

INTERVIEW WITH MARY CHELLADURAI, DIRECTOR OF THE AINA TRUST IN BANGALORE



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “We ensure that children are handled with care and dignity. Parents are taught to respect their children and their rights, and to provide a child-friendly environment. AINA does not differentiate between families based on cultural or religious identities. Poverty defines target groups for interventions.”
- “The community is changing. Before AINA’s intervention, many children were treated with no respect and dignity and were regarded as the properties and possessions of parents. Some were beaten. Today, mothers have begun to regard children as God-given gift who need tender nurturing and care.”

You are the Director of the Aina Trust in India. What does your organization do?

I founded AINA Trust along with two other Trustees. I continue as the Founder and Executive Trustee who manages AINA Trust and report to the Board of Trustees.

AINA works in Chikkaballapur district, Karnataka State, India, particularly in Chickballapur and Sidlaghatta towns. The projects' main focus is to serve disadvantaged children including from socially marginalized groups, including Dalits and other minority communities. We especially serve children from single parents in poverty who live in slums and engage in daily wage-earning and rag-picking, bringing a meagre income to take care of their families. These families often suffer from alcoholic/drug addictions. They are not cared for in government welfare or protection schemes. Their children are malnourished and vulnerable to infant mortality. Even their small incomes from daily wages have been affected seriously due to the Covid-19 pandemic whose effects will continue in 2021.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Mary Chelladurai, the Director of the Aina Trust in India, explains the aims of her organization which serves young disadvantaged children from socially marginalized groups (Dalits and other minority communities), mostly through Early Child Care Centers.

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AINA runs 30 small Early Child Care Centers (ECCs) for slum-dwellers and 12 ECCs for rag-picker families from Chickballapur town. It also runs 30 ECCs for slum-dwellers and 77 school-going children from Sidlaghatta town. Each ECC enrolls five children. Children in ECCs are 0-4 years old, while school-going children are 6-14 years old. Altogether AINA directly benefits 387 children, as primary beneficiaries. Secondary beneficiaries are the families of the children. A total of 72 caregivers provide care in the ECCs, so benefit from the program too.

AINA provides nutrition for all 387 children through a mid-day full meal at the ECCs. For holistic development, AINA organizes regular medical check-ups and special care for malnourished children, as well as awareness training and orientation for caregivers and parents, especially mothers, and community members. Caregivers in the ECCs are skilled in child-friendly games, storytelling, reciting rhymes, paper crafts, toy-making, etc.

What are some of the strengths of your programs?

- The members of the Board of Trustees are renowned members in the development and social work field. They are professionals from Social Work, Counselling, Social Development, Lawyers and Chartered Accounts. They provide timely guidance to the program and the projects.
- AINA has an Advisory Committee with expertise in Management, Child Rights & Welfare and Societal Development. They advise the Board of Trustees from time to time on management, societal development and child rights/welfare.
- The Field Team members are from the local area, well trained and experienced. This helps tremendously to get easy acceptance, to gain the confidence and cooperation of beneficiaries. During the Covid-19 crisis for example; they could organize the Government's relief support even when the areas were totally cut from any movement from outsiders.
- The Executive Trustee and one other Trustee have a good rapport with the local governments and NGOs; this is an asset for networking and collaborative activities. AINA complements the child care activities of the Government.
- AINA has established a Community-based Child Care model where caregivers are drawn from the local community and trained to care for the

children from immediate neighbors. They provide sustainability for the ECCs and their benefits.

What are some of the difficulties you face?

- The economic poverty of the target families makes them vulnerable and increases their dependency on AINA.
- A few of the caregivers who take responsibility for ECCs may fall into the bad practices (lethargic attitude, lack of self-discipline, caring more for the honorarium/ salary/benefits they earn, etc.).
- With Covid-19 and schools shut down, older children (5-6 years) are coming to ECCs, and it is hard to say no to these children.
- Trainings are a regular feature for Aina for caregivers, but some who are illiterate caregivers may not learn as much or practice what has been taught through demonstrations and role plays.
- Some mothers feel that caregivers should groom the children; as soon as the child is up from bed s/he may be dropped at the ECC. This makes the work of caregivers difficult, leading to complaints.
- The opening hours for ECCs are based on the work schedule of the mothers but some mothers leave their children much earlier and keep the children late in the centers. Despite trying to reduce such practices, they remain.

How do you understand the concept of integral human development and what does this imply for your work?

AINA always believed and followed the perspective and practices of "integral human development". In our concept of "development", we recognize and respect children's rights and uphold their dignity. To defend their human dignity, we need to appreciate and recognize their cultural and religious belongings and practices. We believe that to affirm the children's dignity, we need to have a multi-pronged approach as individuals, families, and communities. This is translated into our project activities by directly working with the children, parents/families, and communities. The ECCs provide childcare, welfare and development. We ensure that children are handled with care and dignity. Their parents are taught to respect their children and their rights, and to provide a child-friendly environment. AINA does not differentiate between children or families based on cultural or religious identities. Poverty defines target groups for interventions.



Photo: Children at an Early Childhood Center.

Beyond the work of your organization, what is working well and what needs to be improved in terms of the involvement of various organizations, Catholic or not, with children at risk?

The activities that are within AINA's purview work well. On the government side, delivery systems are essential to protect children at risk, but need to be improved. AINA has been collaborating with the Women and Child Development Department of the Government by providing training to Anganwadi (child care) workers. The attitudinal change of Anganwadi workers and care for the children still needs to be improved. The attitudinal change of parents for respecting the dignity of children is to be improved as well. The poverty of the parents and alcoholism, especially among the fathers, increases further the children's vulnerability.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

My parents were pious Catholic, and my family had close associations with Catholic priests and nuns and their services to the poor. My education has been all through

Catholic educational institutions. My basic instinct and drive for doing good for the poor and those in need motivated me to take up my post-graduate degree in Social Work. After my graduation in 1984, I was a trainer for the Anganwadi workers' training institute. I also was a part time lecturer in School of Social Work.

My journey continued with NGOs which focused on children, starting with rag-pickers and street children in Bangalore and subsequently with women and children in the city's slums. I worked with Training Institutes and other NGOs as well as corporate entities. I decided to found AINA as an NGO with a few like-minded individuals in the late 1990s. From the start, we targeted our services to some of the most vulnerable children. I was also working for a large corporation for a decade as an expert in parenting, conducting regular sessions on various child development themes and parenting topics. I counselled on strengthening family ties and having a conducive environment for the growth and holistic development of children for more than a decade along with the team.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

As a woman, I have never shied away from raising my voice against any unfair treatment, whether in my family or workplace. I pointed out and challenged ill-doings in NGO or Government delivery mechanisms. Sometimes I paid a price for this. I had to resign from workplaces where I could not correct institutional wrong-doings. I always found it difficult to compromise on issues where I felt that it was not alright. I resigned from an honorary government position related to children's welfare.

I am passionate about children, their well-being, their rights and dignity. I always consider the children we serve as my children. My heart goes out to them if they are found without food, ill-treated, or discriminated against based on their caste or cultural identity. I am passionate about talking about their goodness and taking up their

cause. I am also passionate, about dialoguing with the community on positive ways to discipline children. Childhood is crucial for the development of the person into a mature adult. The community is changing. Before AINA's intervention, many children were treated with no respect and dignity and were regarded as the properties and possessions of parents. Some were beaten, chided with bad words and punished ruthlessly. Today, mothers have begun to regard children as God-given gift who need tender nurturing and care. This is not a function of money but rather of the attitude of the community, mothers, and fathers to change. This makes me and my team proud. The team has been regularly trained and mentored. They bring the issues of children from the community and there is a wide discussion with the community and the take-home is the attitudinal change and the mothers' hidden love for the children which is being reinforced.



Photo: Training event for care givers.