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The American University in Cairo

School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**Young People transitioning out of Alternative Care in Egypt: Aftercare
challenges faced by Non-profit Organizations and the way forward**

A Thesis Submitted to the

Public Policy and Administration Department

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Public Administration**

By

Mai Amr Abdel Hafez

Fall 21

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List of Acronyms:

AC	Alternative Care
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics
CM	Case Management
CRC	The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child
CV	Curriculum Vitae
EGP	Egyptian Pound
IRB	Institutional Review Board
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOSS	Ministry of Social Solidarity
NGO	Non- Governmental Organization
SW	Social Worker
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
UN	The United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund

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Abstract:

Young people raised in Care homes face many challenges after they reach 18 years old and have to leave these care homes to be independent and integrate with society. Minimal research is conducted in Egypt on this topic; thus, this study is presented to fill this research gap by answering these research questions: What were the biggest challenges faced by the care leavers? And how can the government and the non-profit sector support in decreasing these challenges? The purpose of the study is focused on the effectiveness of care homes in preparing young people for aftercare and how to provide sustainable service by the government and nonprofit organizations to promote the wellbeing of the care leavers. 17 Semi-structured interviews have been conducted with care leavers, social workers, and child protection experts to gain insights on this issue. The main findings of this study are presented in a life cycle approach with three main themes: pre-leaving care, transition, and post-leaving care. The pre-leaving care factors identified that had a later impact on leaving care, such as frequent placements, the relationship with caregivers, facing stigma since childhood, and overprotecting the females. In the transition phase of leaving care: the preparations and support that some care homes provide to the young people and the experience of leaving from the young people's perspectives. In The post-leaving phase, many challenges have been identified in several domains such as: housing, life skills, education, employment, relationships, stigma, financial situation, health, mental health, resilience, and relationship with the civil society. The study concludes with recommendations to policy makers and practitioners derived from the data with the aim to increase the effectiveness of care homes in preparing young people for aftercare.

1. Chapter One: Introduction and Background

The transition to adulthood is a very challenging phase for all young people. Most young adults' journey nowadays extends to their mid-twenties until they become fully independent (Stein, 2005). It is much more challenging for children raised in alternative care homes as they face the outside world without their parents' support (Van Breda, 2015; Bond, 2020; Rome,2019).

The Egyptian child law states that children without parental care can stay in care institutions until they are 18 years old (Egyptian child law no 126 of 2008). After they reach 18 years old, most young people leave their institutions and live independently. This forces the young person to face significant life changes like getting employed, finishing education, getting married, and being a younger parent than their peers (Stein, 2005). Aftercare can be seen as the State or the non-profit sector acting as a good parent by providing the young people with the long-term support needed to make a smooth and successful transition to adulthood (Stein 2012).

According to various sources, the published statistics for the number of children in residential care are different. According to UNICEF, there are currently 2.7 million children living in residential care worldwide (UNICEF, 2021). Still, according to Faith to Action initiative, there are between two and eight million children living in residential care worldwide (Faith to action, 2021). These differences could be due to inaccurate reporting from some countries. Thus, various international and national documents were drafted to outline the State's role in providing care for children without their parents. Aftercare is mentioned directly in some of these documents. The International documents include The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child, which is a binding instrument outlining the rights of children and tackles specifically the issue of Alternative care in two articles (20 and 21) which projects the State's

obligation to provide assistance and protection to children deprived of family care. The Alternative Care Guidelines issued by the UN put the general framework for alternative care, and specific guidelines mentioned aftercare.

The Local documents include the Egyptian child law (Egyptian child law no 126 of 2008), which states that any person below 18 is considered a child and outlines the role of the care institutions. The executive regulations for alternative care and the model regulations for alternative care further discuss alternative care guidelines and tackle aftercare directly in some articles. In the model regulations, article 34 is specific to aftercare. It states that institutions should provide aftercare services to young people above 18 years old who are staying at the institution or those who left (Article 34, model regulations for the Egyptian child law, 2014). Also, international and national conferences were conducted just for the topic of aftercare, discussing all the challenges care leavers face and proposing recommendations.

In international literature, the care leavers interviewed had similar struggles in pillars like securing housing, continuing their education, getting employed, and having healthy social relationships (Rome, 2019; Shankaran, 2018; Adeboye et al., 2019). Other studies measured the protective factors that helped these young people transition to adulthood, such as having a supportive relationship with an adult, proper planning before leaving care, and training to prepare them for their lives outside the institution (Cunningham, 2013; Thompson, 2016; Manso 2020).

Minimal research is conducted in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, focusing on this topic. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap by exploring Egyptian care leavers' experiences after leaving the alternative care system and the effectiveness of care homes in preparing young people for aftercare.

A qualitative methodology is used for this research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with three main groups: 1) Young people who left the care system to tell their experience from their point of view. 2) Social workers who work in the alternative care system to explain the services they provide to support these care leavers and the aftercare process. 3) Child protection experts to add to the research more details on the aftercare process in the Egyptian context, recent developments, and policy implications.

Problem Statement and Research Objectives:

Care leavers experience instant adulthood when they reach 18 years old and have to deal with many major life changes simultaneously, such as: finding housing, budgeting, finding a job, and continuing their education (Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Unlike their peers, who usually have the support of their family during these life changes. Especially in Egypt, it is customary in the culture that the parents support their children through university and prepare them financially to get married. The above makes the transition to adulthood much harder for care leavers and makes them more likely to struggle in housing, social relationships, mental health problems, maintaining a steady job, and continuing their education (Stein, 2005; Breda, 2015).

The obstacles the care leavers experience is due to many factors. There are factors in their pre-leaving experience, such as being abused, neglected, facing multiple transitions, and their relationship with their caregivers. Also, there are the challenges of not being prepared or having received proper rehabilitation for their life aftercare (Rome 2019; Bond 2020).

This paper aims to outline what happens on the ground in leaving care, the challenges the care leavers face, and the factors that helped them overcome them.

The main research question is: What were the biggest challenges faced by the care leavers? And how can the government and the non-profit sector support in decreasing these challenges?

In addition, the following sub-questions:

- 1) What is the aftercare system that is currently being implemented in Egypt?
- 2) What are the main factors that helped the care leavers in their aftercare experience?

The results of the above questions are intended to identify good practices and guide the drafting of good policies in order to make the transition of care leavers to adulthood easier with a higher probability for their success and increase the effectiveness of the government and non-profit sector in preparing the young people for aftercare.

Background:

In this section, the researcher presents the background on aftercare by reviewing international and national documents that govern alternative care, focusing on the articles regarding aftercare.

According to UNICEF, there are currently 2.7 million children living in residential care worldwide (UNICEF,2021). There is no updated data on the number of children and young adults in the alternative care system in Egypt. Still, according to Abdel- Aziz, there are ten thousand children in care homes placed in about 500 care homes and twelve thousand in alternative families (Abdel-Aziz, 2019). This could be an underestimate of the actual number of children as there are no accurate data published on this matter. There are various reasons children leave their families and are admitted into care homes: poverty, family separation, lack of interest in parenting due to unwelcome gender, or unwanted pregnancies (Ali, 2016). All of these children will pass through the aftercare phase, leaving these care homes at some point in their lives. Various international and national documents outline the State's role in providing care for children without their parents. These documents will be reviewed in regards to the aspect of aftercare.

International Documents:

The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child: (CRC)

The UN issued the convention in 1989 as an international binding instrument outlining the rights of children. Egypt was one of the states that ratified this convention. The CRC aims to ensure that all children around the world receive fundamental human rights. The CRC has defined the child as any person younger than 18 years old unless the age of adulthood is obtained earlier according to the law applicable to the child. This is why most young people leave the care homes at 18 years old as they are not considered children anymore.

"For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier." (Article 1, CRC).

The CRC tackled the issue of alternative care mainly in articles 20 and 21.

"1. A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her family environment, or in whose own best interests cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the State.

2. States Parties shall in accordance with their national laws ensure alternative care for such a child.

3. Such care could include, inter alia, foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or if necessary placement in suitable institutions for the care of children. When considering solutions, due regard shall be paid to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background."

(Article 20, CRC).

Article 20 projects the State's obligation to provide assistance and protection to children deprived of family care, whether permanently or temporarily. Article 21 is mainly about adoption.

2) The Alternative Care Guidelines issued by the UN:

As mentioned above, the CRC stated that states should provide care and protection to children without parental care, but the CRC did not mention what measures should be taken. There was an international need for more guidelines in regards to alternative care. A series of meetings have been conducted to draft the guidelines until the UN approved them in 2009. The guidelines are not a binding document and are not obliging for any state to follow, but they put the general framework. Aftercare was explicitly mentioned in the guidelines (131-136).

"131. Agencies and facilities should have a clear policy and should carry out agreed procedures relating to the planned and unplanned conclusion of their work with children to ensure appropriate aftercare and/or follow-up. Throughout the period of care, they should systematically aim at preparing children to assume self-reliance and to integrate fully in the community, notably through the acquisition of social and life skills, which are fostered by participation in the life of the local community.

132. The process of transition from care to aftercare should take into consideration children's gender, age, maturity and particular circumstances and include counselling and support, notably to avoid exploitation. Children leaving care should be encouraged to take part in the planning of aftercare life. Children with special needs, such as disabilities, should benefit from an appropriate support system, ensuring, inter alia, avoidance of unnecessary institutionalization. Both the public and the private sectors should be encouraged, including through incentives, to employ children from different care services, particularly children with special needs.

133. Special efforts should be made to allocate to each child, whenever possible, a specialized person who can facilitate his/her independence when leaving care.

134. Aftercare should be prepared as early as possible in the placement and, in any case, well before the child leaves the care setting.

135. Ongoing educational and vocational training opportunities should be imparted as part of life skills education to young people leaving care in order to help them to

become financially independent and generate their own income.

136. Access to social, legal and health services, together with appropriate financial support, should also be provided to young people leaving care and during aftercare." (UN Alternative Care Guidelines, 131-136)

The guidelines clearly state that all agencies should have a clear policy and mechanism for aftercare and should prepare the children towards independence and community integration by helping them acquire social and life skills. The transition process should be individualized, considering the differences between each child (gender, age, maturity, and circumstances). It also mentions that children should be part of the planning process and have at least one specialized person supporting their independence in aftercare. In addition to that, care leavers should have access to ongoing educational, vocational, social, legal, health services and appropriate financial support.

The Egyptian context:

In Egypt, there are twenty-two thousand children within the alternative care system. There are around ten thousand in institutions placed in about 500 institutions and twelve thousand in alternative families (Abdel-Aziz, 2019). There are two types of institutions, public and private, managed by NGOs, but the ministry of social solidarity supervises both types. These institutions are divided by age. Institution nurseries for children ages 2-6 years old and institution homes for children ages above six years. As for children under two years are admitted to motherhood and childhood centers supervised by the ministry of health. The institution homes are further divided into two types: one type provides care to children whose parents are unknown, and the other is for children who got separated from their parents, whether willingly or not (Abdel-Aziz, 2019). In Egypt, there are some national documents and legislations that govern the alternative care system; these documents will be reviewed regarding aftercare.

Egyptian Constitution and the Egyptian Child Law:

The new Egyptian Constitution was issued in 2014; article 80 outlined the State's responsibility towards children as follows:

"A child is considered to be anyone who has not reached 18 years of age. Children have the right to be named and possess identification papers, have access to free compulsory vaccinations, health, and family care or an alternative, basic nutrition, safe shelter, religious education, and emotional and cognitive development." (Article 80, The Egyptian Constitution).

As stated above, the Egyptian State considers persons under 18 years of age as children and have rights to alternative care if family care is not possible, so young people above 18 years old are not entitled to alternative care as per the constitution.

As for the Egyptian Child Law, it was issued in 1996 and was amended in 2008. Chapter 2, article 48 states that care institutions host children from six to eighteen years old, and children can stay until they finish their higher education if they are passing. So here again, the law enforces the institutions to host the children till 18 years old, and above that age is left to the institution's decision.

"Social care institution for children who are deprived of family care" shall be any reception center for children of not less than six (6) years of age and not more than eighteen (18) years of age, who are deprived of family care for being orphans, or due to the breakdown of the family, or to the family's inability to provide proper care to the child. The child may remain in the institution if he is enrolled in higher education, until graduation, provided that circumstances that led to his admission in the social care

institution are still standing, and the child has successfully passed his educational stages." (article 48, chapter 2, Egyptian child law).

In addition to that, in the executive regulations, article 112 states that the Minister of social solidarity should outline in the model regulations: the criteria to accept children into institutions, the services provided, including aftercare, and the system of hosting houses that can be affiliated to the institution to provide aftercare services to the institution's graduates (Article, 112, executive regulations, Egyptian child law). However, in the model regulations issued in 2014, the first article defined the care institution to provide care for children deprived from parental care starting six years to eighteen years old or until having a stable job or getting married for females. Here we can find discrepancies in the age when young people can leave the organizations; law and executive regulation state 18 years or until finishing higher education. The model regulations also state 18 years old but until getting a stable job or getting married for females. It is also left to the care institution's management to let the child stay after 18 years old or not.

In the fifth chapter (Holistic care) in the model regulations, article 34 is specific to aftercare. It states that institutions should provide aftercare services to young people above 18 years old who are staying at the institution or those who left. The regulations outline the aftercare services for young people who stay at the institution as follows: having an independent place at the institution just for young people above 18 years where they are separated from their younger peers and get support until they become independent and leave the institution. If employed, the young person should pay some of the expenses of staying at the institution with a maximum of 10% of his total expenses. The institution should provide appropriate meals according to its budget. The young people manage their lives with respect to the institution's regulations. The

institution should hire staff for the aftercare (night supervisor, social worker for 15 young people and workers).

As for the care leavers, the regulations outline that the institution supports them through follow-up and helping them if they face any problems. The institution also provides them with financial or non-financial support as per the capacity of the institution. The institution should allow the care leavers to attend different occasions at the institution. Also, the institution should host the females back if they get divorced and help them get a job to participate in the expenses and host the males back if they are having problems with their work. (Article 34, model regulations for the Egyptian child law, 2014).

Also, Article 11 in the model regulations states that each institution should have a supervisory committee. Its duties include discussing the young peoples' request for independence for work or marriage, giving them their savings book, and monitoring the withdrawal movements.

Structure of the Thesis:

This paper is divided into seven chapters as follows:

Chapter One Introduction and Background: introduces the topic, problem statement, research objective, insights on the methodology used, provides background on the alternative care context internationally and in Egypt.

Chapter Two Literature Review: presents the review of the previous research on the aftercare topic. The literature review is divided into four main themes: young peoples' after leaving care experiences, positive models and experiences around the globe supporting aftercare, factors affecting aftercare success and care leavers' resilience, and finally, aftercare in Egypt and the MENA Region.

Chapter Three Conceptual Framework and Methodology outlines the overall framework used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews and presents the methodology used, data collection methods, sampling, data analysis, ethical considerations, and the study limitations.

Chapter Four the Current status of Aftercare in Egypt presents the recent policy developments regarding aftercare in Egypt and the active aftercare programs.

Chapter Five Before Leaving Care and the Transition to Independent Living: is divided into two themes and presents the data on pre-leaving care and the transition phase.

Chapter Six Post-Leaving Care: which presents the challenges faced by care leavers in different domains.

Chapter Seven concludes the study by outlining the main findings and offering several recommendations based on the data collected and the best practices identified in the literature.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review is divided into four main themes: young peoples' after leaving care experiences, positive models and experiences around the globe supporting aftercare, factors affecting aftercare success and care leavers' resilience, and finally, aftercare in Egypt and the MENA Region.

Research on Aftercare for children without appropriate care is still in its infancy internationally, especially in the MENA region and Egypt. The existing literature can be grouped into different themes: measuring youth's performance after leaving care in various domains such as education, employment, housing, relationships, etc. Positive Programs or policies put in place supporting aftercare, factors affecting care leavers' resilience and increasing their chances of success in adult life, and finally, aftercare in the MENA region.

Young peoples' after leaving Care experiences:

Several studies around the world were conducted to measure young peoples' performance after leaving care against different domains such as housing, employment, education, and relationships, identity, resilience, transitional support provided, substance abuse, health, and crime (Rome, 2019; Shankaran, 2018; Breda, 2015). Also, research was conducted to identify the main factors that impacted their performance in the above domains.

One of the most challenging domains overall was the employment domain, as care leavers were facing a lot of instability and changes, and they were unsure who and where to go seeking help (Rome, 2019). A study that researched the status of care leavers in six African countries (Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe) concluded that care leavers were facing many challenges in three key areas: employment, housing, and social integration (Breda, 2015) as the young people faced challenges in revealing their backgrounds

with even their close circles in fear of stigma and being judged (Shankaran, 2018). Another study showing the experiences of young care leavers in Portugal and Nigeria after leaving the alternative care system highlighted that the participants were decisive about their choices in education and employment but not in marriage. Their past had a cumulative advantage regarding their education and skills gained but a cumulative disadvantage regarding relationships and marriage (Adeboye et al., 2019). They also faced many challenges in housing, managing their finances, and social relationships (Sekibo, 2017). In addition to that, they face challenges in education, mental health issues, homelessness, and addiction (Mooney, 2016). Some care leavers also face problems with the juvenile system (Cameron, 2019). Many care leavers reported being depressed and using alcohol as their main mental problems (Heerde, 2018). The main risk factors identified leading to these challenges were: frequent changes in their placement, losing government assistance, and accumulating fines (Rome, 2019).

On the other hand, the protective factors identified were living with an adult, being a student, receiving financial support, and staying in one job as they were more financially stable (Rome, 2019). Also, another protective factor is the support they receive from the care home by encouraging their independence before leaving through teaching them to prepare their own food and manage their personal financials (Shankaran, 2018). In addition to that, providing the young people with housing support when they reached 18 and helping them issue the official documents they needed for employment were all protective factors that supported the care leavers in their transition (Shankaran, 2018). Personal and social resources played a significant role as the young people, despite these challenges, could cope by using these resources. Their personal resources included persistence, hopes, and fear of failing. The social resources had formal and

informal social support (Sekibo, 2017). Research says that succeeding in one domain made it more likely to succeed in other domains (Rome, 2019).

The main recommendations to make the transition smoother are:

1. Providing aftercare services to young people leaving care is crucial and not to be seen as optional (Shankaran, 2018).
2. Supporting care leavers in their first year is imperative as it will significantly impact the years to follow (Breda, 2015). Also, providing specialized services targeting young people exiting the alternative care system, providing care leavers with mentors, supporting them in housing and education opportunities in the first year (Rome, 2019). Young people also need a structured process leading them to adulthood and supporting their transition (Breda, 2020).
3. Providing care leavers with the support they need to adjust to adult life should be provided by the government, and it also should have a strategy for all care leavers (Sekibo, 2017).

It is evident from the above research that care leavers worldwide are facing the same challenges after leaving care in aspects like housing, employment, and building social relationships. The study also shows the importance of providing adequate support to young people during their transition to help them succeed in their adult lives and overcome their challenges.

Positive Models and experiences around the globe supporting aftercare:

Some studies focused on the positive models that helped aftercare practices in different countries; these studies aimed to share these positive models to see what was successful, the factors that led to its success, and how these models can be replicated in other contexts and countries. The concept of corporate parenting received recognition in the field as a good model for aftercare. It encourages the government, agencies, and services providers to work together in fulfilling the care leavers' needs holistically instead of each agency working in isolation. The concept means that all stakeholders have a collective responsibility towards the care leavers, and they should all regularly cooperate to fulfil the care leavers' needs. (Dixon et al., 2017).

In India, a study was conducted introducing the LIFE model (Living in Family Environment), which is managed by an NGO. The model aims to create consistent living conditions, familial relationships through lifetime volunteers, and bonds between the siblings, in addition to educational and social support to help orphaned and vulnerable children transition into adulthood (Modi et al., 2016). The model incorporates positive psychology tools to encourage resilience. It addresses the grief and loss issues by using attachment and trauma-based understanding. The model also includes mentors to help young people transition into adulthood. They provide the care workers with monthly capacity-building training to ensure their quality. (Modi et al., 2016).

Girls are admitted into a residential aftercare facility for their aftercare program, and boys are admitted into housing affiliated with their educational institutions. These young people are supported with training, career development, and higher education. The support does not end until the young people are fully settled. This model was implemented for 19 years in New Delhi, India, by Udayan Care. The research shows that although the children faced abuse, neglect, and

trauma, their mental health status is encouraging due to the psychological interventions presented. This model shows the importance of intervening with the children from the beginning with different resources to support a smooth transition to adulthood (Modi et al., 2016).

In India, SOS villages in Delhi have an effective aftercare program in which they provide vocational training, career counselling, education, and housing assistance (Modi et al., 2016).

Another study was conducted in Ireland with social care workers who are currently assisting children throughout the aftercare process. The study aims first to describe the aftercare process that happens in Ireland and then highlight from the social worker's perspective on the effective transition process (Mooney, 2016). The process in Ireland usually starts with the child is 16 years old, they get appointed with an aftercare social worker. The aftercare social worker looks into the care plan already in place and assesses what skills they have and need to transition with the child. For the services provided to care leavers, the social workers mentioned an organization EPIC (Empowering people in care). They provide grants for education and training, provide semi-independent living in which staff pass by the care leaver's accommodation regularly (Mooney 2016). However, in Ireland, a study was conducted in 2017 based on consultations with care leavers, and one of the main findings was what they described as the cliff edge; the young people felt they lacked preparation and faced sudden cut-off services (Dixon et al., 2017).

A country's level of wealth is key to aftercare; for example, in Finland, which is considered a rich country, care leavers do not face the problem of housing as they are provided with an apartment when they leave care. Still, they feel that they need more support in maintaining social relationships (Torrönen et al., 2014).

In South Africa, a study was conducted with young people about to leave care, social workers, and center workers from four different children and youth centers. The study aimed to identify the effective services that prepare young people at leaving care and the effective follow-up services provided. In preparing for leaving care, most young people mentioned that engaging in daily household responsibilities effectively prepared for their transition. Also, some centers had care leavers groups for young people who are leaving care in less than a year; in the group, they were taught basic skills for daily living, how to write their CV, apply for jobs, use public transport and manage their personal finances (Bond, 2020).

The independent living program was launched in the US to prepare young people for aftercare by providing them with the needed services and training. Each State must have a state plan for aftercare and an individual plan for each young person enrolled in the program (Mendes, 2006). A study was conducted to evaluate the independent living program in Florida. They are provided with life skills training, housing support, and employment preparation. The main results of the evaluation are that the program participants achieved better outcomes in education, employment, housing, and self-evaluation. However, no significant change is shown in social relationships and substance abuse (Georgiades,2005). In the US as well, an initiative was the name of "you gotta believe" to provide care leavers with permanent parents in this critical phase of their lives. They work on the child identifying who can play that role through their acquaintances or kin, and then they provide the prospective parents with training to prepare them and get certified and licensed. The program was found to be very successful as almost 50% of the care leavers stayed with their permanent families (you gotta believe,2021).

The main recommendations from these good models are the following:

- 1) It is crucial to have a child-centered assessment be put in place to identify the child's need for a successful transition which leads to proper transition planning (Mooney, 2016; Cameron 2019)
- 2) Leaving care should be seen as a long-term gradual process that starts when they are children, helping them develop their life skills and support relationship building. They need to know how to manage personal finances, cook, do laundry and maintain personal hygiene.
- 3) The young people stated that it helps if they have a meaning for their life, whether through school or work (Torronen et al., .2014; Cameron, 2019).
- 4) The young people felt that helping them find jobs and housing were among the most essential services as having secure housing correlated with having better employment status (Bond, 2020).
- 5) Care leavers highlighted the importance of follow-up, to have their social workers call them every now and then to check on them and support them in their problems (Bond, 2020).

All of the above positive models have many aspects in common, such as long-term preparation for aftercare when children are still living with them to develop their life skills. Support in housing, education, and job finding were found as the most needed services for young people when leaving care. Also, the previous models show the importance of follow-up with care leavers at least in their first year to support them in living independently. The above models can be considered good practices that governments and the non-profit sector can study further and consider implementation.

Factors affecting aftercare success and care leavers' resilience:

Many factors in the young peoples' history and placement in care could affect their transition into independence and resilience. Resilience is defined as "overcoming the odds, coping and recovery." (Stein,2005). Stein divided the care leavers into three groups: the moving on group, the survivors group, and the victims group. The moving on group, which is the most resilient, most likely had a stable placement, a strong relationship with at least one adult, was successful in education before leaving care. They also had gradual preparation to leave and left at a later age. They left welcoming the challenge of an independent life and wanted to gain more control over their lives. The survivors group had less stability in their care and was left at a younger age with less educational qualifications without gradual preparation. This group was more likely to face problems in housing, employment, and relationships, but they saw themselves as tough and that these challenges made them stronger to face life. They also received some support from a social worker, family, or friends that helped them through the drawbacks they faced. The victims group is the most disadvantaged group who faced too many placement, bad care conditions, and leaving care at a young age with very low education. They are most likely to become homeless, unemployed, and have mental problems (Stein, 2005).

From a resilience perspective, four central social processes were identified that explain the process of leaving care from the care leavers' views. The four skills are building self-confidence, networking, belonging, and responsiveness. For belonging, care leavers, once they leave their care, spend a lot of their time and energy trying to fill their sense of belonging to a community by building relationships to feel connected to others and experience love and support. The second process is networking for achieving their goals, for example, using their networks in securing accommodation and employment. For this process, care leavers need to have developed

adequate social skills when they were in care. The third process is responsiveness which is mainly learning from others, reflecting on one's actions, and acting according to the context. This is particularly important as they would face many adverse situations, so they would need this skill to survive. The Final process in building self-confidence is a learned skill when the person is faced with challenges and believes they can overcome them. Young people see the abovementioned skills as crucial to adulthood success (Van Breda, 2015).

Some studies tried to identify the risk and protective factors to account for in policy and implementation. The main risk factors identified in the research were: economic insecurity. The care leavers are suddenly faced with so many financial responsibilities that they were not prepared for. Under the economic insecurity, their biggest fear was to end up homeless (Cunningham, 2013). Also, going through many placement changes (Islam, 2013). As young people who stayed in stable placements are more likely to succeed academically, work, feel better about themselves, and integrate into society more smoothly (Stein, 2005). In addition to that, childhood maltreatment, multiple transitions, not living with parents, the stigma associated with living in care homes, feeling different from others, lack of connection with family, and fear of financial and housing insecurity (Hines, 2005; Mendes et al., 2006).

Additionally, some care leavers perceived their birth families as a risk factor to their resilience as they are not supportive regarding their future (Driscoll, 2013). Also, the frequent changes of social workers made the young people lose confidence in the advice they received (Driscoll, 2013). In some care homes, young people are not provided with any opportunity to depend on themselves; they go shopping accompanied by a social worker. All the groceries are bought in bulk and distributed, leaving them no chance to learn how to buy and budget (Stein, 2015).

On the other hand, the main protective factor identified in the research was having a job before leaving care, as care leavers who had a job had a higher chance of success at living independently (Cunningham, 2013). The extent of young peoples' involvement in activities (hobbies, sports, organizations, religious entities) during their care affected their probability of having a mentor. The results were that if care leavers were involved in any activity, it significantly increased the possibility of having a natural mentor. Getting involved in these activities is a protective measure for these young people when leaving care (Thompson, 2016).

Having a good relationship with at least one adult was a significant factor for a successful transition (Islam, 2016; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Care leavers mentioned that having a committed social worker that they could go to for help and be listened to made the transition easier and supported their advancement in education (Hedin, 2017, Driscoll, 2013, Gwenzi, 2015). Also, having a good social worker helped the young people in their employment, whether getting them a job through their social capital, giving them practical advice, or promoting their self-esteem (Gilligan et al., 2016). Care leavers who had mentors reported increased confidence and better independent living skills (Stein, 2005). As loss of social support was causing the participants anxiety and the care leavers who were able to keep connections with their social workers, friends or family were able to make the transition more smoothly (Cunningham, 2013; Frimpong-Manso, 2020).

Receiving education and having good social relationships with adults and their peers were identified as important factors. Having a network they could trust, such as family and peers they connected with through Facebook for example, made the transition easier (Hedin, 2017). children involved in spiritual activities had a better outcome (Islam, 2016). Stability in placement, the care leavers said that having a stable and safe home made it easier to focus on

school and the future (Hedin, 2017; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). In preparation for adulthood, the young people stated that if the social worker or caregiver gave them the needed training and life skills to survive as adults, such as doing house chores, the transition would be easier (Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Also, the provision of services after leaving care would make the transition more manageable if the care leavers were provided with services like housing and financial support (Gwenzi, 2015).

Also, there were personal protective factors. The care leavers said that going through some challenging situations made them more mature and believe in themselves that they could get by and see themselves as survivors (Hedin, 2017). Individual attributes (Assertiveness, independence, goal-oriented, accepting feedback, determination to be different from parents) (Hines, 2005, Gwenzi, 2015). Confidence, perseverance, and determination to achieve goals (Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Most care leavers described themselves as self-reliant and had self-efficacy; they felt that they were in control of their lives (Driscoll, 2013; Stein, 2015). Also, care leavers who had a positive sense of identity were considered more resilient; building a positive sense of identity is impacted by their background knowledge, experience with how the community perceives them, and how they see themselves (Stein, 2005).

Family-related attributes (friends or significant others, mentors or positive parenting figures), community-related attributes (education, positive relationship with adults). These factors resulted in resilient functioning educational achievement (high expectations for career, sense of social responsibility, desire for family formation). Still, also it resulted in some psychological adjustments (rigidity, feeling stress and anxiety, and depression) (Hines, 2005).

Although the above research pieces were conducted in different countries, common factors were identified which led to increasing the care leavers' resilience, such: having a strong

social capital, a good relationship with at least one adult, individual attributes, stability, and education. To provide the care leavers with a smooth transition, each care home should ensure that the child has a meaningful relationship with at least one adult, as it is crucial to help them in the transition. Also, all care leavers should receive the necessary support to continue their education (Frimpong-Manso, 2020).

Research on aftercare in Egypt and the MENA Region:

Research on the alternative care system as a whole is still in its infancy in the MENA region. The Aftercare topic was researched in very few studies making this topic in need of much more research.

In Jordan, The Aman fund was established in 2003 as an NGO registered under the ministry of social development; it provides care leavers with educational and vocational scholarships, career counselling, and financial support until employment is secured (Al Aman Fund,2021). A research was conducted tackling the experience of young people leaving the care system in Jordan. Forty-two care leavers were interviewed, and the findings were quite similar to the international results as well. They mainly faced challenges in employment, continuing their education, and financial problems. The author also explored the impact of the Arab culture (family, patriarchy, and collectivism) on the care leavers' experience. The results were that the culture added stress to their post-care experience as the young people were stigmatized. The Arab culture puts great emphasis on one's family and origin, so they get marginalized without having known families. (Ibrahim, 2011). Another research in Jordan was conducted on care leavers, and the main findings were that care leavers face forms of discrimination leading to social exclusion. However, the society accepted them to take part in education or employment, but they gave negative replies if they would be connected to the care leavers by marriage or

friendship. And they are forced to integrate into the community without any proper preparations or a support system. The young people felt that their caregivers were not qualified and did not support them for their transition (Empowering Care Leavers in Jordan,2017).

In Egypt, Ghazi conducted the most recent study in 2021; the study is taking Wataneya's program on Aftercare (Forsa, one of their projects supporting the youths' journey to independence) as a case study assessing it and documenting the achievements and challenges. Wataneya Society is the first NGO specialized in strengthening the alternative care for children and youth in Egypt through developing systems and standards, building capacities, and providing consultations. The methodology used was semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with Wataneya's team, care leavers who took the program, and caregivers. The main research questions were how does Wataneya address the needs of the young people in transition? What are the successes and challenges of the program? And what needs to be developed? The program's main objective is to strengthen the capacities of young orphans so they can express themselves and be socially included. They used the asset-based approach, building on the children's assets and strengths. The program staff see the program's success as young people opening up and smiling and their high level of commitment. From the caregivers' perspective, they found that the program helped some young people with managing depression, setting goals, and starting their own project, while others found that some young people did not benefit at all. The young people themselves reported that the program benefited them in knowing about themselves and the respect they felt. The challenge of the program was the inconsistency in the quality of the training as it was conducted by a service provider. The young people had more expectations regarding the employment part and the age gap between the participants. The

recommendations for developing the program were for the program to be institutionalized and work on the employability part (Ghazi, 2021).

Adding to the above research, a study was conducted by Hassanin in 2018, which assessed the resilience levels of orphans living in care homes ages (16-21). The study aimed to identify the factors that lead to their resilience and the tools they need to transition to adulthood successfully. The main factors identified were similar to international findings: having a good relationship with at least one adult, having access to quality education, feeling of belonging, having a sense of social responsibility, and religious beliefs. On the other hand, the young people, especially girls, felt overprotected and that the care home did not give them enough opportunities to deal with the outside world. Also, they thought they needed wider connections and networks to succeed (Hassanin, 2018).

As identified by the international literature, the Arab and MENA region care leavers are also facing many challenges in their aftercare experience in housing, managing finances, and employment. In addition to that, the Arab culture also had an impact on the care leavers, such as facing social stigma and discrimination for not having known families, such as making the youth's experience in the region a bit different.

In Egypt, there are very limited studies on the aftercare experience of young people and the challenges they face. Thus, this research aims to fill this gap by exploring Egyptian care leavers' experiences after leaving the alternative care system and the effectiveness of care homes in preparing young people for aftercare

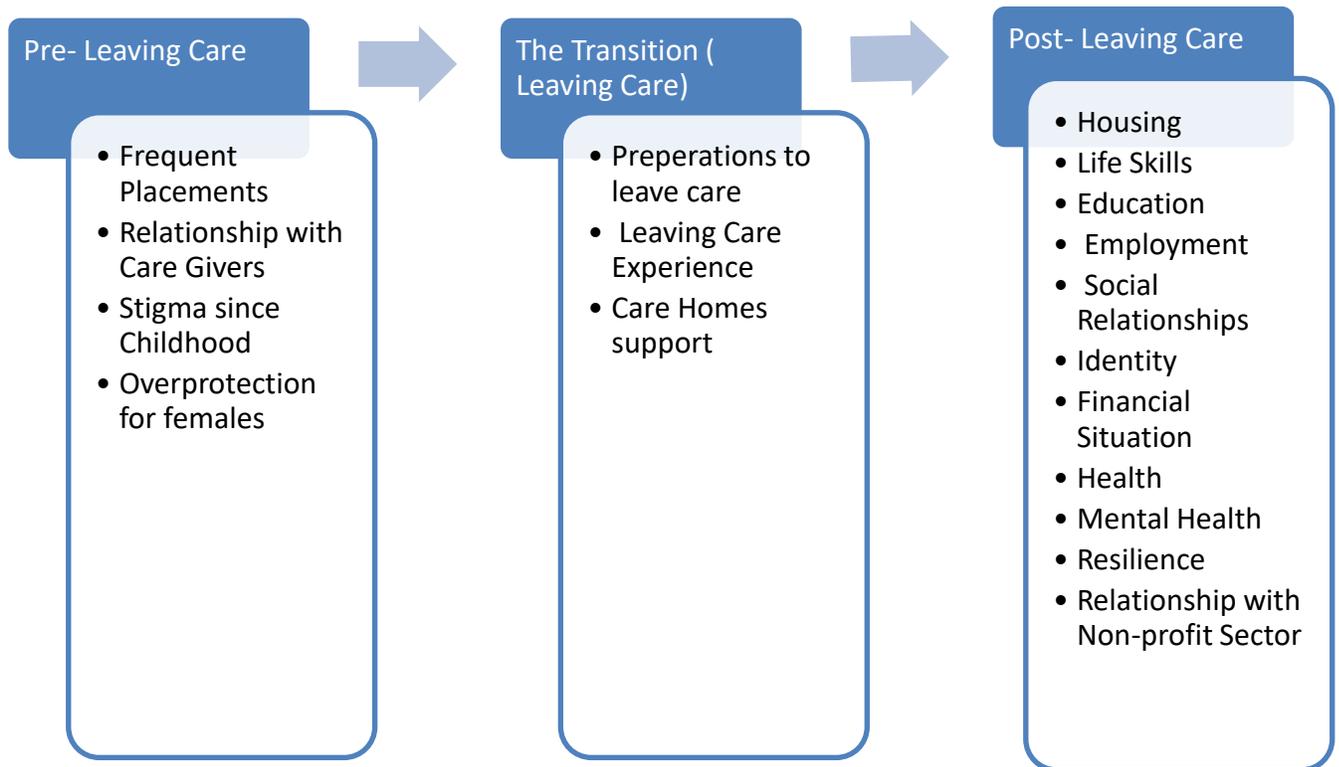
3. Chapter Three: Conceptual framework and Research Methodology

In this section, the researcher presents the conceptual framework; that the data of this thesis is written and presented through.

The Conceptual Framework:

The framework used in this thesis uses the life cycle approach that was amended for this thesis.

The data is presented into three main themes that explain the process of leaving care. In addition to that, a section is added at the beginning of the data findings to outline the recent policy developments based on the expert interviews conducted.



1) The Pre- Leaving Care stage:

In the pre-leaving stage, the researcher is outlining the factors identified by the care leavers that later impacted their leaving and post leaving care experience. Not all aspects of pre-leaving care are discussed, like the living conditions in the care homes and the services provided. As it is very different from one care home to another and is out of the scope of this thesis, the researcher is only discussing the important factors mentioned in the literature. This stage has four main points:

- 1) The frequent placements the children have to go through until they leave the care home.
- 2) Their relationship with the caregivers that were responsible for them in the care homes while growing up.
- 3) The stigma they faced since they were children in schools, care homes, and the surrounding neighborhood.
- 4) The overprotection measures experienced by females growing up in the care homes and its implications on them when they leave.

2) The Transition (Leaving Care stage):

In the transition stage, the researcher is outlining the main factors associated with leaving care. This stage has three main points. 1) The preparations the young people received before leaving care, the researcher is presenting the good practices shared by the social workers interviewed and the care leavers' opinions. 2) The experience of leaving care from the care leavers' perspectives, sharing their feelings and thoughts in that stage. 3) The support the care homes provided once they left care and the follow-up conducted.

3) The Post- Leaving Care stage:

This stage is the focus of this thesis. In this section, the researcher is outlining the 11 pillars that young people experience after leaving care. These 11 pillars are 1) Housing: the current housing situation of the care leavers, the support they received from the care homes regarding that pillar,

the challenges they face such as: homelessness, dealing with the neighbors, and coping together as flat mates. 2) Life Skills: doing the house chores, dealing with the outside community, and general life knowledge. 3) Education: paying the education fees, support from the care homes in that pillar, dropping out, and choosing the type of education. 4) Employment: the current employment status of the care leavers, finding a job, lack of employability skills, frequent job changes, and opening businesses. 5) Social Relationships: Marriage, Parenting, friendships, and family. 6) Identity and facing stigma and discrimination in revealing their identities, stigma from the society, and discrimination in education. 7) Financial situation: the savings book, the financial struggles, and financial literacy. 8) Health: care leavers access to health care and leading unhealthy lifestyles. 9) Mental Health: suffering from trauma, loneliness, burying feelings, and high level of stress. 10) Resilience: identifying the protective factors that promote care leavers' resilience, such as: having a supportive relationship with an adult, having role models, personal traits, spiritual beliefs, participating in extracurricular activities, volunteering, and reading and finally, their relationship with the non-profit sector.

The conceptual framework tried to capture the life stages the care leavers go through, starting from their lives pre-leaving care, going through the transition, and their lives after leaving care.

Research Methodology

This chapter explains the research methods used, participants recruitment, data collection methods, sampling technique, and validity measures. Also, a section is added on the ethical considerations and study limitations.

Based on the study's objective, a qualitative approach was chosen so that the informants could speak in-depth about their experiences. As the research topic is about life experiences, a qualitative approach is the most fit to capture all the details and emotions showing what happens in reality. In the literature review, most studies used the qualitative approach in measuring the different life pillars the care leavers experience for the above reasons (Rome, 2019; Shankaran, 2018; Breda, 2015)). The semi-structured in-depth interview method was chosen as the topics asked can be sensitive, so by doing individual interviews, the researcher is assuring the safety and comfort of the interviewees.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three main groups to capture all sides of the experience and as used in the literature: 1) Care Leavers (18- 40 years) who left the care system to tell their experience from their point of view (Adeboye et al. 2019; Bond, 2020; Cunningham, 2013; Breda,2020; Frimpong-Manso,2020; Islam, 2013; Rome, 2019). 2) Social workers who work in the alternative care system and work directly with young people to explain the services they provide to support these care leavers and the aftercare process from their point of view(Bond 2020; Sekibo,2017; Gwenzi, 2015; Dixon, 2015). 3) Child protection experts to add to the research more details on the aftercare status in Egypt, the recent developments, and interventions (Bilson et al., 2010).

The Data Collection Method:

The data collected for this research is built mainly on in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The interviews are conducted with three main groups: the care leavers who stayed in alternative care and went through the leaving care experience, the social workers who work directly with young people to prepare them to leave care, and child protection experts in the field to give an overall picture of the status of aftercare in Egypt, the recent developments, and policy implications. The researcher conducted a total of 17 interviews (eight with care leavers, six with social workers, and three with child protection experts who work on the policy level). The interviews were conducted over the course of a month and a half from mid-September 2021 to the end of October 2021). Twelve interviews were conducted in person, three over the telephone and two via zoom. The participants were the ones who chose the most convenient and comfortable interview method for them. The majority of interviews took around one hour; the longest took two hours, while the shortest was 40 minutes. The Interviews questions were inspired by the literature reviewed and the Social finance leaving well framework (2017). This framework is an outcome framework for care leavers assessing six main domains: Housing, Health, Relationships, positive activities, financial stability, employment, and education. The researcher started by sending emails to the most prominent organizations in the alternative care field to introduce the research and ask for their permission to interview their social workers and care leavers on the subject. The researcher has also attached the IRB approval, interview guide, and consent form for their reference. Eight organizations were contacted, six replied back with accepting to participate, and two did not reply. Out of the eight organizations contacted, only two agreed to connect the researcher with care leavers, while the rest only approved contact with the social workers.

The researcher has also contacted Wataneya (A leading NGO in strengthening the alternative care in Egypt), which supported the research by connecting the researcher to five care leavers and three social workers from their networks. They have also provided the researcher with feedback on the interview questions and shared some helpful literature on the topic before proceeding with the interviews. In addition to that, the Care-leavers' Independence Project Officer was interviewed, who gave a general view on the aftercare status as they worked with many care homes in Egypt, and briefed the researcher on their interventions to develop the aftercare sector.

Also, the researcher emailed the field experts who contributed to the Alternative Care strategy launched in April 2021. The researcher virtually attended to learn more about the topic from the policy and law perspective.

The care leavers, social workers, and experts showed great interest in the topic. They stated that this topic is under-researched in Egypt, and more research is needed to develop the needed policies. All interviews were conducted in Arabic (the mother tongue of all participants).

Fourteen interviews were audio taped after receiving permission from the participants, and the remaining three were recorded by hand during the interviews as the participants refused to be recorded. The researcher later transcribed all the interviews and then translated them into English.

The care leavers interviewed came from seven different alternative care homes to show a diverse experience, and the social workers came from five different alternative care homes. The Researcher interviewed the care leavers and social workers of the same care home in two interviews to show the two sides of the story from different perspectives while the rest were from different care homes.

Finally, the researcher attended three conferences on the aftercare topic, Sanad conference conducted in 2019 in Cairo, Sanad Forum conducted in 2020 virtually, and the International care leavers convention conducted virtually in 2020. These conferences discussed the challenges of aftercare, and the outcomes are used to triangulate this research. The researcher has also reviewed official documents, laws, policy documents, and scholarly work for the validity and reliability of the data.

Sampling:

The sampling method used in this research is purposive sampling. Also, snowball sampling was used to reach a greater number of participants who fit the study's criteria. To diversify the sample, a total of eight organizations were contacted who are the most known organizations in the alternative care field based on the literature, contributions, and conferences mentioned above. Since the researcher has no direct contact with care leavers, the researcher asked the organizations to explain to their care leavers networks the purpose of the study and methodology and share their contact information after agreeing to participate. At the end of the interview, the researcher has also asked the participants if they knew someone or an organization that could be useful to the study. The demographics of the care leavers interviewed are the following: the researcher interviewed four Males and four females to have a fair representation as males and females face different types of challenges, especially living in a middle eastern country. The Age range is from 21 to 37 years; most of the participants were in their twenties to show different life experiences and their development as some of them only left care two years. The maximum was leaving care 14 years ago by one of the participants. All participants were employed; six of the participants were employed full time while two were employed part-time. They worked in the fields (Alternative Care organizations, Media, Sales, Teaching, and graphic design). Three of the

participants are still in employment while five finished their education, three had a bachelor's degree, and two graduated from a higher institute. Four of the participants were single, two in a relationship, and two married to show the different experiences of different marital statuses. Only two of the participants had children. All of the above characteristics show the diversity of the sample and the richness of the data. The researcher stopped interviews when there was saturation in the data and that the participants were not adding new information to the data obtained.

Data Analysis:

The researcher used the Braun and Clark thematic analysis for data analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). The researcher transcribed all interviews in Arabic then translated them into English. The analysis was done traditionally without using a software. The researcher read the interviews many times to familiarize herself with the data. Then the researcher generated general codes, highlighted the common themes, and divided and rearranged the data according to these themes. Then the researcher reviewed the themes to make sure they were reflective of the data and coherent. Finally, the researcher named the themes and started working on the results section by writing each theme and describing them. The data was then triangulated with the literature review and the guidelines of the local and international documents (The UN guidelines for Alternative care, the child law, the executive regulations, and the model regulations and laws. To ensure the validity of the data, the thick description method was used as well.

Ethical Considerations:

After reviewing the research topic, questions, and consent forms, approval was obtained from the American University in Cairo Institutional Review Board (IRB). At the beginning of the research, the researcher also informed all the participants of the study's objective and that the data gathered will be used in a published thesis. It was also explained that participating is entirely voluntary with no benefits or harm. The interviews were conducted in private settings, just the researcher and the participant in a locked room or over the phone. The researcher explained that they could skip questions if they felt uncomfortable. Their consent on doing the interview was taken by signing the consent form or verbally if they were not comfortable signing the consent form as it is the only document confirming their identity. The interview was only audio recorded after obtaining the participant's approval. The researcher only received the contact information of the young people after sharing a brief of the research, the questions, and the IRB approval. The organizations first contacted the care leavers to brief them and get their approval, and then the researcher contacted them. All the participants' information is kept confidential without mentioning anything that could reveal their identities. None of the names of the interviewed care leavers are published, and pseudonyms have been used throughout. All recordings are put in a password-protected folder on the researcher's private laptop.

Study Limitations:

Since the researcher received referrals from different organizations, who worked in the alternative care systems to reach the young people who left the care system, this somehow limited the reach only to care leavers who are still in contact with these organizations and are willing to share their experience. The care leavers interviewed were more successful than their

peers as per their views in the interviews conducted as they were the ones who were working in the organizations or doing voluntary work. However, the care leavers were very different, and they came from different care homes, which made the data diverse and detailed. Also, the care leavers interviewed were very open about the challenges they faced and the experiences of their peers as well.

4. Chapter Four: The Current Status of Aftercare in Egypt

In this section, the researcher presents the recent policy developments regarding aftercare in Egypt and the active aftercare programs based on the child protection experts' interviews conducted and based on the researcher's observation from attending different conferences and meetings.

New Alternative Care Strategy:

In April 2021, the Minister of Social Solidarity announced that the government would provide care leavers with apartments in the new cities, health insurance, and food subsidies card (Masrawy, 2021). Later in April 2021 as well, the ministry of social solidarity, in partnership with UNICEF, issued the national strategy for alternative care. The strategy aims to provide the best alternative care possible to every child and young person on Egyptian soil. The strategy outlined the proposed services by the other ministries as follows: the ministry of housing to provide apartments for care leavers, the ministry of higher education to exempt the young people from the university tuition fees, the ministry of health to provide health insurance, and the ministry of workforce to provide them with a percentage of the vacant jobs, etc. (Al Ahram, 2021)

Aftercare was mentioned explicitly in the third strategic goal with the proposed interventions of designing a specialized program on preparation for independence and aftercare services and identifying measures and mechanisms for aftercare. Aftercare was also mentioned indirectly in the other goal such as: developing a specific program for aftercare, hiring a youth worker to be responsible for preparing the young people for independence, forming a consultative committee from the care leavers, and documenting the positive national models of aftercare (Al Ahram, 2021).

To further discuss the new alternative care strategy, an interview was conducted with Ms. Amira Abdel Aziz, the UNICEF consultant for Alternative care. She was the leading researcher working on the strategy. She shared the following insights:

“ Regarding aftercare in the new AC strategy, we focused on four issues. 1) The age of leaving care: so far, there is no clear agreement on a certain age, but most of the experts' and practitioners' discussions suggested that the age should be greater than 21 years. 2) The services provided by different ministries. We mentioned all the relevant ministries and outlined exactly what is needed for young people above 18 years old. 3) Preparing the children for aftercare should start from a young age maximum when the child is 12 years. Preparation can't be just before leaving the care. 4) The care home's responsibility towards the young people when they leave, what we agreed upon was that they do have a responsibility; e.g., helping them find accommodation not just leave them this could be through paying rent or getting apartments.” (Amira Abdel Aziz, UNICEF consultant on Alternative Care).

The new strategy focuses on the age of leaving care before the strategy; nothing is binding to the care home to let the young people stay after 18 years. They also mentioned the different services needed from each ministry to provide the care leavers with needed support. In addition to that, the strategy put guidelines to care homes to start preparing the children from a young age on leaving care and finally putting clear responsibilities for the care homes towards the young people and not just leave it up to the care home's management decision. The ministry and UNICEF are currently working on a national action plan to achieve the guidelines of the strategy.

New Alternative Care Law:

There is currently a new Alternative Care law that is being developed. Ms. Amira further elaborated on the importance of the new law as follows:

“One of the strategy outcomes is to develop a new separate law for Alternative Care, in light of the strategy. The strategy puts a general vision, but it is not binding. The idea of having a law derived from the strategy ensures that it becomes binding for the care homes whether they belong to the Ministry of social solidarity or other Ministries. The strategy and the law are not only MOSS’s responsibility but the responsibility of all the ministries. The law is expected to be finalized by the start of 2022 and to be presented in the parliament.” (Amira Abdel Aziz, UNICEF consultant on Alternative Care).

After launching the strategy, the ministry and UNICEF are now working to develop an alternative care law to make all the points in the strategy binding to all ministries to ensure implementation.

Conferences on Aftercare:

- **International Aftercare Leavers Conference 2020**

In November 2020, the first international care leavers conference took place virtually, with participants from over 85 countries, and Egypt was one of those countries. The conference aimed to cover the essential issues that face care leavers, develop policy recommendations, and connect care leavers worldwide. The topics covered were: the impact of covid 19 on care leavers, discussing case studies, policy and legal frameworks of different countries, and good practices in aftercare. The main demands of the care leavers were: supportive caregivers, having a digital platform connecting young people in alternative care, leaving care should be at 25 rather than 18,

being better prepared to leave care, being included in decisions, access to mental health services, and more research to be conducted on leaving care (Care Leavers' Community, 2020).

- **Sanad Conference 2019 (After Care in Egypt)**

In 2019, Wataneya society organized the first Arab conference for alternative care in partnership with the ministry of social solidarity. Wataneya is a leading NGO in strengthening the alternative care in Egypt. The conference aimed to share experiences and best practices in the Arab region to develop the aftercare system and services. The conference covered the following topics: best practices in aftercare, young peoples' participation in aftercare, the role of the private sector, the role of the media, and legislative frameworks. The main recommendation from the conference was: building the capacity of care homes through hiring and training caregivers, providing appropriate housing for young people in transition, providing psychosocial support to care leavers, ensuring youth participation in developing the aftercare system, and developing legislations and governmental policies for aftercare among other recommendations, (Wataneya Society, 2019).

- **Sanad Forum 2021 (After Care in Egypt)**

In 2021 Wataneya organized the Sanad forum three times; one of the forums was for the theme of aftercare for girls. The forum specifically discussed the issues of female care leavers, such as the challenges they faced in becoming independent and showed cases of female care leavers who were different from the known stereotype. Wataneya presented a baseline study they conducted in 2020 to assess the readiness of female care leavers to leave care. The results were that 60% of girls were not ready psychologically to leave care, 44% were not ready to live independently, 72% couldn't deal with challenging situations, and 46% did not have financial literacy (Wataneya Society, 2021).

The main recommendations of the forum were changing the perspective of caregivers on females to positive attributes like strength and independence, preparing girls for independence from a young age, keeping supporting them until 24 years, and follow-up with them when they leave, among other recommendations (Wataneya Society, 2021)

Active aftercare programs managed by the Non-Profit sector:

An interview was conducted with the Care-leavers' Independence Project Officer at Wataneya society to provide more details on the program

“The Care-leavers' Independence Project has three pillars (Developing the institutions, providing Youth programs, and creating an enabling environment for reintegration). For the first pillar, we do the following: We assess the institution based on the ministry’s model regulation of 2014, including the articles relevant to aftercare. Then, we put an action plan together, follow up with them with the implementation, and finally, we do a final evaluation to evaluate the institution’s progress. Based on the assessment, we train caregivers on how to deal with the children and prepare the young people for independence. We also give training on strategic management, child protection, psychological support, and safeguarding.

We have a youth program to prepare them for aftercare. We target young people within the age range of 14-18 years. They get life skills training on topics like Decision making, Goal setting, self-awareness, and social awareness. They also get employment skills training on topics like job hunting, preparing a CV, communicating in the work environment, etc. and finally they take independence skills, these are applied through a camp as if they left care: how to fix things, cooking, cleaning) they take how to protect the environment, types of health (physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual). In

addition to that, we have courses on Sex education, legal awareness, and financial awareness. The third pillar works on raising awareness on care leavers' rights, organizing community-based initiatives and lobbying for change of laws” (Care-leavers' Independence Project's Officer).

Wataneya developed the above project after researching the skills most needed by the care leavers for a smooth transition out of care. They provide this training to many institutions, but not all of them take the whole package. Some only choose courses that they need.

As Shown above, there are a lot of new developments on the policy and national level regarding alternative care in general and aftercare as part of it. These new developments, such as the new alternative care strategy and law, should have an impact on care leavers' transition into independence in the coming years. The pre-leaving care, transition and post-leaving care phases are discussed in the next chapter.

5. Chapter Five: Study Findings: Before Leaving Care and the Transition to Independent Living

In this chapter, the researcher is presenting and discussing the data collected from the 17 semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants as part of this study. The interviews produced rich data and many details of the life in aftercare that will be linked and triangulated to the literature. This section will be divided into two main themes:

1)) Pre-leaving care: The living conditions in the care homes and relationships with the caregivers. 2) The transition phase: the preparations to leave care, the support provided by the care homes, and the transition process itself.

1) Pre-Leaving Care

This section discusses the factors in their pre-leaving care phase that later affected the young people after leaving care. The pre-leaving care experiences of the care leavers interviewed were quite diverse. Many different factors made their lives before leaving care dissimilar, like the quality of the caregivers and their relationship with them in addition to the services provided to them. Still, also there were some similar factors identified, such as the frequent placements and facing stigma since childhood that most of the care leavers in this sample experienced.

1.1) Frequent placements:

Five of the eight care leavers interviewed spoke about frequently changing their care homes, which impacted their sense of stability. Nada, a care leaver who was 22 years old at the time of the interview, notes:

“I have been to three different care homes. In the first one, I had many friends; we all were going through tough circumstances, but the care home was terrible; they used to

punish us physically. The other two care homes were much better than the first one, but I couldn't really relate to the girls. We had different personalities and ideas.” (Nada, Care Leaver).

In Nada's experience, although she felt that the other two care homes were better than the first one, she couldn't really connect with the girls and make friends. Hagar also experienced changing the care homes more than once. Hagar, also a care leaver, confirms what Nada said, noting:

“I have stayed in three care homes. First, I stayed in a branch where I was the only girl among ten boys, they were my brothers, and I stayed in a separate room. Second, I have been to the special needs branch for two months as there was no space in the girls' branch. Finally, I moved to the girls' branch. It was very confusing living in many places. Moving too much is very hard.” (Hagar, Care Leaver).

Also, in Hagar's case, she has been to three care homes, including one for boys and for special needs, which shows that there is no clear system in admitting the children in the care homes. Changing placement frequently is considered one of the risk factors. According to the literature, young people who stayed in stable placements are more likely to have a smoother transition into adulthood and to succeed academically, in work, feel better about themselves, and integrate into society more smoothly (Stein, 2005; Islam, 2013).

1.2) Relationship with Caregivers:

The relationship between the young people and the caregivers is complicated; some young people had good relationships with at least one caregiver while others had very bad relationships.

Also, the care leavers complained the caregivers changed frequently. Ahmed, a care leaver, explains the type of relationship he had with the caregivers:

“We had a very bad relationship with the caregivers; they were very young and unqualified. We did not receive any rehabilitation. We heard the worst language and curses all the time. I had to listen every day that I had a problem because my parents are unknown and that I illegitimately came into this life. They were very unqualified with very poor education; they did not go to university. They couldn’t even study for us.”
(Ahmed, Care Leaver).

As stated by Ahmed, the caregivers he had were abusive, unqualified, and unsupportive. They abused them verbally and were not able to build a good relationship with the children. Hagar also had bad relationships with the caregivers; she added the following:

“The caregivers were only two years older than us, so it always caused problems; they were totally unqualified and had bigger psychological problems than us. They had very bad living conditions themselves; why would they leave their families and work as caregivers? They do that because they are responsible for their families financially or pay for their education. So, they can’t help anyone else. One of the caregivers was very jealous of me, asking me why do you buy your clothes from expensive shops, why do you think you are better than us?” (Hagar, Care Leaver).

Also, Hagar thought that the care leavers she had were unqualified and had psychological problems and couldn’t support the children as needed. Abd Allah, on the other hand, had a mixed experience. He explained more:

“The earlier caregivers wanted to control us by hitting us to show us that they were the ones in control, we were so young, and none of them were qualified to deal with us or deal with our problems. After two years, we got a caregiver for our room, and he was very good; he taught us to pray, we loved him, and we listened to him. He treated us with respect, and he helped us in our studies, and we all did well in school then.” (Abd Allah, Care leaver).

Abd Allah had two experiences dealing with unqualified and qualified caregivers, which shows how having a good caregiver impact the lives of the children in many ways. Having a good relationship with at least one adult is considered one of the main protective factors in leaving care (Hedin, 2017; Driscoll, 2013; Gwenzi, 2015). Mahmoud, another care leaver, had a different experience that he shared:

“One of the caregivers helped me personally to get a job. If I needed money, I would call a worker who used to work in the care home’s kitchen whom I consider a friend to borrow money, and then I would pay him back when I get my salary. He was always there for me.” (Mahmoud, care leaver).

On the other hand, Mahmoud had a positive relationship with the caregivers he had. They supported him in getting a job. The relationship continued after he left the care. They supported him financially on a personal basis when he needed it, making his transition out of care a bit smoother. The above shows the caregivers' significant impact on the children and young people in their lives in the care home and after they leave care.

1.3) Facing Stigma since childhood

The Care leavers and Social workers reported that the young people were subject to stigma and felt that they were different, whether intentionally or unintentionally, since they were children.

From Neighbors:

One of the social workers interviewed narrated how the children were facing stigma from the neighbors:

“When the kids played and made a lot of noise in the care home’s playground. Some of the neighbors would yell at them in a loud voice, calling them bad names and that their parents threw them away. This really impacted the children and destroyed all the psychological support we were giving them. Society had a very negative impact on them.” (SW 3).

The above statement shows that even inside the care homes, the children faced stigma because they were raised in a care home.

In Schools:

Also, the children faced stigma inside their schools, as stated by one of the social workers interviewed:

“In schools, they felt rejected as they were known as the institution children, so we talked with the school management to take care of that. It is very hard to change the society.” (SW 2).

The care leavers have been subject to various types of stigma, as shown above in the care home and the schools. This was also reported to be the case in Jordan as the care leavers felt that due to

having unknown families, they were subject to social exclusion (Empowering Care Leavers in Jordan, 2017).

From Donors:

Ahmed, one of the care leavers, reported that some of the donors who visited the care home and wanted to help the children sometimes hurt them unintentionally.

“Sometimes we felt really bad when some of the donors visited; they used to intentionally rub our head many times to get “thawab,” I wanted to tell them I am not a bucket for Hasnat.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver).

In the Islamic religion, there is a well-known saying by the prophet that if someone is kind to orphans even by just rubbing their head, they will get Hasna for every hair they touch. So sometimes, the donors do that but very literally without taking into consideration how the child feels.

1.4) Over Protection for females:

Two out of four females in the sample said they felt the care home was overprotective with them and limiting their exposure to the outside world. Sarah notes how this overprotection impacted her after leaving care:

“Every work I go to, I go in a group with the girls from the care home, and we used to go in a rented car, so we did not really communicate with the outside community. But that was wrong. I realized that when I left because now, I can’t deal with anyone from outside, I can’t ride public transportation alone, I can stay for months in the same neighborhood as I am afraid to ride public transportation. I did not have the chance to deal with different people. They were very overprotective.” (Sarah, Care Leaver).

Sarah felt that being overprotected and having a rented car to go anywhere impacted her skills to deal with the outside world, and she faced problems in that area after she left the care. This goes with one of the findings in the study about orphans in Egypt that the females felt overprotected (Hassainin, 2018). In order to increase the effectiveness of the care homes, they need to allow the children, especially girls, to deal with the outside world under supervision to prepare them to leave care.

2) The Transition (Leaving Care):

2.1) Preparations to leave care:

Every care home interviewed in the sample had different procedures to prepare its children to graduate and leave the care home at some point. However, some care leavers felt that they were inadequately prepared to leave. In this section, the researcher will outline the different preparation models identified and then finalize with the gaps in the preparation as per the care leavers' perspectives.

Case Management:

Some care homes have case management systems through which they put a plan for the child since they are admitted to the care home until they graduate to either live independently or reintegrate with their families. One of the social workers interviewed explained more about the case management system they follow:

“We have a case management system so that we can eventually reach our vision which is rehabilitation and community integration. When the child enters our care home, we put a rehabilitation plan in place (Medical records, psychological assessments, case assessments, follow-up forms) in one file to reintegrate the child with the family or be

independent. We do a lot of work to enable the child to reach the aftercare phase like: psychological interventions, trying to build a good relationship with the family, employability skills and leaving the care home with a secure job and breaking the fear barrier from the society by preparing them psychologically how to deal with people outside.” (SW 2).

In the above example, the care home has a case management file for each child according to his needs to finally integrate with the family or be independent. A child-centered assessment is considered one of the most important protective factors to prepare young people for independence (Mooney, 2016; Cameron 2019).

Gradual Preparations:

Other care homes try to prepare for adulthood by following a gradual independence approach as explained by the social worker:

“We do not prepare them to leave; we prepare them to be independent gradually. For example, when they are in preparatory school, they buy clothes with a supervisor, and when they enter secondary school, we give them a certain amount of money. They buy what they need themselves, so they learn how to prioritize their purchases. They go out by themselves, we give them the allowances, and they are free to spend them as they like, but we try to advise them to prioritize and save. In secondary school, the cleaner cleans their rooms twice per week only, and they are responsible for cleaning it the rest of the week. We also start to sit with them and explain how to budget for the household costs, what are the categories (vegetables, fruits, pantry, detergents, rent), etc.” (SW,6)

As mentioned above, the care home tries to make the transition gradual since the children are in preparatory school, teaching them the life skills they need to become independent. This is one of the literature's recommendations for a better transition phase (Torrönen et al., 2014; Cameron, 2019).

Mentorship:

Another care home has a mentorship program that starts when the children are very young until they grow up. The social worker elaborated more on this approach:

“We have a system for alternative families (called alternative brothers and sisters) each child has a brother or sister by kafala (volunteers) most children have 3-4 siblings. These siblings have responsibilities towards that child, such as applying for schools, monitoring their academic performance, and applying for daycare; they help them choose a sport and buy clothes. Their relationship is very strong; they meet a lot. One of the girls decided to leave and go live with her sister when she turned 18, and the others still communicate frequently with the children. They are their support as caregivers change, but their brothers and sisters do not change.” (SW 4)

The above care home tries to compensate for changing caregivers frequently by having older brothers and sisters to the children who take care of them since they are young. They act as their mentors, and their relationship is sustained even after the children graduate and leave the care home, as in the case mentioned by the social worker that she went and stayed with her sister when she graduated. According to the literature, that's a significant factor as care leavers who had mentors or a strong relationship with at least one adult reported having a smoother transition when leaving the care home (Stein, 2005; Islam, 2016; Frimpong-Manso, 2020). Also, it is

similar to the LIFE model (Living in the Family environment), which aims to create consistent living conditions, familial relationships through lifetime volunteers (Modi et al., 2016).

Group Discussions by care homes:

Another care home resorts to group discussions led by young people who have already left to share their experiences with their younger peers. The social worker interviewed further explained:

“We hold group discussions, each time with a different topic, we try to get mentors who are graduates and were able to succeed in their lives. They come to tell their younger siblings about life outside, the challenges they faced and how did they overcome them, the support they received from the care home, the times they failed and where did they go and why did they fail?” (SW 5)

The care home tries to show the younger children what to expect when they leave by exposing them to their older brothers, who share their experiences to learn from each other.

Summer Jobs:

Other care homes tried to prepare the children by letting them work in the summer to acquire employability skills, as one of the social workers explained:

“The children must work in the summer vacation. They work in suitable jobs for their age that do not abuse them, for example, working in a supermarket, stationery shop, etc. From these jobs, they gain experience, save money, and know what will happen after they graduate. Working in the summer is not optional; they have to work, or else they won't stay in the care home.” (SW 5)

In this care home, children must work in the summer, which helps them acquire the necessary skills to prepare them for life post-care. Before leaving care, young people who had a stable job had a higher chance of living independently (Cunningham, 2013).

Care leavers' perspectives:

Although all of the above are considered good practices, the care leavers felt that they needed more preparation in certain life aspects. Mahmoud felt that his care home did not prepare him enough to do household chores, noting:

“In our care home, we had staff doing all of the chores for us; our responsibilities were to study, pray and play. Nothing else was required from us. I was punished if I helped the staff to clean or cook. Suddenly you find yourself that you have to leave the care home without any preparations for the outside world. As if they cut your legs and arms because you never used them before.” (Mahmoud, care leaver).

Mahmoud reported that he struggled with doing the chores when he graduated, and he felt that being more involved with doing these chores would have helped him. That concern was shared by many care leavers as well that the care home's staff do everything for them. Nada felt that she needed more time for preparations. She shared her experience, saying:

“In the six months before leaving, a caregiver sat with us and showed us how to divide the chores and pay for living expenses. That was a very short period for preparing us, and we were really pressured and overwhelmed. We needed more training on how to manage our finances.” (Nada, Care Leaver).

Nada expressed that having training on doing the chores and covering living expenses in just six months before leaving without enough, she needed more time and gradual preparations. She also

expressed her need for training on how to manage her finances, which was also reported by the other care leavers in the sample.

2.2) Leaving the care home experience:

The care leavers expressed their feelings and expectations when they were informed that they were leaving the care home. Most of them reported that they were afraid and felt unprepared for this phase. Sarah shared her thoughts and feelings when she left, saying:

“They told us we had to leave and tried to assure us that this will always be our place and that they will follow up with us, but I felt a lot of pressure that I had to leave. We all felt that this place did not want us anymore. In the last period, we were all depressed and were very afraid to leave. It is tough to live outside. I have never lived in a home; I have been in care homes since I was one year old. I was very scared on the first night. I was used to sleeping in a room with seven girls. I am not used to sharing a room with only one person.” (Sarah, Care Leaver).

When Sarah was informed that she had to leave, she felt pressure, fear of the unknown, and unwanted. She only had six months to prepare herself, which she felt was not enough. Nada also had a similar experience when she was informed that she was leaving, adding:

“I was shocked when I was told that I am graduating. I did not understand what does graduating meant. I was still in school last year. I felt I was not ready at all to leave; I had just left my job, I still did not know how to deal with the community outside. They made us sign a paper that we were leaving; this caused me a lot of anxiety as I felt that if anything happened to me, it would be none of their business.” (Nada, Care Leaver).

Nada felt confused, unprepared, and afraid when she was informed that she had to leave the care home. Both Sarah and Nada needed more time so they could prepare themselves that they are leaving. Leaving Care is a very emotional stage in young peoples' lives; it is characterized by: feelings of confusion, anxiety, and fear. Although some care leavers have seen their older peers leave, they felt unready as they needed more emotional preparation for this step.

Ahmed had a different experience, as the care home closed without informing him that he was leaving. He further elaborated, noting:

“I stayed in the army for one year after finishing university. When I returned on my day off, I was shocked to know that the care home had closed. I did not have any phone numbers to call. I had no solution, and I slept in front of the door, and I had to stay in a small place in a warehouse that my friend knew. I stayed there for two months, and when I finished my army. I contacted my brothers and went to stay with one of them (Ahmed, Care Leaver).

Ahmed was not informed that he was leaving nor received any preparations; suddenly, he had to find accommodation and employment to sustain himself, which was very hard. All of the care leavers interviewed stated that leaving the care home was not by their choice and some of them were shocked with the decision because they were the eldest and hadn't seen anyone leave, so they thought that they were going to stay until they got married. The young people needed to be informed in a structured manner since they were children that they would have to leave at a certain age to be prepared psychologically for this phase, and the decision of leaving should be structured and not left entirely to the care home's management.

2.3) Support provided by the care homes and follow-up:

The support provided by care homes after leaving the care homes varied greatly from one home to another. Some homes support the care leaver until they finish education or reach 21 years old fully by finding an apartment, helping them get a job, paying their tuition fees, and regular follow-up. Nada shared her experience, saying:

“The care home helped me in the following: finding a decent job, furnishing the apartment, finding the apartment but we pay the rent, they helped us in the moving, and we had minor supervision for the first two years through visits and phone calls, but now there is no supervision. They now help by buying the monthly groceries and with the tuition fees.” (Nada, Care Leaver)

In Nada’s case, the care home tried to support her in different ways to make the transition smoother. In others cases, the care homes were not that supportive. Abd Allah had a different experience, stating:

“The care home gives each child 300 le per month when they turn 18 for the aftercare phase, and you have to leave; we are the ones responsible for looking for an apartment, paying the rent, and getting ourselves a job. They also support part of the tuition fees and monthly food supplies, but there was no kind of follow-up.” (Abd Allah, Care Leaver)

In Abd Allah’s case, the care home only provided him with monthly allowances and food supplies. He had to figure out everything else by himself without any follow-up from their side. In other cases, the care home just gave them their savings book when they left and did not provide them with any support or follow-up, as shown below in Laila’s case; she added:

“Some people helped us in finding an apartment in a new city, and my friends were the ones who helped me to get a job. The care home did not provide us with anything or any type of follow-up.” (Laila, caregiver).

In Laila’s case, the care home did not provide her with any support in housing or employment, or any type of follow-up. Six out of the eight care leavers interviewed expressed that they needed more follow-up from their care homes and to feel that they could go back to them for guidance and support. This was also reported in some studies in the literature review that the care leavers felt that having a social worker calling them every now and then was vital for them (Bond, 2020). The differences between the care leavers' experiences show that there is no system that all care homes follow, but rather it is based on the care home’s management willingness.

As shown above, some factors in the pre-leaving care phase have a later impact on their aftercare experiences, such as facing multiple placements, overprotection, and stigma since childhood. Also, the relationship they had with the caregivers had a significant impact on their lives. In the transition phase, the care leavers interviewed had different experiences in the preparations phase and in the leaving care experience due to not having one system for aftercare. The challenges the young people experience after leaving care are discussed in the next chapter.

6. Chapter Six: Post-leaving Care

Some common themes emerged through the researcher's interviews with the care leavers and social workers when they spoke about their post-leaving care experience. These themes are Housing, Life Skills, Education, Employment, Relationships, dealing with society, financial situation, health, mental health, dealing with the civil society, and protective factors. These themes were identified in many studies mentioned in the literature review (Rome, 2019; Shankaran, 2018; Breda, 2015; Sekibo, 2017; Mooney, 2016; Heerde, 2018).

1) Housing:

Types of housing support

The current housing situation of the eight care leavers interviewed is diverse. Five of them are living in apartments that they found themselves and are covering the rent fully. Two are staying in the apartments the care home found for them, but they are paying the rent fully, and one couldn't find appropriate housing according to his budget. Hence, he returned to stay at the care home again.

There are different types of housing support provided to the care leavers based on the care home's policies. Some care homes have youth homes under their supervision that young people are transferred to when they reach 18 years old. Another model is that they help them find accommodation and arrange for them to stay in groups in these apartments; they also provide them with furnishing and minor supervision. However, covering the rent differed from one care home to another. One example was fully covering the rent until they are 21 years old or finish their higher education. Another example was covering the total rent for a certain period than half the rent till they reach 21 years or graduate college.

The other model present was that they only provided furnishing and the care leavers were responsible for paying the rent fully.

According to the Social Worker, there is a system that is unique to this organization:

“We divided the aftercare housing into three levels: level A is for outstanding young people academically and/or morally. In level 1, they have a cook, higher daily allowances, rent, and utilities are fully covered. The group is only six per flat; we ensure that these six are in the same age group, educational levels and have a good relationship. Level B f receives lower allowances, the cook only comes once a week, and we cover the rent as well. Level C is for young people facing issues like addiction. We have already admitted them to rehabilitation more than once, or they steal, so I need to isolate them from their peers as they could threaten the stability of the units. In level C, each care leaver is staying alone in a separate unit. The first year we pay the rent fully. In the second year, we pay half of the rent, and in the third year, we pay a quarter. Then by that time, they should have secured employment and can pay for themselves.” (SW 3).

The above model is unique to this organization as they divided the housing support they provide the care leavers into three levels based on their academic performance and behaviors. They used housing as a motivational tool to encourage good behaviors.

Another care home provided housing support to the care leavers as explained by the social worker:

“When the boys turn 18 and until they are 21, we put every 4-5 care leavers in an apartment. We call that period the weaning period. We provide them with monthly food supplies, tuition fees, and medications if needed. We also pay the rent and utilities. We appoint one supervisor who stays with them. I can’t leave a group of young people living

alone. They would cause problems. The supervisor is instructed to give the young person freedom, but they must follow the rules at the same time.” (SW 1)

This care home provides housing support till the young people reach 21 years old, then afterward, they are fully responsible for themselves. They also appointed a staying supervisor to stay with the care leavers for follow-up and support. Still, when one of the care leavers who came from this care home, commented that the supervision was ineffective, and the care leavers did not get along with the appointed supervisor.

Another example was providing care leavers a certain amount of money, and they find their own accommodation. Abd Allah, a care leaver, shared more about the housing support he received:

“We are the ones who look for our own apartments, but we found that the apartments are costly, the least rent you can find was EGP 1,500 and not in a good neighborhood, so we needed at least five to six people to share the flat we faced troubles as were a group of single boys so were a target of people who did illegal actions to want us to work with them. We decided to find another flat in a better neighborhood even if we paid more. It took us three months to find an apartment. “(Abd Allah, care leaver)

As shown above, there is no set system for providing accommodation to care leavers. Each care home follows a different model. Also, some believe in the importance of having supervision in the aftercare flats, while others do not. The supervision also differed from having a staying supervisor to having a supervisor who passes by regularly. Providing housing support is a significant protective factor as many care leavers reported in the literature that housing was one of the most challenging domains (Breda, 2015).

Gender and housing:

Housing is a gendered process; for girls, some care homes have policies to stay until they get married. Hagar shared her experience as a female care leaver, noting:

“I did not leave the care home until I got married; that was the system in the care home no girl leaves until she gets married; I was the oldest to get married. All of my younger sisters got married earlier. I was married at 28 years old. For them, I was really old. All of the other girls got married at 19 or 20 years old.” (Hagar, care leaver).

Hagar stayed in the care home until she got married as per the policy, but her sisters married at a much younger age to leave the care home. Also, Laila had the same policy in her care home. Still, the management suddenly decided to let her out when she fought with one person of the management. she shared her story as follows:

“Leaving the care home was not my choice, suddenly they told me I had to pack and leave in one hour because a problem occurred between me and one person from the management, so they asked me to leave. At that time, I finished university and worked as a social worker in the care home. So suddenly I lost both my job and my accommodation. One of the caregivers allowed me to stay in her apartment until I could find housing and employment. Without her, I would have been on the streets” (Laila, care leaver).

The model above abides by the model regulations stating that females can stay until marriage. Still, as seen in Laila’s case, it is not obligatory the management just decided to let her go in one hour without having any fear of accountability in front of the ministry.

Challenges in Housing:

Homelessness:

Some care leavers couldn't afford to continue paying the rent after the care home stopped supporting them. Ahmed shared the experiences of his brothers, saying:

“Some of my brothers left the apartment and got key money as they couldn't continue to pay the rent and stayed on the streets.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver).

Struggling to pay the rent is a major issue as it could lead to homelessness. As stated above by Ahmed, some of the care leavers end up staying on the street, which is similar to international research in that some care leavers end up homeless at the end (Breda, 2015; Sekibo, 2017). The government's latest development of providing housing to all care leavers could really solve this big problem as the case in Finland as the care leavers there receive free housing and are facing any housing problems (Torrönen et al., 2014).

Living together as a group:

Also, there was the challenge of living together as they stayed around four or five care leavers in one apartment, as in the case of Nada. She further explains:

“I am currently living alone. At first, I lived with three other girls in a place that was coordinated by our care home. Still, I left them as we had many fights because we had different ideas. One of the girls robbed me, then we had a fight, and she hit me, so I decided to leave as they were two sisters and the third got married. we are friends and sisters, but we can't bear with each other as each one of us has a lot to deal with already.” (Nada, care leaver).

In the above example, the girls could not stay together as organized by the care home, but they broke up, and one girl had to stay alone, which made the rent very expensive. As shown in her quote below.

“Rent is very expensive, it is either I live in a relatively good place and pay high rent, which is most of my salary, or I live in a bad area and get harassed from the neighbors as I am a girl living alone.” (Nada, Care Leaver).

Nada couldn't stay in the group arranged by the care home as they fought a lot; she now lives alone and has to stay in a nicer area because she is living alone, causing a significant financial burden on her.

Dealing with Neighbors:

One of the challenges the care leavers faced was dealing with their neighbors in the new housing.

Laila shared her confusion, saying:

“We had problems with the neighbors because we did not know how to deal with them as we never had neighbors before. Should we let them enter the flat or not, what to share with them and what not to share?” (Laila, Care Leaver)

The care leavers reported not knowing how to deal with the neighbors when they first moved to independent housing. They were unsure what to share, what not to share, and how the relationship should look.

Also, Nada expressed how the neighbors are interfering in her life just because she is a girl living alone, adding:

“I get subjected to many bad situations. Men think we are easy just because we are living alone. The neighbors want to know stuff about us and interfere with our lives. I have a

neighbor that whenever I have a friend over, she stops them and ask them who they are and why are they coming over.” (Nada, Care Leaver)

The Egyptian society is not used to the idea of having girls living alone, so when they find a girl living alone, they assume that she is doing something wrong or needs guardianship, thus giving themselves the right to interfere in her life.

2) Life Skills and Independence:

Another common theme that emerged from all the interviews was life skills and Independence. The care leavers and Social workers agreed that they needed more preparation in that area.

House Chores:

The care leavers expressed their struggle with doing house chores when they moved to independent housing. Mahmoud shared his experience with house chores, stating:

“We faced many problems in doing house chores, some of us ate noodles all week, one was about to set the flat on fire by leaving the stove on, someone ruined all of his clothes as he washed them all together. Another one finished all his money just by ordering food all week” (Mahmoud, Care leaver).

Mahmoud stated that he and his brothers struggled to feed themselves, clean the apartment, and wash their clothes at first as they were not used to doing these chores in the care home. Only two of the care leavers expressed that they did not face any problems in this area as they were used to cleaning after themselves and cooking before leaving the care home, which also is coherent with the research conducted by Bond that young people who used to participate in household chores since they were young faced fewer problems when leaving care (Bond, 2020).

Dealing with the Outside World:

Another challenge faced by the care leavers was dealing with the outside world. Sarah shared her fears in dealing with the outside world, adding:

“I can’t deal with anyone from outside, I can’t ride public transportation alone, I can stay for months in the same neighborhood as I am afraid to ride public transportation alone. I can’t go to university alone my sister has to accompany me. Buying stuff from the supermarket is very challenging to me; dealing with the outside world till now is very hard.” (Sarah, Care Leaver)

Some of the care leavers were not exposed to the outside world while living in the care home, especially observed with girls making the transition and living alone very challenging for them as they have to ride public transport and deal with a lot of people they have never seen dealt with before. This was mentioned in the literature that some care homes do not give the children any opportunity to depend on themselves (Stein, 2015).

Life Knowledge:

Others stated that they lacked general life knowledge due to living in care homes all their lives. As Nada shared the following example:

“I have very limited life experience as I had always lived in care homes. When I left, I did not know the most basic things, for example, that I have to lock the door when leaving the flat, but one of my friends warned me.” (Nada, Care Leaver).

Nada explained that she did not know that she had to lock her flat door when she left as she stayed all her life in care homes, and doors were never locked. She only knew when one of her friends warned her.

3) Education:

The eight care leavers interviewed have the following education status: four are still studying, one is in an open university (does not require attendance), one is in a higher institute, and the other two are in public universities. The remaining four finished their education, two of them graduated with a bachelor's degree, and the other two graduated from a higher institute.

Four of the care leavers interviewed left the care home while they were still studying and the other four left after finishing their studies.

Dropping out:

The young people who left the care home while studying had to work to sustain themselves and study simultaneously, which put a lot of pressure on them. Abd Allah shared the experiences of his brothers, noting:

“Many of my brothers dropped out of university because they couldn’t work and study at the same time. It is very pressuring and hard to manage to do both at the same time.”

(Abd Allah, Care Leaver).

Some of the young people who left the care home while studying had to drop out as they couldn’t manage to work, study and do house chores. It was too much for them. In comparison, young people who stayed in the care home had a better chance to continue their education. It is stated in the child law that children can stay in the care home until they graduate from higher education, but many care homes do not abide by that. This was also confirmed in the international literature in the study conducted by Mooney that young people who left care while still studying were struggling with their education (Mooney, 2016), and in Jordan as well, the care leavers reported that they faced challenges in continuing their education (Ibrahim, 2011).

Tuition Fees:

Some care homes supported the young people after leaving with the tuition fees, as explained below by one of the social workers:

“We cover their tuition fees fully until they are 21 years old. We will also pay the remaining tuition if it is only one year remaining if they have more years than they pay their tuition.” (SW, 1)

As mentioned above, the social workers interviewed confirmed that the care homes cover the tuition fees. Some cover until the care leavers graduate from university with the condition that they are passing and not failing. Some cover the fees until they reach 21 years. Then the care leavers have to pay the remaining years. Also, some care homes covered public and private universities fees. In contrast, others only covered the public, and if the care leaver wanted to be enrolled in a private university, they pay the difference.

However, from the care leavers interviewed, Abd Allah explained that they only get a certain amount of money and have to pay the rest of the fees themselves regardless of what type of university they are enrolled in, adding:

“There was the issue of the university fees, the care home only paid 3000 le per year regardless how much is the cost of your education so for me, the first year was 4000 then the second year was 6000, etc., and they only paid 3000 every year, and I had to pay the rest” (Abd Allah, Care Leaver).

As shown above, there is no set system to cover the tuition fees. Each care home has its own system. They are not following the same regulations as the law is not binding in this aspect.

Choosing the type of education:

Hagar mentioned that choosing her field of study was not her choice, but instead, it was chosen by the care home's management, explaining:

“We were all enrolled in the same higher institute, and we were not given a choice to study in a different institute, not due to financial problems but because they wanted us to all be the same. I was just enrolled in the program they chose for me. They do not account for our individual differences. We all go to the same place regardless of our academic capabilities.” (Hagar, Care Leavers).

As mentioned by Hagar, she was not given a choice to decide which field she wanted to study, and the management wanted all of them to be the same regardless of what they wanted or their capabilities.

4) Employment:

The eight care leavers interviewed were all working; five were working full time while three were working part-time. The fields that they are working in are NGOs, Media, Sales, and Graphic Design.

Finding a job:

Only two of the care leavers were supported by the care home to secure employment before leaving care. The other six care leavers had to find a job by asking around in the neighborhood or through their networks. Laila shared how she got her job, noting:

“When I left the care home, I had no job, so my friends were the ones who helped me by informing me about vacancies in their workplace or if they know anyone hiring until I was able to find a job.” (Laila, Care Leaver).

As stated above, Laila was able to find employment through the help of her friends. The care home did not help her in finding a job which is a risk factor as it was reported in the literature that young people who had secure employment before leaving care had a smoother transition (Cunningham, 2013).

Frequent Job Changes:

All of the care leavers interviewed have tried many jobs at first before settling in their current job. Ahmed gave examples of all the places he had worked at as follows:

“I was the one who got myself a job from asking around. I worked various jobs: in workshops, restaurants, factories, warehouses, cashier in a supermarket, etc. anything I could find to support myself (Ahmed, Care Leaver)

The care leavers had to change many jobs as they wanted to support themselves in any way, and they were not sure at the beginning where did they want to work. After changing jobs for a while, they could figure out the field they wanted to work in in the future. This was also reported in the international literature that care leavers suffered from instability in employment (Rome, 2019).

Lacking employability skills:

The care leavers and social workers interviewed stated that the care leavers lack essential employability skills such as: communicating in the work environment, preparing a CV, and applying for a job. One of the social workers interviewed shared how he viewed this topic, noting:

“Many care leavers left their jobs because they did not know how to deal with their managers if the manager was strict with them and demanding, they will fight with him and just quit or get fired.” (SW 3).

The care leavers were not taught how to deal with their managers or communicate in the work environment, which caused them problems when they got employed. Many care leavers worldwide reported struggling in the employment domain (Rome, 2019; Shankaran, 2018; Breda, 2015).

Opening a Business:

One of the organizations interviewed reported a special fund to support the care leavers in opening their own businesses. The social worker shared more on the support they provide to the care leavers:

“We have el Amal box; we give the graduates a sum of money to open their business. We support the care leavers who have a business idea by providing them with the assets they need. We give them a loan, not a grant, as they need to pay back the money to ensure seriousness. These projects have a very high success rate. They sell mobiles, clothes, slippers. They can do anything as they have street experience and know-how to deal with people and sell. They only need guidance on how to make money legitimately.” (SW 5)

The organization supports the care leavers by giving them loans to open their own business if they have a business idea and do not want to work for someone. However, this organization hosts children who stay on the streets for a certain period of their lives, so they have the necessary street experience to open these businesses.

5) Social Relationships:

Two of the care leavers interviewed reported that they are married with kids, and two reported that they are in a relationship. The relationship status of the remaining four is unknown.

The care leavers shared their relationship experiences with marriage, parenting, friends, and family.

Marriage:

The care leavers shared their stories about choosing their partner and their fears before marriage.

Ahmed told his story of getting married, saying:

“I wanted to get married, so I chose a girl from a care home too as I thought that she has been through the same circumstances and had the same life. However, I was afraid as no one taught or showed us how to build a house and a family, how to deal with our spouses, or how to parent our children.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver)

Some of the young people who left care homes prefer to marry girls who were living in care homes as well as they feel that they had the same life somehow and can relate to them more.

Also, they felt unprepared as they hadn't received any training or seen any example of a healthy marriage to follow. This is coherent with international literature, that care leavers have challenges in choosing a spouse and marriage (Adeboye et al., 2019; Sekibo, 2017).

Hagar also shared her experience as a female getting married, adding:

“The care home did not give us the proper preparations to get married. They were always telling us not to make your husbands angry. They were always taking the husband's side, or they only talked to us about the sexual side of marriage. To begin with, many of my sisters had very bad marriages and got divorced in the first year as they were very bad matches. They just got married to leave the care home. In my case, my marriage is balanced because before getting married, I took a marriage preparation course on my own, and it really benefitted me, and it helped me in choosing my spouse.” (Hagar, Care Leaver)

Hagar felt that the care home only cared about certain aspects of marriage without tackling essential issues like choosing your spouse and dealing with him, which led to many failed

marriages. She also felt that they always took the husband's side, which is common in Egypt as the Egyptian society is patriarchal. In her case, she took a preparation course that she felt benefited her, showing the importance of these courses, especially for care leavers.

Becoming Parents:

The care leavers shared that you felt that they needed more support when they became parents.

Hagar shared her experience as a first-time mother, noting:

“I really needed support when I was giving birth, my sister was there to help me, but she did not have any background with babies. I also had medical problems after giving birth and had problems with breastfeeding, so it was really a lot. I felt that I had no one.”

(Hagar, Care Leaver)

Hagar faced many problems in giving birth and taking care of a newborn. She wanted any kind of support from the care home as she only had her sister (a fellow care leaver) who couldn't really help her as she had no experience in dealing with babies.

Friendships:

Most of the care leavers had solid relationships with at least one of their siblings raised with them in the care home and continued as very close friends. Laila, who left the care home 14 years ago, notes:

“I am still in contact with my sisters, we trust each other, and we support each other, and they helped me in passing through many hardships.” (Laila, Care Leaver)

Laila felt that having her sisters in her life supported her, which made her pass many hardships.

A strong network of peers is considered a protective factor for care leavers (Hedin, 2017).

Family:

Sarah, who had known her parents, talked about her relationship with them after leaving care, saying:

“My relationship with my family is not good at all. I can’t forget some incidents that happened to me. It is very hard to stay with someone I am not used to. I do not like visiting them, when we stay together for a week we always fight. I do not like my mother’s attitude or how she speaks. She always thinks she is right. I do not have any energy to keep a good relationship with them.” (Sarah, Care Leaver)

Sarah did not want to be reintegrated with her family after leaving care as she does not get well with them and can’t forget the incidents she had with them. She prefers to have a minimal relationship with them and stay alone. The literature also found that some care leavers regard their families as a risk factor to their independence (Driscoll, 2013).

The Social workers who work in family reintegration shared their experiences, explaining:

“Some cases are reintegrated with their families, and we follow up with them to make sure that the situation is stable. First, we assess the family situation and see if the problem still exists. For example, some cases came because the family did not have housing. If the family now has stable housing, then we can reintegrate the girl. We try to work with the family that had violence and neglect and try to remove the reasons. Some girls want to be reintegrated with their families, and others refuse. we work psychologically with her and her family before integration so they won’t relapse.” (SW 2)

In some cases, family reintegration is successful if the reason the child left the family ceased to exist. Also, sometimes the young people prefer to return to their families if they both receive the

required psychological interventions. However, in some cases, like Sarah, she prefers to live alone and refuses to reintegrate with their families.

6) Identity, Stigma, and Discrimination:

Revealing their backgrounds

The care leavers interviewed mentioned that they do not like to reveal their backgrounds to anyone. Ahmed explained further by saying:

“I do not like to say anything about my background to anyone. All of my colleagues from university and work do not know anything about my childhood. When people ask me about my parents, I tell them they are traveling. There is no benefit in telling anyone about my past. They will just feel pity and keep treating me in a special way. People here do not have the culture of how to deal with people who have special circumstances like orphans and people with disabilities.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver)

The care leavers felt that when they reveal their backgrounds to other people, they start treating them in a special way and feel pity for them. They prefer not to share their backgrounds so they can be treated normally. This was also one of the main findings in the literature (Shankaran, 2018).

Stigma from the society

The care leavers mentioned situations when they felt that they were subject to stigma. Abd Allah shared his experience with the neighbors, noting:

“We had issues with the neighbors once they knew we are from a care home. They refused to let us stay in the building. They asked us to leave in 24 hours. One of the neighbors kept saying, how come we agree they live with us? They are thieves and thugs and could hurt our children. If they stay, we will call the police for them. All of this

rejection, and one of the neighbors was a frequent donor to our care homes and visited us many times there, but she refused as well. “(Abd Allah, Care Leaver)

The neighbors did not accept them once they knew they were from a care home and assumed they were thieves who could hurt their children without getting to know them. Although there was a donor in the building, but she refused as well to let them stay. Some people donate and try to help but refuse to connect with the children outside the care home.

This was also shown in the marriage domain as shared by Nada:

“I am currently in a relationship, but we do not have any plans to get married as his parents do not approve of me as I am from a care home and they are of a better social and financial level.” (Nada, Care Leaver)

Some families do not accept marrying care leavers, which is also one of the findings in Jordan that the society could accept them in education and employment but not in the social domains such as marriage and friendships (Empowering Care Leavers in Jordan,2017).

One of the social workers interviewed elaborated on this point, adding:

“Sometimes, they can’t engage in the community due to the society’s perception of them and the stigma surrounding young people who used to live in care homes. Our society is still sick despite the awareness we do. They always feel rejected, people just say you graduated from a juvenile, they do not differentiate between the care homes, they think if the child is not raised by his family, then they are not raised well.” (SW 5)

Some people just assume that all care homes are for juveniles enforcing the stigma surrounding care leavers.

Discrimination in Education:

Omar also mentioned the discrimination he faced when applying to a certain faculty, stating:

“I wanted to be enrolled in the police academy that was my dream, but when I went, a high official there told me sorry we do not accept people with unknown origins (Loqtah).” (Omar, Care Leaver)

Omar felt discriminated against when he was not accepted in his dream faculty just because he has unknown family origins and was raised in a care home.

7) Financial Situation:

The financial situation of the care leavers interviewed varied. The ones who are still studying and working are the ones who are struggling financially. The financial situation is somehow stable for the others who finished their education and are working full time. However, some common themes were mentioned by the care leavers and social workers interviewed.

Savings Book:

It is required by the law that each care home keeps a savings book for each child. However, there are major differences, as stated by one of the social workers.

“It differs from one child to another. One received 150 thousand, another 80 thousand and the other 20 thousand, one had only six thousand. These differences are because some of them have more donors, and they keep paying in their savings book, and others do not have any, and we can’t control it. It is mainly based on appearances prettier children get more donors.” (SW 1)

There are major differences in the savings books between one child and another, which impacts them when leaving care. Care leavers who graduate with more money have better chances of covering their needs.

Financial Literacy:

The care leavers expressed that they needed to train to manage their budgets, set priorities, and save. Omar shared the experiences of his brothers, saying:

“Some of my brothers who turned 21 years old are now in the street with no job or house. They did not learn how to spend their money or set priorities, so they wasted all of the money they received from their savings book.” (Omar, Care Leaver).

Not having proper knowledge and training on budgeting and setting priorities could harm the care leavers as they could waste all of their money and end up homeless like what happened with Omar’s brothers. This was also one of Wataneya’s findings presented in Sanad Forum 2020 that 46% of female care leavers reported not having financial literacy (Wataneya Sanad Forum 2020). Also, that is coherent with international findings that care leavers struggle to manage their finances (Sekibo, 2017).

Struggling Financially:

Some of the care leavers reported that they are struggling financially, especially those who are still studying. Nada was still studying at the time of the interview, notes:

“I pay the rent fully; my salary is 2000 le, and I pay rent 1200 le. My care home pays for my university fees, but I only have 800 le remaining each month from which I pay electricity, internet, and food. I do not have any budget to do anything for me, like buying something or going out. If I want to get married, I do not have any savings to get my marriage stuff.” (Nada, Care Leaver)

Some care leavers are struggling financially as they do not have high-paying jobs, especially if they haven’t finished their education, and they are required to pay rent and utilities, which take most of their income.

8) Health:

Regarding the health domain, two main themes were identified in the data: Access to health care and leading an Unhealthy lifestyle.

Access to health care:

Only three of the care leavers interviewed have access to health care when they get sick through their care homes; the remaining five pay all their medical expenses themselves. Ahmed shared a story of one of his brothers, saying:

“One of my brothers was sick for four years, and he did not have enough money to pay for check-up or medications, and his case kept deteriorating.” (Ahmed, Care leaver)

Not all care leavers have access to health care. It is up to the care home’s decision to pay for their medical expenses or not, leaving many struggling like the case mentioned above.

Unhealthy lifestyle:

Some of the care leavers interviewed mentioned that they lead unhealthy lifestyles. Nada explained further by saying:

“I do not take good care of myself at all, I have severe anemia, and the doctor told me I must eat well and do sports, but I can’t eat healthy as I only eat pasta and rice and I do not have the time or place to play sports.” (Nada, Care leaver).

Some care leavers can’t lead healthy lifestyles as they do not have the financial means to get balanced nutrition or the time to play sports as they need to work and sometimes study at the same time.

9) Mental Health:

The care leavers interviewed expressed that they are suffering from mental health issues such as: dealing with trauma, feeling of loneliness, dealing with high stress, and their views on the psychological interventions provided to them.

Trauma

The care leavers expressed how they felt about their past. Ahmed shared his feeling by saying:

“Till now, I am receiving psychological interventions so I can overcome all what happened to me. I faced many pressures and sad incidents throughout my life. Even after achieving a lot in my life, I always remember these incidents, bringing me great sadness. We were deprived of all kinds of care, material and emotional. Sometimes I think that if I were born in a low-income family, at least I would have received some love or any type of emotional support.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver)

Ahmed is still seeking psychological support. Although he left the care home eight years ago and has achieved a lot in his life already, he still needs support to overcome the sad incidents he faced as a child and the lack of affection he was subject to as a child. This was also one of the findings in the literature that care leavers are facing issues regarding their mental health (Mooney 2016; Heerde, 2018).

Loneliness

They also mentioned that they suffer from loneliness. Nada expressed her loneliness by adding:

“I have some friends that visit and stay over, but they have to leave at some point because they have their own lives, so I am constantly feeling lonely. I am suffering from being alone and always feeling afraid. Any support given to me is not enough; any

psychological support given won't be enough as it won't heal the feeling of loneliness.

“(Nada, Care Leaver).

The care leavers who are living alone are struggling with feelings of loneliness even if they have many friends. At the end of the day, they always feel alone.

High levels of Stress

The care leavers also mentioned that they are always suffering from high levels of stress. As in Hagar's case, who further explained:

“The biggest challenge I am facing now is very high levels of stress as I need to take care of my son and my husband and I also need to work to cover our financial needs without having enough support.” (Hagar, Care Leaver).

The care leavers need to work to cover themselves financially and study or take care of their families and do house chores without having social support, making them suffer from high levels of stress.

Burying feelings

Mahmoud explained how he dealt with the negative feelings he had, noting:

“When I grew up, I realized that I was burying my feeling and emotions “under a rug.” I never gave it much thought, and whenever I thought about it, it made me really sad, so I only allowed myself 10 minutes to feel sad and move on. I buried the feelings of loneliness, loss of family, fights with friends, and of being rejected.” (Mahmoud, Care Leaver)

The care leavers did not learn how to deal with their negative feelings, so they learned to bury them, which made the issues grow bigger and bigger when they grew up and became aware.

Views on Psychological interventions

Mahmoud shared his views on the psychological interventions he received in the care homes, noting:

“In the institution, we are seen as a group, a number in a list or just a person part out of a group, we are all the same. True psychological support was not present in the care home. Although we had three psychologists in the care home, but they only intervened at times of the problems, so they mainly intervened to punish you when we got older. We were 18 boys and two psychologists only, and most of the time, only one was present, so they did not have enough time and energy for us. Psychological support shouldn't be given to children only when they cause problems. It should be given to fill the emotional gap we have from not receiving affection and love from our parents.” (Mahmoud, Care Leaver)

Mahmoud expressed how he felt that there was no individual care but rather always being treated as a part of the group. Although there were psychologists in the care home, they only intervened with the children caused problems due to not having enough time and energy, so the children did not receive the psychological support they needed. Also, Omar shared his experience with the psychologists in his care home, adding:

“The psychologists used to sit with us and tell everything we say to the other staff, making us lose trust of them.” (Omar, Care Giver).

Some psychologists share what the children tell them to other caregivers making the children lose trust and feel that they don't want to share anything else with them.

10) Resilience:

The care leavers identified some factors and traits that made them resilient and able to overcome hardships.

A supportive relationship with an Adult

The care leavers explained the impact of having a supportive adult in their lives. Omar shared the relationship he had with his teacher, noting:

“I have a very good relationship with my school teacher till now. She was very supportive, and she was the one who got me a very good job through her connections, and I have been working in that job till now. Without this teacher, my life would have been totally different.” (Omar, care leaver).

Having supportive relationships with at least one adult is a major protective factor as they feel that they have someone they can go to for much-needed guidance and support. The literature often mentioned that having a supportive adult made the transition smoother (Islam, 2016; Frimpong-Manso, 2020; Hassanin, 2018).

Role Models

The care leavers also shared that knowing about people who had the same circumstances and succeeded was a big motivating factor for them. Ahmed further explained:

“At fourth primary, I understood that I was an orphan. I read a lot about stories of orphans who developed themselves and became successful in society. Also, all of us were really touched when we knew that the prophet was an orphan too.” (Ahmed, Care Leaver).

The care leavers felt motivated and accepted themselves more when they read about examples who had the same circumstances and overcame these challenges and succeeded. Also, knowing that prophet Mohamed PBUH was an orphan made them feel better about themselves.

Personal Traits

When the social workers were asked what made some young people resilient and able to overcome challenges and some could not. They attributed the differences to personal traits. The social worker further elaborated by saying:

“I think what differs between the care leavers who succeeded and those who did not are individual characteristics. Some are ambitious and have goals and persistence, while others just go with the flow with no goals. Also, the care leavers who succeeded had better social skills and were able to deal with different people, had self-confidence, and were more accepting of the idea of leaving care and becoming independent. “(SW 2)

Care Leavers who were more ambitious, persistent, felt they deserved to have opportunities, and had better social skills were able to overcome challenges they faced better than their peers. The literature also outlined that having some personal traits such as ambition and persistence was a protective factor (Sekibo, 2017; Hines, 2005, Gwenzi, 2015; Frimpong-Manso, 2020).

Volunteering

Some care leavers spoke about the benefits of volunteering. Mahmoud shared how volunteering impacted his life, noting:

“When I started volunteering, I felt that I had something to offer; I can help others. It is not just me seeking help. In the care home, we always felt that we were weak, we needed help to eat, buy clothes, study, but we never felt we could give back or that we had things to give, so that feeling changed when I began volunteering.” (Mahmoud, Care Leaver)

Being able to volunteer and feel that you can give back to the community and not just seek help made the young people empowered and made them feel that they have value and something to contribute to society. This was also one of the findings in a study assessing resilience in Egyptian orphans that having a sense of social responsibility was a protective factor (Hassanin, 2018).

Participating in Extracurricular activities

The care leavers interviewed mentioned that engaging in extracurricular activities made them more resilient. Omar shared his experience participating in sports, adding:

“I was into sports, and I was ranked 1st in the governorate’s sports tournament, sports made me more competitive and made me believe in myself.” (Omar, Care Leaver)

Participating in different activities such as sports, music, or art made the young people more competitive, able to face the challenges better, and increased their self-esteem. This was also one of the findings in the literature that engaging in different activities served as a protective measure (Thompson, 2016).

Spiritual beliefs

Some care leavers felt that having strong religious beliefs made them stronger. Ahmed explained further:

“Being close to Allah and having my spiritual beliefs made me continue and gave me strength.” (Ahmed, Care leaver).

Having strong spiritual beliefs made the young people stronger and pushed them to continue when faced with challenges. This is was one of the findings in a study conducted in Bangladesh (Islam, 2016).

Reading

Laila also highlighted that having reading as a habit also is an important factor in her resilience, adding:

“I used to read a lot since I was a child. I used to run away from my life by reading different types of books. Reading was eye-opening as it showed me different worlds.” (Laila, care leaver).

Reading helped the young people as it showed them different worlds than what they are exposed to, making them more ready to face the outside world. All of the above served as protective factors when young people left the care homes.

11) Relationship with Non-Profit Sector:

When the care leavers and social workers were asked if they received any assistance from any external NGO, most replied negatively. However, some mentioned an aftercare program implemented by Wataneya Society (A leading NGO tackling the issue of Alternative Care in Egypt).

Two of the care leavers interviewed took part in the earlier version of Wataneya's aftercare project "Forsa" which was mentioned earlier in the literature review section, and they shared their opinions. Hagar, who participated in Wataneya's project, added:

"Participating in Wataneya's program really opened my eyes to many things. It encouraged me to stand up for myself and ask for the things I wanted. I was able to get a job through Wataneya's project as well." (Hagar, Care Leaver).

Hagar felt that participating in the program really benefitted her in her personality and employment as well.

The care leavers interviewed faced challenges in many domains such as: housing, life skills, education, employment, relationships, dealing with society, financial situation, health, and mental health. On the other hand, their relationship with the non-profit sector and having some protective factors made the post-leaving experience less challenging. Thus, the next chapter will further discuss the recommendations to the government and the non-profit sector to increase the effectiveness of aftercare.

7. Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In this chapter, the researcher is presenting the conclusion of this study based on the findings above. The policy recommendations are presented based on the best practices identified and the aftercare experiences of the care leavers to develop the aftercare system in Egypt.

Conclusion:

Young people raised in Care homes face many challenges after they reach 18 years old and have to leave these care homes to transition into adulthood, unlike their peers who still get their parents' support at this age. They suddenly have to cope with many changes, finding housing, living with new people, getting employed, and continuing education, making the transition phase very challenging and stressful.

Some international and national documents outline the State's and the NGOs' role in providing aftercare. The International documents include The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child and The Alternative Care Guidelines issued by the UN. The Local documents include the Egyptian child law, the implementing regulations for alternative care, and the model regulations for alternative care. Also, recently, a new Alternative Care strategy has been launched by MOSS and UNICEF to put a framework to provide the best possible alternative care for all children and young people in Egypt.

However, there is a clear gap between what's written in the documents mentioned above and what is happening on the ground. This research shows that there are many differences between the care homes and between the services provided to the young people in the aftercare phase. The aftercare systems presented in the study were all developed by individual care homes trying to serve their graduates with the means they have. Some put the leaving age at 18. Others put it at 21 years old. Some care homes support housing and employment; others do not. They do

not have a clear system or framework to follow. Also, they are not held accountable for these young people after they leave the care homes as there is no effective M&E system put in place.

The study had this main research questions: What were the biggest challenges faced by the care leavers? And how can the government and the non-profit sector support in decreasing these challenges? The main findings of this study were divided into four sections to answer the above questions. The Current status of Aftercare in Egypt 2) The pre-leaving care section and in this section, the researcher is not covering all the aspects of living in care that is out of the scope of this study. Rather the researcher only mentioned the aspects that had a later impact on the young people after leaving care. The main themes identified are the frequent placements many young people had to experience, which brought instability. The relationship with caregivers played a significant role in the young peoples' lives, whether positively or negatively, facing stigma since childhood and its impact on their mental health and finally overprotecting the females, which harmed them later when they had to deal with the outside world. 3) In The transition phase, the care leavers narrated the stories of their experience of leaving care and their feelings about it. Most of the care leavers did not receive enough time or information on this phase. Also, the preparations and support that some care homes provide to the care leavers are discussed. 4) In The post-leaving phase, which is the focus of this study, 11 themes were identified: Housing, life skills, education, employment, relationships, stigma, financial situation, health, mental health, resilience, and relationship with the civil society. This section aimed to present a realistic view of what the young people go through after leaving care and their challenges. It also highlights the main factors that supported their transition.

Policy and Practice Recommendations:

This section presents the policy and practice recommendations based on the data, literature, best practices identified and from the care leavers' and social workers' interviews. The recommendations are divided per target group:

To the Government:

- Put **clear criteria for graduation in the law**, including: (Age, Education level, Employment status, Army status, Housing status). These criteria need to be binding and not to be left to the care home's management decisions.
- Put **clear policies for the aftercare support** provided by the care homes (No. of care leavers per flat, the amount of allowances provided, the tuition fees, etc.)
- To provide **free or subsidized housing**, the young people need to be involved in choosing the area and flat to ensure that it fulfills their needs to avoid reselling these flats to other groups.
- The ministry should have a **clear follow-up system** for care leavers and hold the care homes accountable. The ministry officials should ask about the young people who left, what happened, and their flats and follow up with them. They need to know where these care leavers went. Follow-up that they took the savings book money and put all of these data in a database.
- The ministry should have a stricter **follow-up system on the care homes in general and on the saving books in specific** with regulations to minimize the differences between the children in the same care home. In the follow-up visits, the officials should sit with the children to know their opinions, not just the management.

- Develop a **national training program for care leavers** that they can access in their care home or, if not feasible, online tackling the needed skills for transition such as life skills, employability skills, communication skills, etc.
- Develop a **tool kit with all the important technical information** the care leavers need (issuing formal documents, opening a bank account, important phone numbers of services they might need).
- Require Each care home to have an **individual graduation plan** as part of case management for each child starting the age of 12; this plan should be child-centered and includes assessments of the child's skills and action points to prepare for his independence. The ministry officials should review the plan in their follow-up visits.
- Create a **digital platform for care leavers** to share experiences and tips.
- Provide access to **free mental health service providers** that the care leavers can access for a certain period of time through having partnerships with NGOs that provide mental health services.
- Hire **Aftercare social workers** who get appointed to the child when he is 15 years old. The aftercare social worker looks into the care plan and puts with the child a transition plan that assesses the skills they have and the skills for a smooth transition. They also follow up with the care leavers after they leave.
- Encourage care homes to have **mentorship programs** (The older brother or sister kafala). The role of these older brothers and sisters is to follow up with the children on all of their life aspects. They will serve as lifetime volunteers as proven that having a supportive adult relationship is a major protective factor. They can compensate for the frequent changes of caregivers.

- **Minimize the number of placements** the children are subject to, put regulations that only allow changing the care home as a last resort. It was proven in the literature the adverse effects of frequent placement on the children.
- Develop a **national implementation plan** based on assessing care leavers' needs (health, mental health, employment, education, housing, financial support, and independent living skills) and develop a Pathway Plan to meet those needs.
- Allow the care leavers to **apply to the police academy and military schools**
- **Minimum qualifications for caregivers** should be set in care homes in terms of education experience and psychological stability to be best qualified to work in care homes. A certification system can be put in place for the caregivers and social workers to ensure their quality and ensure that they are psychologically stable.
- Provide different services to the care leavers such as: **health insurance**, enrollment in the **food subsidies** program, and reducing or waiving the **higher education tuition fees**.
- **Organize meetings and conferences** between the care homes to share their experience in the aftercare.

To the Non- Profit Sector:

- Create a **Network of civil society organizations** that can provide different services to the care leavers, for example: (Educational grants, Internships, Job Opportunities, Courses, legal support, psychological support, funds for opening businesses) with developing a **clear referral system** among these organizations.
- **Involve the private sector** by connecting them to the care homes to provide summer internships, training and hire the most qualified care leavers.

- Use the **media, art, and religious figures to advocate** for care leavers and counter the stigma associated with them.
- Create a **volunteering program for care leavers** they get enrolled in before leaving care to feel that they are part of the society and can give back.
- Provide **Marriage preparation and parenting courses** that target care leavers and their needs.
- Provide **employability skills training** in topics like Soft skills, computer, English, job hunting and writing a CV, workplace communication.
- Provide **pro bono lawyers** to defend the care leavers as the police take many for crimes they did not do.

To the Care Homes:

- Ensure **Care leavers have all their documents** when they leave care, such as IDs, bank accounts, and birth certificates.
- Have the children more **engaged in the chores** like cooking and cleaning since they are young, not just before leaving care through assigning them with weekly chores that are suitable to their age.
- Allow the children space to **deal with the outside world**, to have the opportunity to buy their own food and clothes, and deal with governmental entities.
- Have a **long-term plan and budget for aftercare** that is put in place once the child joins the care home.
- Allow time for a **gradual transition**; the young people should be informed since they were children that they are leaving at a certain age to be psychologically prepared.

- Arrange **meetings with the care leavers** who have already left to share their experiences living outside with their younger peers.
- Provide **quality education** as education is the most important protective factor
- Support the prospective care leavers in **finding a job**.
- Have a system for **Follow-up** with the young people after they leave and, if possible, hire someone just to follow up with the care leavers.
- Decrease the **caregivers' turn-over** as it is very hard to build trust with new caregivers.
- The caregivers need to be more **supportive and encouraging** in the aftercare phase.
- Put **fewer care leavers in the after-care apartments**; the higher the number, the more conflicts.
- Provide **financial literacy training**.
- Provide **Sex education training**.
- Allow the care leavers to **visit the care homes** and seek guidance and support if needed.

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Annex A: Care Leavers Interview Questions

- 1) Background: Age: Gender: when did you leave the care system:
Highest Education received: Marital status: Employment status: Housing Status:
- 2) Can you tell us about your experience in the first year you left the care system? How did you feel? What did you do?
- 3) How were you prepared to leave the care system? Was there a specific program or training?
- 4) What were the biggest challenges you faced when you left the care system? Was it according to your expectations? And how did you face these challenges?
- 5) Did you receive any support when you left the care system? How is it?
- 6) How did you find accommodation? Manage yourself financially? Manage the daily life tasks?
- 7) How were you able to find employment? Are you satisfied with your current employment status?
- 8) Were you able to continue your education after leaving care? Why? Or why not?
- 9) Do you have any close relationships (friends or significant others that you can confide in)? How is your relationship?
- 10) Do you have any positive relationships with adults that you seek for advice? (Social Workers, Volunteers)
- 11) Did you face any problems dealing with the community? (Neighbors, Work colleagues, etc....)
- 12) What do you do if you get sick? Where do you receive healthcare?
- 13) Do you participate in any extracurricular activities (sports, arts, volunteering)?
- 14) From your point of view, what could have been done differently to make the transition to adulthood more manageable for you from your care home?
- 15) From your point of view, what are the policies that need to be put in place to support young people in their transition?

Annex B: Social workers questions

- 1) How do you prepare young people before leaving your care home? Do you give them any trainings or specific programs?
- 2) What kind of support do you provide them when they leave the care home?
- 3) Do you keep in touch with young people who leave the care home? For how long and how?
- 4) From your point of view, what are the most common challenges faced by these care leavers?
- 5) What do you think could have been done differently to make the transition to adulthood easier for young people?
- 6) What are the factors that make the care leavers resilient from your point of view?
- 7) From your point of view, what are the policies that need to be put in place to support young people in their transition?

Annex C: Child Protection Experts Questions

- 1) What is the current status for After Care in Egypt now? What are the current policies in place regarding the aftercare process? Are they applied? If not, what are the main challenges in applying them?
- 2) How will the new alternative care strategy contribute to aftercare?
- 3) What are the services offered by the government and the NGOs to support the care leavers in their transition phase?
- 4) What are the programs or training present preparing the young people for the aftercare phase?
- 5) From your experience, what are the best practices regarding aftercare?
- 6) What policies need to be put in place to support the care leavers