



Understanding Psychosocial Development Among Children Living in Child Care Institutions in Manipur: A Qualitative Case Study

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Abstract: *Introduction:* India is home to a large number of children, many of whom are institutionalised in Child Care Institutions (CCIs) due to various reasons. The ethnic violence that erupted in Manipur in 2023 is expected to push many families deeper into poverty, lost parent/parents also led many children to seek shelter in CCIs. *Objectives:* This paper seeks to explore and understand the psychosocial development and challenges among children living in CCIs in Manipur, particularly orphaned, abandoned, and destitute children. It also focuses on investigating their coping mechanisms and strategies for resilience and recovery. *Method:* The researcher adopted a qualitative case study approach for this study. *Findings:* The findings reveal that children are institutionalised primarily due to orphanhood, financial instability, health-related issues, and ethnic violence. Most children expressed gratitude with the support they receive in the institutions; however, they remain vulnerable and continue to experience various psychosocial challenges. *Recommendation:* Love and affection were found to be essential for the positive development of institutionalised children. Therefore, immediate caregivers and family members should develop stronger emotional connections with children in order to build trust and secure attachment. *Conclusion:* This case study provides evidence of the lived experiences of institutionalised children and highlights the psychosocial challenges they face. The findings can help guide caregivers and institutions in addressing these challenges and promoting children's overall positive development.

Keywords: *Children, Child Care Institutions, Psychosocial Development, Challenges*

1. Introduction

Across the world, in every country, there are millions of children without parental care (Csaky, 2009). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that nearly 140 million children across the world have experienced the loss of one or both parents. Statistics indicate that India has about 30 million orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), the highest number in the South Asian region (UNICEF, 2016). Most of the children in institutional care are not orphans, 50 to 90 per cent have at least one living parent, children are institutionalised due to poverty and parent's inability to provide care (Bunkers et al., 2014). In India, it was estimated that there are 44 million destitute children, and among them, about 12.44 million are orphans, and most of them are reported to be in institutional care (Dutta, 2017). JJ Act (2015) defined Child Care Institutions (CCIs) as Children's Home, Open Shelter, Observation Home, Special Home, Place of Safety, Specialized Adoption Agency (SAA) and a Fit Facility, recognized under this Act for providing care and protection to children, who are in need of such services. Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) under the GOI (2018) notes that there are 9,589 CCIs/Homes with a total of 370,227 children, among them 199,760 boys, 170,375 girls, and 92 transgender children. The Public Information Bureau, Delhi (2022), reported that under the Child Protection Service Scheme–Mission Vatsalya, the MoWCD recorded 2,215 CCIs in India serving 77,615 beneficiaries. Among these, 355 CCIs with 7,899 beneficiaries were located in the North East states during 2020–2021 with 1,966 inmates in Manipur. Social Welfare Department of Manipur (2024) recorded 83 CCIs in Manipur. It was observed that children are institutionalised in CCIs due to the death of parents, poverty, family incapacity, armed conflict, and disasters. Institutions are designed to provide a family like environment with shelter, food, clothing, education, healthcare, and other services along with care and affection (Rahul & Yadav, 2022). Children in need of care and protection as well as in conflict with the law, should be provided with conditions that support their physical, mental, and emotional growth, enabling them to achieve their full potential in a safe environment for their overall development (Modi & Das, 2016).

1.1 Statement Of The Problem

Every child should live in a supportive and protective environment that promotes their full potential. However, there are many children who lack a stable home and family. These include orphans, abandoned, surrendered, trafficked children, and destitute children with families that are unable to look after them and are placed in CCIs. In Manipur about 12,000 children have gone through harrowing condition, in the ethnic violence and 57 children have been shifted to children's homes (Times of India July 11, 2023). Institutionalised children often

experience neglect, lack of love and care, lack of proper trained staff, and the absence of a consistent caregiver have been implicated in the negative outcomes among these children. This study delves into the experiences of psychosocial development and challenges, examining how children have been affected. Furthermore, it will shed light on the coping mechanism and strategies to deal these challenges by the children and measures taken by institutions to address these children's problems and promote positive impacts. Therefore, this study on children living in CCIs assumes significance.

2. Literature Review

Institutionalised children often lack nurturing environment which is crucial for their physical growth and psychological development. It has been reported that such as physical, cognitive and emotional problems are some of the primary developmental issues common among these children. Therefore, interactions between children and their immediate environment at micro level are emphasized to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional care settings and to enhance child friendly environment (IJzendoom et al., 2011). It was observed that children who lost their parents experienced worry, anxiety and depression with limited care and support. The trauma of losing their parents has also severely impacted their feelings such as mistrust, inferiority, shame, guilt, insecurity, and improper conduct (Naqshb, 2012). Meanwhile, Gupta (2019) observed that children in institutional care experience depression and other mental health issues due to a lack of care and safety, often unable to express their emotions and opinions freely. Additionally, they find it challenging to grow according to their expectations because of discrimination and limited life opportunities. It was reported that most of the institutionalised children come from very poor and disadvantaged families; therefore, CCIs are considered a better place for the abandoned and homeless children, as child care system aim to provide a healthy environment and holistic development for the children. However, it was also observed that bullying behaviour is found to be common among the institutionalised children (Rohta, 2020).

Orphans and other vulnerable children are often found to be more emotionally deprived and experienced insecure and thus hamper their overall development as compared to normal children (Chanu, 2020). Likewise, Anjali and Sathyamurthi (2021) found that institutionalised children often lack love and attachment with their caregivers, and these children feel more comfortable to share and express their opinions and emotions with their peers, and through them they receive emotional support rather than from the caregivers. The study also reveals that children exhibit behaviours like arrogance, disobedience and a sense of abandonment in

the absence of parental fear due to lack of guidance and emotional attachment. Additionally, caregivers and working staff find it challenging to discipline these children due to child rights legislation. Study on the lived experiences of trafficked children reported that the hopes and dreams of the children aspire to achieve often turn into despair. Despite their vulnerability and oppressive conditions, they face, children develop various coping mechanisms and survival strategies including spiritual approach, supporting inmates, and shifting focus (Gearon, 2021). A review on psychosocial development also found that frequent negative experiences and societal pressure can lead to feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem; therefore, parental care and support are emphasised to promote positive development (Legg, 2023). Further, a study on the experiences and perspectives of caretakers working in childcare institutes in Delhi highlights that the rise in institutional care is influenced by increasing number of orphaned and abandoned children. Institutional care practices are often encouraged because many children are victims who have been rescued from parental abuse, destitution, and other catastrophic conditions. These institutionalised children are provided with the basic necessities of life such as safety, food, and shelter. However, the study also found that these children often experience emotional issues and poor social interaction (Sharma et al., 2025).

3. Methodology

The objective of the study is to understand the reasons for children being institutionalised in CCIs, examine their psychosocial development and the challenges they face, and explore the coping mechanisms and strategies for resilience and recovery. The researcher used a qualitative case study approach to understand the lived experiences of children in CCIs, selecting six cases purposively from institutions in Manipur. In-depth interviews were conducted with the children, data were collected from primary and secondary sources, and thematic analysis was performed on the six case narratives.

3.1 Background Of The Respondents

Case 1

Sina (name changed) is a 14-year-old girl in eighth grade; she is the sixth daughter of eight siblings. She has lost 4 siblings and left with four surviving siblings. She only has her father, who is a cultivator. In 2024, her mother died of cancer. Sina is a child infected with HIV/AIDS (CIA) and her family has financial issues; therefore, she was institutionalized in the CCI in 2022. Sina claims that she comes from a broken family and does not have close bonding with her family. She expresses that in the CCI, she has made some friends and does not feel as lonely as she does at home, although she mentions that she does not have a very close friend

and finds it difficult to trust others. Sina explains that she has a close attachment with the institution owner and she calls them *Mom and Dad* because they care for her like her own parents. She also expressed that she is happy with the services and facilities provided to her in the institution.

Sina explains that she developed hearing loss in her right ear after a marble entered when she was little, treatment was done however, no improvement was observed. She describes herself as disobedient and often cause problem in family and experienced emotional distress. She expressed that now she feels ashamed, guilty and regretful about her past behavior and reluctant to discuss and prefer to forget. According to one of the caretakers, Sina was sexually abused and was admitted to the institution following the incident. Additionally, thoughts about her health and family situation make her feel upset and worried, and she stated that she sometimes cries in dark and isolated places where no one could see her. However, seeking God, motivates her, and receiving support from the caretakers through counselling, Sina is gradually adjusting to her surroundings and improving. She states that she loves to sing and aspires to become a gospel singer, as singing makes her happy and helps her feel better when she is sad. Sina concludes that living in the CCI has helped her grow both mentally and spiritually therefore, she is grateful to the institution. Due to a combination of factors, including her HIV/AIDS status, parental loss, sibling deaths, victim of sexual abuse, and a lack of attachment with family, Sina is extremely vulnerable. Her reliance on faith and desire to become a gospel singer reflect adaptive coping mechanisms.

Case 2

Len (name changed) is a twelve-year-old girl, she has lost both of her parents to HIV/AIDS when she was just four years old. She has seven elder siblings who initially took responsibility of her care and raised her. Len is a child infected with HIV/AIDS (CIA) and was institutionalized in the CCI since 2022. She describes that five of her elder siblings are married, and she live with one of her older brother's family prior to admitted in the CCI and has attachment with them. She adds that she has few good friends in the institution who are supportive and kind to her, and whom she also trusts them. However, she explains that she doesn't have much attachment with of the caretakers at the institution because she doesn't feel easy and comfortable. Len also claims that her family situation concerns her, as she is an orphan. In addition, she misses her home and wanted to go home as she did not go home from the time she was admitted to CCI. Additionally, when teachers and caretaker scold her for her disobedient or misconduct, she gets upset and these issues sometimes affect her focus on studies. She expresses that she wanted to leave the CCI most of the time because she felt

homesick and lacked independence due to the rules and regulations, and because she was not accustomed to such an environment. Furthermore, Len expresses that she wants to become a designer when she grows up. She states that she feels uncomfortable sharing all her problems with the caretakers during counselling sessions. She expresses that living in the CCI has helped her achieve better performance in her academics, personality development, and gardening, as she gets opportunities to learn and receives support from the institution.

Len's case reflects the long-term impact of early parental loss. Although she benefits from institutional care, her discomfort in sharing personal problems suggests emotional support.

Case 3

Chouba (name changed), aged 17 years in 12th grade, has lost his father when he was small and only has a mother. He is the fourth son among 6 siblings; he describes that he comes from a very poor family with no stable source of income, and that semi-orphanhood led him and his younger brother to be placed in the CCI in 2011. Meanwhile, Chouba describes that he grows up without the parental love and care as he was institutionalized at a very young age. He expressed that he feels he was abandoned by his mother, as she doesn't visit, and he has no connection with his mother and other siblings besides his younger brother. He also expressed that he feels the institution is more like his home than CCI because he grew up here and received love, care, and support from the caretakers. He said that he had a close bond with the owner, who was like a father to him, and he felt like he was part of his family. He reports that he also has many good friends in the institution, like brothers, and supportive friends at school.

Further, Chouba said that despite the ethnic violence occurred in Manipur, he and his younger brother did not leave the institution and continue to live in there. He says that he feels safe and is not worried, as he has been living in this institution since childhood and has adapted to the environment, which is located in Kangpokpi district, mostly occupied by the Naga and Kuki communities. However, Chouba expressed that he is very worried and stress about his career and future as he grows older. He aspires to join the Indian Army after completing his 12th grade and believes that joining the Indian Army would help him become independent and support his younger brother, who loves to become a football player, as they don't really have a connection with their family. Chouba describes that when he is worried and stress, he shares his problems with the caretakers and the owner motivates and supports him. Furthermore, he expressed that even after attaining 18 years of age, he wishes to continue living in the institution, as he feels it is like his home and is not interested in returning to his family. Further, Chouba explains that living in the CCI has helped him become a better person, and he is grateful

to the institution for the support he received, he also states that if he were not living in the CCI he would not be studying today. Chouba's case shows that institutional attachment has replaced family bonds providing him a sense emotional security and detachment from his biological family. Despite this security, Chouba experiences anxiety about his career and future independence, reflecting stress common among older adolescents in CCIs.

Case 4

Lungdi (name changed), aged 15 years, he has lost both of his parents when he was small, he is a single child and lived with his paternal grandmother. He describes that his grandmother is a cultivator and he comes from a very poor family with no source of income, and that orphanhood led him to be placed in the CCI in the year 2022. Lungdi describes that he receives services and facilities in the institution, including proper accommodation, food, bedding, clothing, basic toiletries, and education. However, he reports that some of his belongings like school bag and cloths are being affected during the 2025 flood as their resident is very close to the river. Therefore, he doesn't have school bag and sufficient casual clothes to wear, and basic daily use like surf and soap are also not adequate sometimes. He also states that he is happy and grateful with the facilities provided to him as he comes from a poor and complicated background with no proper facilities and education opportunity. Lungdi describes that he grows up without the parental love and care at a very young age and sometimes he feels he was abandoned by his immediate relatives as they don't visit, and he has no close connection with them. Meanwhile, he also expressed that he feels the institution is more like his home as has few good friends in the institution like elder brother to him and whom he trusts, he also received love, care, and support from the caretakers. Lungdi describes that he studies in a residential school within the institution and is very weak in his studies as he starts his schooling very late unlike other children in the institution and has issues with his academic for which he is still in 2nd grade although he is 15 years of age. He expressed that he loves to play football and he is not interested in academic however, he is worried about his future as he grows older. Further, Lungdi explains that living in the CCI has helped him become a better person, and he is happy for the services and support he has received, stating that if he were not living here today, he would not be studying.

Case 5

Bob (name changed), is a 13-year-old boy, his family belongs to two different ethnic communities—his father is Meitei and his mother is Naga. The family was affected by the ethnic violence that erupted in May 2023 in Manipur, which led to their temporary relocation to a relief camp for safety and they stayed for few days and return home as the situation

improved in their area. Moreover, both his parents are cultivators and had work to do in the fields. Bob also stated that he was institutionalized due to ethnic violence and financial difficulties. Meanwhile, Bob reports that despite the ethnic tensions his family property were unharmed. Three of his siblings are with his parent while, he is admitted to CCI. He said that his parents and siblings remain connected to him, with visits during visiting days, and he also goes home during festivals. This ongoing family contact provides Bob with emotional support, though he experiences mixed feelings about being away from home for the first time.

Bob expressed that he is happy with the services and facilities provided to him at the CCI as he also receives care, and social support. Additionally, he has formed friendships that offer him kindness and encouragement. Further, Bob describes his experience in relief camp that a large crowd was taking shelter in the relief camp, and the conditions were not very good, he stated food, drinking water, and basic necessities were provided, so it was manageable for him. Although his experience was not very bad, he said that he felt scared and worried about the situation. Bob expressed that he struggles with the emotional challenge of being away from home and missing his family and wish to study in private school rather than at government school and aspires to become an IAS officer. Additionally, disciplinary issues at the institution sometimes disrupt his studies. However, he received emotional well-being supports from the caretakers. Bob expresses that he has a few good friends in the institution who are supportive and kind to him. He also enjoys playing cricket with them which makes him happy. Furthermore, he shares that living in CCI has helped him improve his speaking and writing skills however, he prefers to stay at home with his parents. Bob's case shows how family attachment, community conflict and institutional care shape his development. Thus, constant emotional support and stable care is crucial for his well-being.

Case 6

Sem is a 12-year-old boy, he has both the parents with 2 older siblings, his father is a cultivator and his mother run a small shop. The family was affected by ethnic violence, which led to their temporary relocation to a relief camp for safety. Sem family lived in relief camp for more than one month and restored back home. His family struggles with the ethnic violence therefore, he was admitted in the CCI since 2023. Despite the ethnic tensions. His parents and siblings remain connected to him, with visits during visiting days and he also goes home during festivals which gives him emotional support. Sem states that he is happy with the facilities provided to him besides strict rules and regulation, he sometimes faces disciplinary actions like scolding and beating that upset him. Additionally, Sem struggles with his health issues, he often gets headache during the day and also experience emotional challenge of being away from

home and missing his family sometimes disrupt his studies. He also adds that the trauma of ethnic violence in his community had worried him for security. However, Sem feels comfortable sharing problems with his friends and caretakers and that supports his emotional well-being. Sem aspires to become an IAS officer and do afforestation to protect environment showing ambition and motivation. His family's constant attachment and his aspiration to become an IAS officer contribute positively to his development. Thus, Sem's case illustrates the influence of family and institutional care on his development despite his psychosocial challenges.

4. Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed based on the six case narratives. It identifies and highlights several recurrent and interrelated themes.

i. *Reasons for Institutionalisation in CCIs*

Parental loss, financial instability, health-related issues, and community conflict are the primary reasons for children being institutionalised in the CCIs across all the cases. It revealed that two cases were institutionalised because of orphans and another two cases were due to semi-orphans, indicating complete or partial loss of parental care and financial difficulties. Cases 1 and 2 are vulnerable to health-related issues and considered as Children Infected with HIV/AIDS (CIA) and need adequate care and medical support, as their families are financially instable. Cases 5 and 6 families were disrupted due to ethnic violence and this compelled the children to seek institutional care for safety and security despite having parents. Thus, the six cases show the interconnected vulnerabilities rather than a single factor leading children to seek CCIs.

According to Chingtham (2014), the major causes of children being institutionalised in CCIs in Manipur include: (1) economic crises, (2) HIV/AIDS, and (3) ethnic and armed conflict, thus this literature review support the above primary data.

ii. *Psychosocial Development and Challenges*

Family Attachment

Variations in family attachment were observed across the cases, ranging from strong family attachment and connection to limited contact and emotional detachment. Children affected by ethnic violence (C5 and C6) maintained consistent family attachment reflecting strong family bonds that provided them with emotional support despite their stay in CCIs. In most cases, children expressed having no emotional attachment and very limited contact with

their families due to being orphans or semi-orphans, and the lack of visits from family members and relatives. To quote one of the participants C3, *"I have no interest in returning to my home and wishes to remain part of this institutional family even after attaining the age of 18 as my mother doesn't visit and I feel abandoned."* Thus, it highlights how various nature of children's separation from family including loss of parent/parents, health related issues, incapacity and ethnic conflict have shaped children's perceptions and attachment towards their families and environments.

Caretaker Attachment

In CCIs, attachment to caretaker plays a crucial role for institutionalised children, as they come from different backgrounds. Case narratives revealed that attachment and relationships with caretakers varied among these children. C1 and C3 expressed that they have strong emotional bonds with the caretakers, particularly with the owner of the institution, whom they regarded as a parental figure providing love, care, and guidance. Such relationships helped them receive the absence of parental love and care, and emotional support. *C1 expressed "I do not have a very close friend and I find it difficult to trust others but I have a strong bond with the owner of the institution, whom I calls "Mom" and "Dad" because they care for me like my own parents".* However, C2 has partial trust, uneasiness in sharing problems, and limited emotional attachment with some caretakers, highlighting that not all children adapt equally to the institutional environment. In most cases, children described their relationships and attachment with caretakers as positive. It was also observed that positive attachment enhances trust, emotions and personal growth, while poor attachment needs attention, caring and empathy for the well-being of the child.

Psychosocial Challenges

The study observed that institutionalised children experienced multiple psychosocial challenges, including loneliness, health-related concerns, stress and anxiety related to studies and career aspirations, and family separation. Children with CIA experienced multiple challenges related to health and emotional burden, lack of independence, and difficulties in adjustment. C1 has hearing loss in her right ear and is a survivor of sexual abuse, which has resulted in trauma and stress affecting her mental well-being. *C1 expressed "concerns about my health and family situation makes me feel upset and worried, and sometimes I cry in dark and isolated places where no one can see me."* C3 experienced fear and anxiety related to career and future and few other children experienced stress frequently related to their studies and poor academic performance. In particular, C4 started schooling very late and is currently in second grade despite being 15 years old. Children who were affected by ethnic violence, struggled

with homesickness, and educational disruption, as they preferred to stay with their families and study in private schools. Both the children aspired to become IAS officers in the future and they believed that private schools provide better quality education and offer greater career opportunities. Across all cases, it was observed that most institutionalised children experienced homesickness, anxiety and stress related to studies, which influenced and affected their mental well-being.

Emotional Experiences

It was observed that institutionalised children frequently experienced emotions such as loneliness, shame, guilt, fear, stress, anxiety, and hope. C1's narrative reflects deep emotional distress, including guilt, regret, loneliness, and isolation. Meanwhile, children affected by the ethnic violence expressed fear and worry related to family separation. The study also revealed that most of the children experienced homesickness and feelings of abandonment by their families. These emotional responses reflect the impacts among the institutionalised children. Therefore, emotional support such as love, care, empathy, and trust from the caregivers and families is crucial for children's overall-development.

iii. Coping Mechanisms and Strategies

It was observed from the case narratives that despite multiple vulnerabilities, institutionalised children highlight their personal strengths, coping mechanisms, and strategies. Children such as C1 expressed that faith and spiritual practices, including praying and singing, along with institutional support through counselling and motivation, helped her cope with her emotions. Engaging in recreational activities such as singing, sports, and gardening and peer support positively influenced and helped most children cope with their emotional well-being. While, counselling provided in the institutions further enhanced emotional healing and self-esteem. It also helped children feel included, loved, and safe, which is essential for their overall development. C3 quotes *"If I join Indian Army, I will be financially independent and I can support my younger brother for his career, as we don't have a connection and support from our family, this motivates me to study and work hard. I also received motivations and supports from the institution owner who is like a father to me."* Likewise, aspirations to become IAS officers in the future served as a strong motivation and resilience for C5 and C6. Overall, it was observed that education, recreational activities, peer support and counselling within CCIs played a crucial role in shaping resilience and enabling institutionalised children to cope effectively with challenges and work towards a better future.

4.1 Suggestions

1. Concerned authorities of CCIs should regularly monitor services and facilities to meet children's needs effectively.
2. Emotional support from immediate caregivers and families is require to enhance children's psychosocial development.
3. Encourage children's participation in decision making and provide opportunities for them to raise their concerns and needs.
4. Organising awareness programmes and educating children about life skills, child rights and coping mechanisms of psychosocial challenges can enhanced better well-being.
5. NGOs and the government should organise workshops to equip caregivers with the knowledge and skills to address children's issues effectively.

5. Conclusion

Children are institutionalised for various reasons, including parental death, financial instability, health-related issues, and ethnic violence. It was observed that CCIs provide a safe and supportive environment for children facing many difficulties in their lives. However, children continue to experience emotional pain, trauma, and disrupted attachments. Caring relationships, peer support, counselling, and opportunities to learn and express their concerns and needs can help them cope better. Overall, the study's findings reveal that institutionalised children need deeper emotional support from immediate caregivers and families to ensure acceptance, safety, and healing for their overall well-being.

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