its efficacy is undermined by the lack of strong enforcement systems and the absence of specific financial distribution. Important is strengthening legislative requirements and guaranteeing policy implementation by improved state-level cooperation.

India has developed a robust legislative and regulatory framework to assist orphaned children, but problems with implementation, financing, and execution still compromise its efficacy. The lives of orphaned children in India may be improved by means of addressing bureaucratic inefficiencies, establishing monitoring systems, raising public awareness, and guaranteeing inter-agency collaboration. To guarantee that every orphaned kid gets the care and assistance they are due, a more aggressive government strategy along with community engagement and improved NGO participation are required.

## Summary of Difficulties in Policy Execution for Orphaned and Abandoned Children in India

Millions of orphaned and abandoned children lack sufficient protection and care as a result of the inconsistent and inadequate application of comprehensive child welfare programs, despite their existence. A combination of **infrastructural deficits, bureaucratic inefficiencies, insufficient personnel, and socio-cultural barriers** continues to hinder the realization of child



welfare objectives. Addressing these systemic challenges is critical to ensuring that orphaned children receive the care, education, and social inclusion they deserve.

- **Insufficient Funding and Infrastructure**

The lack of government-run childcare facilities and over-reliance on underfunded NGOs provide a basic difficulty in India's child welfare system. The current Child Care Institutions (CCIs) regularly run with little financial resources, poor healthcare, and inadequate educational facilities, therefore jeopardizing the welfare of the children under their custody. Many orphanages lack psychological support services, qualified personnel, and basic conveniences, which makes it challenging to offer abandoned children secure and loving surroundings. Orphaned children will remain very vulnerable to neglect and exploitation without significant financial commitment and infrastructure building.

- **Legal and Bureaucratic Hurdles**

Long legal processes, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and corruption within adoption agencies compromise the efficacy of legislation such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and Adoption Regulations, 2017, even if they seek to simplify child protection systems. Often preventing orphaned children from being put in stable families are prolonged adoption procedure timeframes, too much documentation, and lack of openness. Furthermore, complicating the adoption and rehabilitation process are disparities in the administration of childcare facilities resulting from gaps in law enforcement and regulatory control.

- **Shortage of Trained Personnel**

The availability of trained carers, social workers, and psychologists in daycare facilities significantly determines the welfare of orphaned children. Still, a severe shortage of qualified experts affects the psychological, social, and emotional development of institutionalized youngsters. Many CCIs run with inexperienced personnel, which results in situations of abuse, emotional deprivation, and neglect. Children are susceptible to mental health problems, developmental delays, and difficulty reintegrating into society without organized training programs and capacity-building efforts.

- **Minimal Adoption and Support for Foster Care**

Although programs like the Sponsorship and Foster Care Guidelines, 2015, support alternative care, cultural resistance, poor regulatory systems, and lack of knowledge have hindered the general acceptance of foster care as an alternative to institutionalization. Unlike in Western nations, where foster care is a favored child welfare strategy, India's foster care system remains undeveloped, owing to societal stigma, lack of financial incentives, and insufficient government assistance. Foster care remains a neglected resource for orphaned children in need of family-based care without efficient promotion, legal protection, and financial support.

- **Poor Inter-Agency Coordination and Fragmented Execution**

Weak enforcement systems, inadequate inter-agency cooperation, and lack of centralized monitoring define child welfare initiatives like Mission Vatsalya and the National Policy for Children, 2013 weak points. State-wide disparities in policy implementation and budget distribution delays undermine the influence of these programs even further. The lack of a coherent, data-driven strategy prevents legislators from precisely monitoring the situation of orphaned children, adoption cases, and the success of daycare centres. These programs will keep failing without improved cooperation among local authorities, NGOs, and state agencies.

- **Barriers to Education and Social Inclusion**

Notwithstanding the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, which guarantees free and mandatory education, one of the most important obstacles for orphaned children is schooling. Many institutionalized children experience prejudice, inadequate paperwork, and exclusion from regular education. Furthermore, impeding their capacity to fit into society and, hence, lowering their chances for economic mobility is social stigma and marginalization. Without organized mentoring, job advice, and skill development initiatives for orphans leaving institutional care, they run more danger of unemployment, homelessness, and exploitation.

Policy gaps, poor implementation, insufficient financing, and insufficient professional assistance define the difficulties with India's child welfare system. Given the scope of the problem, an all-encompassing strategy is needed to properly handle the situation from many angles.

### Comparing India's Child Welfare System with Global Best Practices

India has made significant strides in child welfare through policies such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009. However, the system remains heavily reliant on institutional care, with limited emphasis on foster care, decentralized governance, and workforce capacity building. Many developed countries have successfully implemented family-based child welfare approaches, preventive interventions, and structured foster care systems that offer valuable insights for India. By comparing India's policies with those of the United States, Norway, and Finland, this section highlights key strategies that can help bridge the policy-to-practice gap in India's child welfare framework.

One of the most notable differences is found in the United States, where the child welfare system prioritizes foster care over institutionalization. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), 1997, mandates that children should first be placed with kinship



caregivers (relatives or extended family members) before considering non-relative foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Research suggests that children placed with relatives experience better emotional stability, improved school performance, and stronger cultural identity than those in institutional settings (Winokur et al., 2018). Additionally, state and federal funding support ensures that foster families receive monthly stipends, healthcare, and psychological support (Children's Bureau, 2022). Illinois has further strengthened this system through the Kinship in Demand Act, which seeks to place more children in family-based settings rather than orphanages (Journal Courier, 2024). This approach ensures that children receive personalized care and emotional security while growing up in a stable environment.

In contrast, Norway operates under a decentralized child welfare model, where municipalities are directly responsible for child protection services. The Child Welfare Act, 1992, emphasizes early intervention strategies, ensuring that families receive parenting support, financial aid, and counseling before child removal becomes necessary (Backe-Hansen & Egelund, 2020). This prevention-first approach significantly reduces child abandonment and institutionalization by addressing family stressors early on (Children at Risk, 2023). In addition, Norway's localized governance model allows social services to tailor interventions to specific community needs, making child protection services more effective and accessible.

Similarly, Finland has focused on strengthening its child welfare workforce by addressing social worker caseloads and improving training programs. The Finnish Child Welfare Act was amended to limit the number of children assigned per social worker, reducing caseloads from 35 in 2022 to 30 in 2024 (Children at Risk, 2023). This reform ensures better case management, timely intervention, and improved child welfare services. Furthermore, Finland heavily invests in social worker training, ensuring that child protection officers are equipped with trauma-informed care techniques to address children's psychological and emotional needs (Heino, 2021). These global models offer valuable lessons for India. First, India can shift its child welfare focus from institutional care to family-based care, similar to the kin-first approach in the U.S., where foster care and kinship placements are prioritized. Second, adopting Norway's decentralized approach would enable state and district-level governments to take a more proactive role in child welfare administration, ensuring that services reach marginalized communities effectively. Finally, improving social worker capacity, as demonstrated in Finland, by limiting caseloads and enhancing professional training, would significantly improve the quality of care provided to orphaned and abandoned children.

While India has a strong legal framework, its implementation mechanisms need reform. Learning from these successful global models, India can develop a more child-centric, family-oriented, and professionally managed child welfare system. The following section outlines specific policy recommendations that can help India transition toward a more effective and inclusive child welfare approach.

### **Bridging the Gap: Policy Recommendations for an All-Inclusive and Competent Indian Child Welfare System**

India's child welfare policies, though comprehensive on paper, continue to face severe implementation challenges that leave millions of orphaned and abandoned children vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and socioeconomic exclusion (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2022). Despite legal frameworks such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009, structural inefficiencies, funding shortages, and lack of monitoring undermine their efficacy (UNICEF, 2023).

A multi-dimensional approach is required to bridge these policy gaps and develop an inclusive, evidence-based, and child-centered welfare system. Drawing from international best practices, this section outlines key policy recommendations to improve institutional infrastructure, foster care systems, workforce training, mental health support, education access, technological integration, and community reintegration for orphaned and abandoned children in India.

#### **1. Strengthening Government Support and Institutional Infrastructure**

A major weakness of India's child welfare system is the over-reliance on underfunded NGOs and the lack of well-equipped government-run childcare facilities (UNICEF, 2023). Inadequate budget allocations, substandard living conditions, and insufficient regulatory oversight contribute to poor outcomes for children in institutional care. Strengthening state-run orphanages and enhancing regulatory control over Child Care Institutions (CCIs) is essential for ensuring adequate healthcare, education, and emotional support.

To improve the quality of institutional care, India must increase budgetary allocations to ensure better living standards, access to healthcare, and quality education for children residing in orphanages. Independent monitoring bodies should be established to oversee childcare institutions, preventing mismanagement, neglect, and abuse, thereby ensuring transparency and accountability in their operations. Additionally, expanding public-private partnerships (PPPs) can help mobilize resources for sustainable funding, infrastructure development, and improved service delivery within orphanages. Furthermore, a holistic child development approach should be adopted by integrating mental health support and vocational training programs into institutional care settings. Providing



children with access to psychological counseling, career guidance, and skill-based education will help them transition successfully into independent adulthood. By implementing these measures, India can bridge the gaps in institutional care, ensuring that orphaned and abandoned children receive comprehensive support, protection, and opportunities for a secure future.

## 2. Reforming the Adoption and Foster Care System

Despite legal provisions under the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), adoption rates in India remain critically low, primarily due to bureaucratic delays, complex legal procedures, and social stigma surrounding adoption (MWCD, 2022). Foster care, which serves as an alternative to institutionalization in many countries, remains underutilized in India due to low public awareness, inadequate financial incentives, and lack of trained foster families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

To enhance the adoption and foster care system in India, digitizing adoption records and implementing fast-track legal processes under the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) is crucial to reducing delays in child placement. Additionally, strengthening post-adoption support programs by providing financial aid, psychological counseling, and family integration services will ensure a smoother transition for adopted children into their new homes. Raising public awareness is also essential, and nationwide campaigns should be launched to educate society on the benefits of adoption and foster care, encouraging them as viable alternatives to institutionalization. Furthermore, providing financial incentives and specialized training programs for foster families can promote greater participation in foster care initiatives, ensuring high-quality, family-based care for orphaned children. By implementing these policy reforms, India can address the inefficiencies in its adoption and foster care system, ultimately ensuring more children grow up in stable, nurturing environments.

## 3. Investing in Human Resources for Child Welfare

A critical gap in India's child protection system is the severe shortage of trained social workers, psychologists, and caregivers in institutional and foster care settings (Heino, 2021). High caseloads, insufficient salaries, and lack of professional training lead to poor case management and inadequate child support services (Children at Risk, 2023).

To strengthen workforce capacity in child welfare, India must implement a caseload cap for social workers, ensuring that each professional handles no more than 30 cases at a time, as successfully practiced in Finland. This will enable better case management, individualized attention, and higher service quality for children in need. Additionally, specialized training programs should be introduced to equip child welfare professionals with expertise in trauma-informed care, child psychology, and rehabilitation therapy, ensuring effective intervention and support for vulnerable children. To retain skilled professionals, the government must offer competitive salaries and career incentives, reducing attrition and encouraging long-term commitment to the sector. Furthermore, child rights education should be integrated into police, judicial, and administrative training programs to ensure stronger legal enforcement and protection mechanisms for children. These measures will build a highly trained and motivated workforce, improving the effectiveness and reach of child welfare services in India.

## 4. Ensuring Educational and Vocational Inclusion

Access to quality education and skill development programs remains a significant challenge for orphaned children in India. While the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, mandates free and compulsory education, institutionalized children often face barriers such as lack of identity documents, societal stigma, and inadequate school infrastructure (UNICEF, 2023). Furthermore, the absence of vocational training programs in orphanages limits economic mobility and self-sufficiency for children aging out of care.

To improve educational and vocational opportunities for orphaned children, administrative barriers to school admissions must be removed by allowing alternative identity documentation, ensuring that lack of official records does not hinder access to education. Additionally, vocational training programs should be integrated within orphanages, equipping children with job-ready skills that enhance their employability and self-sufficiency. Collaboration with industries and NGOs can further strengthen this initiative by providing mentorship, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities, enabling orphaned youth to gain practical experience and career guidance. Moreover, expanding higher education scholarships and financial aid programs will help children transitioning out of institutional care pursue college education or professional training, reducing their risk of unemployment and social exclusion. By implementing these measures, India can bridge the education-employment gap, empowering orphaned children with the necessary skills and support to achieve long-term economic stability and successful social integration.

## 5. Leveraging Technology for Efficient Child Welfare Monitoring

The absence of a centralized child welfare tracking system in India contributes to gaps in adoption monitoring, child placement, and case follow-ups (MWCD, 2022). Norway and Finland have successfully integrated digital case management systems to ensure real-time tracking of child welfare interventions (Children at Risk, 2023). India must adopt technology-driven solutions to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability in child welfare services.



To enhance transparency and efficiency in child welfare, India must develop a national child welfare database that enables real-time tracking of adoption processes, foster placements, and conditions in orphanages. This system will ensure better coordination among government agencies, adoption authorities, and child welfare organizations, reducing delays and mismanagement. Additionally, biometric identification systems should be implemented for children in institutional care to prevent child trafficking, illegal adoptions, and missing child cases, ensuring that each child's identity and records remain secure. Furthermore, AI-driven predictive analytics can be utilized to identify at-risk children by analyzing patterns of abandonment, neglect, and abuse, allowing authorities to allocate resources efficiently for timely intervention and protection. By integrating technology-driven solutions, India can streamline child welfare services, enhance monitoring mechanisms, and strengthen safeguards to ensure the safety and well-being of orphaned and vulnerable children.

#### **6. Strengthening Mental Health and Healthcare Services**

Orphaned children are at a higher risk of psychological distress, trauma, and developmental disorders due to early-life adversity and lack of parental care (Dozier et al., 2014). However, India's child welfare policies lack adequate mental health provisions, leaving institutionalized children with limited access to psychological support (UNICEF, 2023).

To improve the mental and physical well-being of orphaned children, India must integrate mental health screening and counseling services into child care institutions and foster care programs, ensuring that children receive early psychological intervention and emotional support. Many institutionalized children experience trauma, anxiety, and attachment disorders, making access to specialized counseling services essential for their recovery and development. Additionally, the government should expand access to trauma recovery treatments by collaborating with psychiatric institutions and mental health NGOs, allowing children to benefit from professional therapy and rehabilitation programs. Furthermore, free and universal healthcare access should be guaranteed for all orphaned children, covering preventive healthcare, nutritional support, and immunization programs to safeguard their physical health. By implementing these measures, India can prioritize the holistic well-being of orphaned children, ensuring they receive comprehensive mental health care and medical support for a healthier and more stable future.

#### **7. Encouraging Child Participation in Policy Development**

Children's voices have historically been excluded from policy-making discussions, despite their direct experiences with the child welfare system. Establishing child advisory councils, as seen in Scandinavian welfare models, can help incorporate children's perspectives into legal and institutional reforms (Backe-Hansen & Egelund, 2020).

To ensure that orphaned and institutionalized children have a voice in decisions affecting their lives, India must establish child advisory bodies within orphanages and foster care networks. These advisory groups will provide a structured platform for children to express their concerns, share experiences, and contribute to shaping child welfare policies, making the system more responsive and child-centered. Additionally, periodic consultations with children in institutional care should be mandated, allowing policymakers and child welfare authorities to regularly assess their well-being, educational progress, and social development. Such engagement will help in identifying gaps in care and improving service delivery. Furthermore, it is essential to ensure formal representation of child welfare beneficiaries in legislative and policy review committees, giving them a role in evaluating and refining child protection laws. By integrating children's perspectives into governance, India can create a more inclusive, effective, and rights-based child welfare system.

#### **8. Addressing Societal Stigma and Promoting Community Integration**

Despite policy advancements, social stigma against orphaned children continues to hinder their integration into mainstream society (Times of India, 2011). Many orphans face discrimination in education, employment, and housing, further exacerbating social exclusion.

To foster the social inclusion of orphaned children, India must launch national awareness campaigns aimed at combating societal stigma and promoting positive narratives around adoption and foster care. These campaigns should leverage media, educational institutions, and community outreach programs to challenge misconceptions and encourage public acceptance of orphaned children as equal members of society. Additionally, legal protections must be implemented to prevent discrimination in education, employment, and housing, ensuring that orphaned youth receive equal opportunities for growth and independence. Strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws will help eliminate biases that often marginalize institutionalized children. Furthermore, corporate partnerships should be encouraged to establish scholarship programs and mentorship initiatives, equipping orphaned youth with educational opportunities, professional guidance, and career support. By adopting these measures, India can create a more inclusive society, ensuring that orphaned children have the resources and support needed to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Bridging the gap in India's child welfare system necessitates systemic reforms that prioritize family-based care, decentralized governance, mental health support, and workforce capacity building. By integrating best practices from global models, strengthening legal enforcement mechanisms, and leveraging technology for transparency, India can develop a comprehensive, child-centered,



and socially inclusive child welfare framework. Ensuring the long-term well-being of orphaned children is not just a policy necessity but a fundamental moral and social responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

India's child welfare system, while supported by comprehensive legal frameworks, continues to face significant challenges in implementation, resource allocation, and service delivery. With an estimated 31 million orphaned and abandoned children, the country struggles to provide adequate care, protection, and long-term support to ensure their well-being and successful integration into society (UNICEF, 2023). Despite policies such as the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS), 2009, gaps in institutional care, adoption processes, foster care alternatives, and mental health support persist (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2022). Addressing these shortcomings requires systemic reforms that prioritize family-based care, mental health integration, workforce strengthening, and the use of technology for transparency and efficiency.

A key challenge in India's child welfare system is the continued dependence on institutional care, which has been scientifically proven to hinder children's emotional, social, and cognitive development (Dozier et al., 2014). While orphanages provide basic shelter and sustenance, they often fail to offer individualized attention, psychological support, and life-skills training, leaving children ill-prepared for independent living. The international shift toward family-based care—as seen in the United States, Norway, and Finland—highlights the importance of prioritizing foster care, kinship placements, and adoption over institutionalization (Winokur et al., 2018). Strengthening India's foster care system through financial incentives, training for foster families, and legal simplifications will provide a more nurturing and stable environment for orphaned children.

Adoption remains another area of concern, with bureaucratic inefficiencies, lengthy legal procedures, and social stigma contributing to low adoption rates (MWCD, 2022). Streamlining adoption processes through digital record-keeping, fast-track legal mechanisms, and public awareness campaigns can encourage more families to adopt. Additionally, post-adoption support services, including financial aid, counseling, and family integration programs, are crucial in ensuring the success of adoptions and preventing disruptions.

Another critical reform area is mental health and healthcare services, which are often overlooked in India's child welfare policies. Studies show that orphaned children are at higher risk of trauma, depression, anxiety, and attachment disorders due to early-life adversities and lack of stable caregiving (Dozier et al., 2014). Integrating mental health screening, trauma-informed care, and therapeutic interventions within childcare institutions and foster programs is essential for their psychosocial well-being. Furthermore, ensuring universal healthcare access, including nutritional support, immunization programs, and routine medical checkups, can significantly improve health outcomes for orphaned children.

Technology can play a transformative role in improving child welfare monitoring and service delivery. Implementing a centralized digital child welfare database will enable real-time tracking of adoption cases, foster placements, and orphanage conditions, reducing delays, corruption, and inefficiencies (Children at Risk, 2023). AI-driven predictive analytics can further aid in identifying at-risk children, allowing timely interventions and better resource allocation. Moreover, biometric identification systems can prevent child trafficking and illegal adoptions, ensuring greater security and accountability in the system.

Addressing social reintegration and independent living support is equally vital. Many children aging out of institutional care face homelessness, unemployment, and social exclusion due to the lack of educational qualifications, vocational skills, and financial independence (UNICEF, 2023). Strengthening mentorship programs, vocational training initiatives, and corporate partnerships can equip orphans with essential life skills and employment opportunities. Additionally, scholarship programs and financial aid for higher education can empower them to achieve self-sufficiency and economic stability.

Children's voices must also be actively included in child welfare policymaking. Establishing child advisory bodies within orphanages and foster care networks ensures that their experiences and concerns are directly incorporated into policy reforms. Further, mandating periodic consultations and representation of child welfare beneficiaries in legislative review committees can make India's child protection system more responsive and effective.

Finally, changing societal attitudes toward orphaned children is crucial for breaking the cycle of stigma, neglect, and exclusion. Public awareness campaigns should challenge misconceptions, promote adoption and foster care, and advocate for equal opportunities for institutionalized children. Implementing strong anti-discrimination laws in education, employment, and housing will provide orphaned children with greater social acceptance and integration opportunities.

In conclusion, India's child welfare system requires urgent, evidence-based reforms that prioritize family-based care over institutionalization, strengthen adoption and foster care mechanisms, expand mental health and healthcare services, integrate



technology for efficient monitoring, and promote societal acceptance of orphaned children. By learning from global best practices and tailoring them to India's socio-cultural landscape, policymakers can create a sustainable, inclusive, and child-centered welfare framework. Ensuring the long-term well-being, dignity, and empowerment of orphaned and abandoned children is not just a policy necessity but a fundamental human rights obligation. Only through comprehensive, well-implemented reforms can India build a future where every child, regardless of their circumstances, has the opportunity to thrive and lead a fulfilling life.

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