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Topic: Operationalising Best Interest of the Child: A study of Decision Making in Child Protection Mechanism

Following are the important research findings:

- Most Child Protection workers understand child protection as measures to prevent and respond to all forms of violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, and maltreatment of children.
- Most respondents believe that the Best Interest of the Child encompasses physical, social, emotional, psychological, and educational wellbeing, aligning with Juvenile Justice Rules.
- Majority of respondents do not consider culture and religion as important determinants of the best interest of the child. Instead, they focus on factors like age, psychological health, and risk assessment.
- While respondents strongly support family-based alternative care, they often resort to institutional care due to resource constraints, limited funding, and scarcity of family-based options.
- There is a concerning belief among some respondents that a certain amount of emotional abuse is acceptable for disciplining children, and some are reluctant to remove children from families solely for physical or emotional safety.
- There is a high caseload on Child Welfare Committees, and an acute shortage of staff in District Child Protection Units. Only 43 members were found in Child Welfare Committees against the required 50, and 46 professionals in District Child Protection Units against the required 90.
- About three-quarters of respondents were not satisfied with the quality of assistance from District Child Protection Units, and more than half were not satisfied with NGO assistance.

- Social Investigation Reports, a crucial decision-making tool, are often conducted through phone calls rather than proper home visits, compromising their effectiveness.
- Individual Care Plans are frequently similar for different children in the same institution, suggesting they may be prepared without proper interaction with children.
- Decision makers often have to rely on incomplete information and instincts due to delays in information gathering and high caseloads.
- District Child Protection Unit staff are underpaid and on contractual basis, which affects the quality of decision-making for children's best interests.
- While India has strong legal mechanisms for child protection, the shortage of family-based care alternatives often leaves institutional care as the only option.
- In Delhi, there are only three counselors available for the entire District Child Protection Unit, leading to Child Welfare Committee members often taking on counseling roles despite lacking formal qualifications.
- The decision-making process generally aligns with Baumann's Decision-Making Ecology model, but due to limited alternatives, decision-makers often must use a satisficing model rather than exploring all possible options.
- While respondents scored above average on child protection attitude assessments, there were significant discrepancies between practice and attitudinal concerns.