ENABLING CHILDREN WITH VULNERABILITIES TO PURSUE THEIR EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: In India, millions of vulnerable children, particularly those without parental care and living in alternative care settings, and girls from vulnerable sections of society, face significant barriers to accessing quality education. This compromises their fundamental right to education and often leaves their potential unfulfilled. There are also many cross-sectional barriers, such as poverty, gender, caste, and social norms, that reduce opportunities for education. Despite strong legislative and policy mandates in India that emphasise the government's obligation to protect children's rights and ensure access to education, gaps persist. Inadequate education hampers children's overall well-being and development, leaving them unprepared for independent living. This paper highlights the efforts of Udayan Care, a practitioner organization, in regard to improving educational access and outcomes for vulnerable young people. It highlights the role of practitioners in two key programs run by Udayan Care when it comes to supporting academic pursuits and their effects on life outcomes for the recipients of its two programs: Udayan Ghars (Sunshine Homes), a residential program for children without parental care; and Udayan Shalini Fellowship, a program to support girls from underserved families through higher education and leadership. This paper explores the systematic and sociocultural barriers to education for children in care and for young adolescent girls in the communities, and demonstrates how individualised support, mentoring, and a trauma-informed approach can transform their lives. Findings are based on internal program evaluations and practitioner insights and experiences. This paper also offers recommendations to empower vulnerable children through comprehensive education and skill-building initiatives. These best practices demonstrate the transformative power of tailored interventions in shaping the lives of marginalised children and creating a foundation for their independent and successful futures.

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Education is a vital component in a child's holistic development, so much so that the right to education was enshrined in the 1945 constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as "education for all" (Schuelka, 2018); 3 years later it was included in Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). The commitment to education is further reflected in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015), emphasising the global consensus on education as a fundamental driver of development and equity.

India's education system remains one of the largest globally, encompassing approximately 1.47 million schools and 9.8 million teachers, and serving around 248 million students (Ministry of Finance and Corporate Affairs, 2025; Sadhwani, 2024). The nation's commitment to children's rights is enshrined in the Constitution of India (2022) and reinforced by international frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which was ratified by India in 1992. These mandates obligate the government to safeguard children's rights, ensuring their access to family-based care and basic education (Modi et al., 2020). Despite these commitments, challenges persist: recent data indicate a decline in school enrolment, with a drop of 3.7 million students in the 2023–24 academic year compared to the previous year ("School enrolment fell", 2024). Furthermore, infrastructural deficits are evident: only 57.2% of schools have functional computers, with 53.9% having internet access (Gohain, 2025). These statistics highlight the ongoing need for targeted interventions to address educational disparities and ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to quality education.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 (Ministry of Education, 2009), mandates free and compulsory education for all children aged 6 to 14 years, reinforcing education as a fundamental right. The RTE Act along with several schemes initiated by the Department of School Education and Literacy (DoSEL) has led to significant improvement in access to education, but providing access to quality education remains a challenge. The National Policy for Children 2013 directs the state "to take affirmative measures — legislative, policy or otherwise — to promote and safeguard the right of all children to live and grow with equity, dignity, security, and freedom, to ensure that all children have equal opportunities; and that no custom, tradition, cultural or religious practice is allowed to violate or restrict or prevent children from enjoying their rights" (Ministry of Women and Child Development [MWCD], 2013). Complementing this vision, the National Policy on Skill Development (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2009) provides vulnerable youth access to skills training, which gives them the opportunity to become financially self-reliant. Though skills are not an alternative to education and may have limitations in long-term career growth, the skills development policy in India provides avenues of lateral and vertical movement between skills development and education. The recently announced National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirms that "access to quality education must be considered a basic right of every child" (Ministry of Human Resource

Development, 2020, p. 6). NEP aims to promote the education system to ensure that career opportunities and life skills development are available to young people.

Even after two decades of landmark declarations of RTE and other legal provisions and mandates, a large number of children in India are deprived of access to education. According to UNICEF India (2022), an estimated 6.1 million children were out of school in 2014, reduced from 13.46 million in 2006. Of children who attend school, 29% drop out before completing the full cycle of elementary education; often they are the most marginalised children (Social & Rural Research Institute, 2014). Around 50% of adolescents do not complete secondary education, while approximately 20 million children do not attend preschool (MWCD, 2015). The Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2022 (ASER Centre & Pratham, 2023, p. 18) states that only 20.5% of children in Grade 3 in government or private schools can read at Grade 2 level or above, a rate that has decreased from 27.2% in 2018. In India, there are difficult socioeconomic conditions and cultural norms that can negatively impact children's access to quality education: various research studies have pointed out precursors to educational deprivation among children in India, including poor economic conditions (Rupavath, 2023), caste and ethnic discrimination (Singh & Sharma, 2022), gender discrimination (Prasad, 2020), and poor infrastructure (Swaminathan et al., 2020).

Similarly, "children without parental care", who are typically placed in child care institutions due to the slow growth of family-based care options, are a distinct vulnerable population, whose basic and fundamental right to education is compromised, if not completely neglected (Brännström et al., 2017). Most children growing up in residential care homes are first-generation learners; one of the key drivers for families choosing to send their children to residential care is the hope that they will receive quality education (McNamara et al., 2019). Children have a greater chance of not being enrolled in school if they come from homes with limited economic resources; they are also the most at risk of poor adjustment at school, and often become school dropouts (Evans et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2021). Approximately 47.4 million children aged 6 to 17 (17% in this age range) were out of school (Mehta, 2025). According to the Ministry of Education's (2024) *Report on Unified District Information System for Education Plus* (UDISE+, Table 10, p. 17), which used 2023 to 2024 data, drop-out rates escalate with age, particularly among adolescents from low-income families, due to factors such as financial constraints, the need for child labour, and lack of access to good-quality education. Rajesh et al.'s (2022) study highlights that constant movement of children in and out of child care institutions, along with frequent changes in caregivers and teaching stakeholders, disrupts education and affects learning outcomes. Children who are separated from their families and are sent to residential care have already faced several challenges, such as experiencing early trauma, betrayal of trust, and loss of family attachment; if these challenges are unaddressed, their ability to learn and pursue formal education will be impaired (Udayan Care, 2019).

Girls in Indian society have few opportunities for education. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights reported that 39.4% of girls aged 15 to 18 were out of school, and more than half (57%) of girls drop out upon reaching the 11th grade (Rai, 2018). Recent research

underscores the significant impact of socioeconomic and cultural barriers, such as poverty, entrenched patriarchy, and especially early marriage, on girls' education in India.

Estimates of the number of women in India who marry before 18 range from 23% (UNICEF, 2023) to 47% (Plan International, 2023). Early marriage significantly restricts girls' access to education, as it often results in school drop-out and lower educational attainment. This link between child marriage and the level of education is clear: in data from 2005 to 2006, 77% of women without education between the ages of 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18, which was true of only 27% of those with secondary or higher education (Das Gupta et al., 2008). Likewise, Kanji et al. (2024) found that young women who married early had significantly lower educational outcomes compared to their peers who married later. Supporting the education of girls significantly reduces the risk of child marriage (Paul, 2019; Raj et al., 2019).

Ensuring a quality education for vulnerable children and girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds opens a world of developmental opportunities for them, liberating their intellect, unlocking their imagination, boosting their confidence, widening their life choices, developing their agency, and enabling a dignified, empowered life. Much of the available literature on education is restricted to examining the role of parents, educators, or teachers only; however, there is another workforce actively involved in supporting vulnerable children and girls in their education journey through meaningful social work interventions: practitioners. Documenting their prospects, contributions, and challenges is important, as their role in moulding a vulnerable child's future is undeniable. This paper explores the roles of practitioners in providing educational support to vulnerable young people, with a focus on Udayan Care, a Delhi-based NGO aiding children without parental care and girls from marginalised sections. It highlights their vulnerabilities and challenges and the practitioners' responsibilities, and gives recommendations for ensuring quality education. Case studies from Udayan Care further illustrate successful outcomes and the transformative impact of sustained, individualised mentoring and informed support.

Founded in 1994, Udayan Care (2025a) operates in 41 cities across 17 Indian states, empowering over 61,000 children, women, and youth; in 7 states, it works with children without parental care either in its own child care institutions or in government-run institutions. For instance, one initiative, the Udayan Shalini Fellowship program, helps underprivileged girls from the 11th grade through graduation. Udayan Care collaborates with individuals, corporations, and foundations to raise funds through various channels and online platforms, allocating the resources to different programs according to their individual needs.

The Udayan Ghar *Model*

Udayan Care established Udayan Ghars (Sunshine Homes) in 1996 to nurture children without parental care through a unique group home model, based on the L.I.F.E. (Living in Family Environment) concept. Children aged 6 to18 are placed in these homes via child welfare committees under the Government of India's (2015) Juvenile Justice Act, where they receive care and guidance through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Upon turning 18, they transition to

independence with aftercare support. The program aims to provide a stable home, quality education, personality development, mental health support, and long-term rehabilitation, enabling care leavers to become resilient, responsible citizens, equipped for employment, social integration, and future stability. Udayan Ghar has nurtured more than 2,200 children. Over 190 children live at Udayan Ghars at any given time, and more than 70 young adults are being supported through the Aftercare Program. Udayan Ghar believes institutionalisation should be the last resort for the care and protection of children; its first priority is thus family identification and strengthening the families to enable restoration of the children.

In the Udayan Ghar program, a committed team of practitioners — supervisors, in-house caregivers, social workers, welfare officers, psychologists, health specialists, and volunteers — strive to provide children with a holistic upbringing, including quality education, fostering physical and mental health, all-round development, a safe and non-discriminatory environment, vocational training, life skills, enrichment activities and experiences, and secure and stable attachments, along with a trauma–informed care approach as a strong mental health care component.. The home level teams are supervised and assisted by professional staff at Head Office, with a manager at the helm. The professional staff recruit and train new staff, manage all documentation and legal work, conduct biannual internal audits at the homes, and help improve standards by organising capacity-building workshops for both the practitioners and the children. Udayan Ghars also has a unique model of long-term volunteers, called "mentor parents" — socially committed, civil society members aged 45 or above who have experience in successfully raising their children and are able to raise resources for the homes through their own networks. Each home has at least 2 or 3 mentor parents who work together to provide the functions of a parent. There are currently 29 mentor parents working in Udayan Ghars.

Through the Udayan Ghars, Udayan Care is committed to ensuring that every child receives a quality education, regardless of the trauma or challenges they may have faced. Recognising that emotional well-being and learning go hand in hand, the organisation creates a nurturing, family-like environment where children feel safe, supported, and motivated. Trained caregivers, mentors, and mental health professionals work closely with each child to provide not only academic guidance but also psychosocial support tailored to their individual needs. By integrating therapeutic care with structured educational support — including tutoring, school partnerships, and life-skills training — Udayan Care empowers children to overcome past adversities and build a strong foundation for a brighter future.

The Udayan Shalini Fellowship

In 2002, Udayan Care initiated a unique academic excellence and personality development program, the Udayan Shalini Fellowship (USF) for deserving and talented girls from vulnerable socioeconomic backgrounds. The uniqueness of the program lies in the fact that it not only finances higher education but also provides regular mentoring and leadership development and inculcates

a sense of social responsibility in the selected girls (the fellows, or Shalinis). The program has five major objectives:

- To provide financial support to deserving socioeconomically challenged girl students from government schools to enable them to continue their studies;
- To provide individual attention and counselling through personalised mentoring to support the girls' overall mental and moral development;
- To provide opportunities to widen the girls' horizons of knowledge in fields like career choices, social issues, and personality development;
- To encourage social sensitivity in the girls so that they are motivated to contribute to society once they become independent and start earning; and
- To develop "employability skills", with components of training on career options, job-oriented skills, and understanding of the employment world.

The program provides monetary support to the girls and young women from Grade 11 through to graduation or vocational training. The scholarship amount varies from 10,000 INR (114 USD) to 30,000 INR (340 USD) per annum, depending upon the classes and the course, for a period of 5 to 6 years. The USF program consists of capacity-building training with a structured focus on employability skills. A unique feature is the component of mentoring, which follows a pyramidal structure in which fellows are mentored by past grantees of the program (called mentor *didis* [sisters]), who in turn are mentored by educators and professionals. Mentors motivate and guide the fellows towards greater achievements and realising their dreams and career decisions. The concept of "giving back" is a pillar of the program, as passively relying on charity and support will not help the girls evolve into sensitive and responsible citizens. To assure their active participation, the program has a component of 50 hours of obligatory social work.

Research Methodology

This paper aims to explore the impact of Udayan Care's approach to its two programs, the Udayan Ghar program that provides residential care for children, and the USF program that focuses on mentorship and higher education for girls. It highlights the approach taken to ensure education for the beneficiaries of both programs, analysing aspects of their experiences along with practitioners' perspectives in order to understand the programs' impact holistically.

Research Design

This paper incorporates a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the educational impact of both programs, the role of mentorship and caregivers in shaping the academic access of vulnerable young people, and practitioners' insights, including those of social workers, mentors, and educators.

Data Collection

Case study narratives: Through selected impact stories, this paper showcases the personal and academic growth of the respondents as they transition from vulnerable backgrounds to successful careers.

Practitioner's perspectives through key informant interviews: The experiences of social workers and caregivers in the Udayan Ghar program in supporting children's education are presented, including challenges they faced and policy gaps they have identified. For the USF program, we discuss the role of mentors and program coordinators in career counselling, gender-specific challenges, and best mentorship practices. Information from several program reports and evaluation reports of the respective programs and relevant policies on education and care have also been taken into account.

Ethical Approval

The study was a result of projects under the auspices of Udayan Care; we therefore obtained the Udayan Care Board's approval and followed our own Organisation's Safeguarding Policy (Udayan Care, 2025b). The data for this paper were collected and analysed according to the guidelines of those policies. The administration of the questionnaire adhered to ethical standards for research established by Udayan Care (2025c), incorporating considerations such as voluntary participation and obtaining informed consent from participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study for the Udayan Ghar program was done through a thematic approach to interpret qualitative inputs from case study narratives, key informant interviews, and the annual QANCC (Questionnaire to Assess the Needs of Children in Care) survey (Modi et al., 2021). Additionally, data from the 2022–23 QANCC cycle were analysed to assess children's perceptions of their educational support, with five indicators focusing on academic guidance, self-study, and opportunity recognition. These insights were triangulated across sources to ensure a comprehensive and validated understanding of the programs' educational impact.

Impact stories from the USF were analysed to trace patterns in the academic and personal growth of young women from vulnerable backgrounds, focusing on themes such as trauma recovery, mentorship impact, and skills development. Interviews with practitioners, including social workers and mentors, were coded to identify recurring themes around educational support strategies, policy gaps, and gender-specific challenges. Program evaluation reports and policy documents were reviewed to provide contextual depth. Case studies of successful fellows illustrate how structured, long-term support can lead to transformative outcomes, with many alumni excelling in fields like medicine, engineering, and civil services. By analysing case studies aligned with the USF's strategic pillars, the paper will highlight how its unique combination of mentorship, skills development, and social engagement creates sustained impact, distinguishing it from traditional educational support programs.

Ensuring Quality Education in Udayan Ghars*: The Role of Practitioners*

Research indicates that children in care have significant adverse and traumatic experiences that can have negative and long-lasting effects on their physical health, mental health, education, and employment (Gypen et al., 2017). At each home, children are provided with abundant opportunities and appropriate counselling to help them achieve their full potential. Besides preparing them for age-appropriate classes at home with arrangements for tutors and volunteers, and enrolling them in schools or in open schools[1] according to their level and capability, they are also given access to vocational training opportunities. An education committee consisting of mentor parents, social workers, and counsellors meets quarterly to discuss the progress of the children, highlighting areas that require support or improvement.

The program recognises that both physical and mental health are integral to the educational attainments of the children. Therefore, at Udayan Ghars, special efforts are made to ensure physical well-being and positive mental health. Each child has regular, detailed health check-ups with immediate follow-up if any specialised treatment or surgery is recommended. Free or subsidised treatment and medications are sometimes available through collaboration with various hospitals, clinics, and laboratories. A mental health program has been set up to address the mental health concerns of the children and young adults; it also helps care providers to develop a sense of responsibility and constantly improve their skills. The mental health program team consists of a psychiatrist specialised in children and adolescents; psychologists; and other program officials like social workers, case managers, and part-time special educators. An individual care plan (ICP) is developed for each child by the mental health program team, with the participation of the child and all carers directly responsible for their upbringing. Regular team meetings are organised to generate synergy among the team and also to discuss challenges and approaches for specific cases. Children are consistently motivated to work hard: many children from Udayan Ghars have become engineers, lawyers, beauty therapists, teachers, psychologists, or social workers, among other disciplines. Those who are not inclined towards academics are encouraged to take vocational and skills training while pursuing open schooling.

Because periodic self-assessment of care strategies within Udayan Ghars had shown that caregivers and children had different ideas about the control and care provided, it was necessary to develop an understanding of the differing perceptions of children and adults in regard to care-giving. A participatory methodology and a commitment to listening to children directly were adopted, which led to the development of a tool in alignment with sociocultural norms in Indian settings, the Questionnaire to Assess the (Fulfilment of) Needs of Children in Care (QANCC). This initiative arose due to the absence in India of a standardised tool for self-assessment that had been validated for use in similar child care institutional settings. The QANCC, functioning as a self-assessment survey, was designed with specific objectives: (a) to evaluate through longitudinal

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[1] In India, "open schools" are a mainly home-based alternative for those who cannot attend regular schools for economic or other reasons. https://www.bosse.ac.in/what-is-open-school-system-in-india/

analysis four dimensions of need (basic/fundamental, emotional, educational, and interpersonal) of children in these institutions, enabling corrective measures; and (b) to develop and standardise an evidence-based indicator tool from the children's perspective to assess the security of their rights. Administered annually to children in all Udayan Ghars, and designed to be answered by the children themselves, QANCC aims to assess the four types of need in children aged 10 to 18 (Modi et al., 2021). Even though the survey was designed to be self-administered, questions were read to the younger children (to age 13) and their answers were recorded individually.

Assessing and providing for each type of need individually and collectively are crucial for a holistic approach to improving care and quality of life at both the individual and home levels. The self-administered instrument was initially crafted in 2011 following an extensive literature review and consultations with various field experts to incorporate parameters believed to influence child development. Content validity was ensured by gathering input from professionals in the child care field concerning a variety of issues related to children in child care institutions. During the pilot study, the questions were assessed by experts for appropriateness in terms of relevance to, and usability in, Indian settings. Longitudinal data from each of the homes, spanning from 2011 to 2019, were systematically collected on an annual basis (typically around October or November) by interns trained in social work or psychology. Data from 2011–2012 were gathered from April 2011 to March 2012, aligning with the Indian school and financial years. The year 2011 served as a pilot year, and a deliberate gap year was implemented in 2017–2018 to minimise carry-over effects. This gap year was utilised for a comprehensive review of the questionnaire and to incorporate changes necessitated by contextual alterations over the years, thereby aiding the standardisation process. Following the gap year, in 2018–2019, some minor modifications and additional questions were introduced in order to enhance the tool's effectiveness and relevance. To date, this data help in understanding the extent to which the needs of children are currently being met, and what more is required. Within the educational needs assessment, five distinct questions have been formulated, which delve into aspects of the quality and sufficiency of guidance and support for studies or career, opportunities to explore personal interests at school, and the provision of assistance to identify and nurture individual skills and talents. The perspectives of children on whether they engaged in self-study or sought assistance, along with their awareness levels regarding their own shortcomings and weaknesses in an educational environment, including self-introspection and comprehension, proved highly valuable in formulating recommendations (Modi et al., 2021).

The Aftercare Program of Udayan Care assures a continuum of care to the young adults who leave Udayan Ghar upon turning 18, with the aim of enabling them to become self-reliant and independent adults. The care-experienced youngsters are assisted with financial support, mentoring, vocational training, and employment assistance, and are helped to become a part of the Global Care Leavers Community[2] and the Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN)[3]. Through

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[2] https://careleaverscommunity.org/about-us/

[3] https://clan.org.au/about/

Udayan Ghar and its Aftercare Program, many children without parental care fulfilled their educational and career aspirations. At the time of writing, more than 100 alumni of the program were employed and around 40 had graduated. Three of the Udayan Ghar alumni pursued post-graduate studies in India, and five went abroad for higher education. Moreover, 60 alumni had completed their senior secondary education with diplomas in vocational courses.

Case Study 1

Anupama, an 18-year-old girl, had lived through abandonment, orphan-hood, separation, and consequent early childhood trauma. Her father had died and her mother had moved on, leaving Anupama and her elder brother to be looked after by their ageing maternal grandmother. Living in penury and working as domestic help, the grandmother struggled day and night to win survival for herself and the little ones. After living in this situation for some time, the siblings were transferred to Udayan Care for long-term care and protection. Anupama, through the love of mentor parents and caregivers, and through psychosocial interventions of a mental health team that included a social worker and mental health professionals, was helped to overcome her issues relating to fractured attachment, stress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and relationship-building.

Anupama was helped to strengthen her academic knowledge and was continuously encouraged to realise her potential. Through hard work, she won admission to a prestigious school where she was able to polish her skills and focus more on her strengths. During a year-long trip to the United States in 2016 as a part of the Matsiko World Orphan Choir, she travelled to different parts of the country, made new friends, and learned about different cultures. This was a turning point for her. Her confidence and belief in herself grew stronger.

After successfully completing senior secondary education, Anupama is currently preparing for the entrance examination in pursuit of her dream to become a graphic designer. She also qualified for the Aneesha Wadhwa Talent Scholarship (AWTS): in addition to her academic achievements, Anupama is a skilful dancer, has a mellifluous voice, and also does well in arts and crafts. She has won numerous awards and certificates in events and competitions.

Case Study 2

Radhika, along with her sister, was transferred to a Udayan Ghar in 2019. She is one of the sincerest child of Udayan Care and was identified as a diligent student. She was given the opportunity to write a proficiency test for admission to The Sagar School, Alwar, Rajasthan, one of the top boarding schools in India. Radhika's dedication to her studies and her determination to become a doctor factored into her securing a spot there. This positive development has inspired other children at the home to do their best in their studies.

Case Study 3

Priya was sent to a Udayan Ghar along with her younger sister *Pari* in 2010. A friendly girl with a calm aura who had the drive to succeed in life. She has been a constant support in the Ghar,

helping to look after the younger children. In school, she was an all-rounder. Her academic performance was appreciated by all her teachers, but she also participated actively in co-curricular activities that helped her hone her social skills. With the support of the Ghar team, Priya's zeal to succeed led to a mark of 90.6% in high school; the Chief Minister of Rajasthan awarded her a citation honouring her performance in the board exams. Priya is currently studying at Chandigarh University, where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in education. Through patience and hard work, she is slowly but steadily working towards a bright future for herself. She is a true inspiration to *Pari* and all the other children at the Ghar.

Quality Education Through the Udayan Shalini *Fellowship: The Role of Practitioners*

Education that empowers females should help them develop a sense of self-worth and agency, while also equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to make informed choices, challenge societal norms, and actively participate in social, economic, and political life (Murphy-Graham & Lloyd, 2016). The USF is structured to meet these objectives. The program has 38 chapters, three mentors, and mentor didis (past grantees of the USF), as well as senior educationists and professionals. Fellows for the program (the Shalinis) are selected through a time-tested, indigenously developed system, designed with the help of experienced educationists from the USF program, that is based on criteria of need, ambition, and talent (NAT). To be eligible for the fellowship, girls must have an aptitude for studying with a minimum mark of 60% in Grade 10, come from a low socioeconomic background (family income of 192 USD a year or less), and be enrolled in government schools or government-aided private schools. The selection process includes submitting an application, a written test, an interview, and home visits.

The USF team of senior coordinators and regional managers assures the smooth functioning and implementation of the five pillars of the program. They supervise the selection and induction of Shalinis, connecting with their schools at least twice a year to follow their progress and to maintain a relationship with the schools. The team conducts motivational and employability workshops and mentor–mentee meetings on a regular basis. In addition to the day-to-day activities of the program, the responsibilities of the team also include maintaining a strong relationship with alumni of the chapters to promote their meaningful engagement in the program offerings, and ensuring quarterly meetings of the alumni cell, followed by an annual meeting. Convenors, senior persons who are life-long volunteers and thus work pro bono, are integral to the project. So too are the members of the core committees, who play multiple roles, including establishing local partnerships, securing meeting venues, and managing donations. They authorise expenses, handle agreements, and oversee staff appointments with head office approval. They support the Project Coordinators in implementing the USF program, maintaining records, organising workshops, and coordinating mentor–mentee activities. Additionally, they may work with Shalinis as mentors and resource persons for capacity-building. Each core committee, comprising three to seven members, is responsible for strategic mentoring initiatives and maintaining standards set by the Board of Trustees and head office. They ensure adherence to guidelines, seek clarifications when needed,

and involve like-minded individuals in mentoring. They also recommend mentors, brief them on responsibilities, and complete appointment documentation.

Over the last 20 years, the USF has impacted over 16,900 girls, 57% of whom are presently employed in different fields and professions including medicine, engineering, law, civil service, academics, and entrepreneurship. Among the USF alumni, 68 have successfully acquired doctoral degrees; 41% are STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) graduates, 30% have graduated in humanities, 20% have graduated in commerce, and the rest have completed vocational courses. The project supported them in many ways, helping them to continue their studies; improve their educational outcomes, life, and employability skills; and build self-esteem, empowerment, sensitivity, and empathy. It has also reduced the incidence of early marriage. Monitoring and evaluating the progress of the program and of the individual fellows are undertaken and documented through a detailed performance evaluation in which the fellows are assessed on criteria designed by the core committee. The project has indirectly improved Shalinis' families and communities by enhancing financial conditions, promoting girls' education, strengthening families, increasing gender awareness and engagement in civil society, and fostering women's participation in nation-building. The USF program has transformed the lives of the Shalinis and their communities by providing Shalinis with continued education; increased employment opportunities; an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem, and aspirations; increased ability to make independent decisions; improved social well-being and quality of life; increased respect in the community; a positive change in the outlook of parents and other family members; and a reduction in the incidence of early marriage. Overall, the USF program has helped many girls to become self-reliant and socially responsible Shalinis.

Case Study 1

Damini, a resident of Mohan Garden, Delhi, overcame financial hardships to become the first girl in her family to complete Grade 10. In 2007, while studying in a government school, she learned about the USF through her teachers. With the USF's support, she completed Grade 12 and resisted family pressure to marry early, instead choosing to pursue a bachelor's degree in technology.

Facing skepticism from her family about vocational courses, Damini proved her determination by scoring high enough in the Bachelor of Technology engineering entrance exam to be awarded a laptop. She attended the USF's Microsoft-certified computer training sessions and used the skills thus acquired to help her father secure more contracts online, supporting her family's income.

Today, at 33, Damini works as a consultant at a multinational company, earning good salary. From nearly being forced into early marriage to becoming a financially independent and respected decision-maker in her family, *Damini* credits the USF for transforming her life through education and technology.

Case Study 2

Anika was selected for the USF program in 2017. Initially unfamiliar with the USF and NGOs, her positive experience at the exam centre and the guidance she received from her mentors reassured her. Anika came from a modest background — her father was an auto-rickshaw driver, her mother a housewife — and her family was thrilled for her to have such an opportunity. The USF provided her with crucial support, and despite challenges, she is now working at a hospital, earning a monthly income of 180 USD, while pursuing a master's degree in microbiology. The leadership skills, knowledge, and confidence she gained from the program helped her become independent. Committed to giving back, she aims to make a positive impact in the future.

Case Study 3

Riya had faced many personal challenges, including a knee injury that halted her promising sports career. With the support of the USF, *Riya* diligently prepared for government job examinations, and ultimately realised her dream of joining the Delhi Police as a constable. As she embarks on this new chapter of her life, she remains deeply grateful to her USF mentors, who played a crucial role by providing her with guidance when necessary, helping her navigate her challenges. The fellowship provided her with a platform to interact with like-minded individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual encouragement. This nurturing environment helped Riya build her confidence. Her journey highlights the importance of providing young women with the resources and support they need to overcome personal and professional hurdles. Riya's story demonstrates that one can overcome adversities and find stepping stones toward success with the right support system, perseverance, and determination.

Discussion and Recommendations

Supporting vulnerable children in obtaining an education is crucial for their development, helping them overcome challenges and shape their futures. Udayan Ghar and the USF program show that systematic efforts can bring positive change and that a dedicated team can ensure quality education, empowering children and girls to become independent and contributing members of society. We conclude this paper by putting forward some proposals to help improve the lives of children and girls through education and secure them a brighter future. Our key recommendations are listed below.

Ensuring children's rights: Child care institutions should expand efforts to include evidence-based assessments and corrective interventions to improve children's well-being. This study highlights the importance of actively listening to children and fostering their agency for better outcomes. Collaboration between schools and child protection systems remains a challenge due to communication gaps and inter-professional barriers. Prioritising schooling programs, case management, and digital learning access can enhance educational opportunities, especially for children in alternative care. Care reforms are essential for social inclusion, and mentorship from qualified adults plays a crucial role in improving educational outcomes for children without

parental care. The Udayan Ghars emphasise the importance of education by integrating formal schooling with supplementary academic support. Children are enrolled in mainstream schools and receive additional tutoring to bridge learning gaps. Regular assessments help tailor educational plans to individual needs, supporting each child's efforts to achieve academic success. It is crucial that *anganwadis* [community-based support structures], government schools, government hospitals, and other public places accessible to girl students in villages and towns be utilised to the maximum extent. Additionally, there is a need to establish a forum at the district level to promote higher education opportunities, mandating a short-term teaching assistantship for postgraduate students at village-level schools near their homes. It is also vital to spread awareness regarding higher studies and research as part of the coursework for research scholars in collaboration with NGOs. Government support can play a pivotal role in facilitating this progress.

Family strengthening: A safe and secure family is the best environment for a child to grow up in, and institutionalisation should be the last resort for child care. Maximum efforts should therefore be taken to assure family-based care for every child and to prevent unnecessary separation of the children from their families. Understanding and addressing the fundamental problems of families that make them incapable of taking care of their children, and enabling them to provide a conducive environment for children's development, will decrease the need for institutionalisation. For girls, Udayan Care conducts awareness sessions with parents to emphasise the importance of continued education, aiming to shift cultural perceptions and encourage them to support their daughters' academic pursuits.

Creating awareness and empowering communities: In the Indian context, communities wield powerful social influence. Often, however, the discriminatory attitudes and practices entrenched in communities become hurdles to the development of children, especially girls. It is therefore essential to work towards changing the behaviour of the communities, generating more awareness and encouraging greater gender sensitivity. Udayan Care collaborates with schools and local bodies to implement child protection policies and create child-friendly spaces within communities, ensuring a safe and nurturing environment for all children. It also interacts with school counsellors to track the progress of Shalinis and provide need-based interventions. Access to digital devices is provided in both programs in keeping with current trends.

Capacity-building among practitioners: The role of social work practitioners who work with vulnerable children to support their educational journey and holistic development is significant, but receives too little attention. To improve the efficacy of child development interventions, practitioners should be given more training and technical assistance to enhance their knowledge, skills, and confidence. Udayan Care invests in the professional development of its staff and volunteers through regular training sessions on children's rights, counselling techniques, and educational methodologies. These capacity-building initiatives ensure that practitioners are equipped to address the complex needs of vulnerable children effectively. The organisation also partners with academic institutions to provide internships and fieldwork opportunities for social work students, fostering a new generation of skilled professionals committed to child welfare.

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