Child Rights and Access to Justice Fellowship 2025-28

Enfold Proactive Health Trust
Bengaluru, India

Background

Children come in contact with the law and justice system in multiple ways – as victims and witnesses of crimes, as subjects of custody battles in a marital dispute, as children in conflict with the law, when seeking access to entitlements such as birth certificates, education, or disability pensions – facing violation of economic, social and cultural rights as much as civil and political rights. Among these categories of children, those who are the most neglected and stigmatized are children in conflict with the law, many of whom are disproportionately from Dalit, Adivasi, Muslim, and poor urban communities. This intersection of class, caste, religion, and age makes them even more vulnerable to arbitrary treatment and exclusion.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in the year 2022, the juvenile justice system in India had a caseload of 78,443 children in conflict with the law with 37,780 children apprehended in 2022 and another 40,663 apprehended in the previous years, whose cases were pending disposal at the beginning of 2022. While 47% children had their cases disposed of in 2022, 4.8% cases ended in release of children during investigation because the offence was unfounded or did not occur. In the disposed cases, 88% held children guilty. Among those held guilty, 55.2% were released on advice and admonition, 13.3% were subjected to a penalty in the form of fine, 29.2% were sent to a special home/fit facility and 2.3% were awarded imprisonment on being treated as adults. The National Crime Records Bureau does not provide data on the number of children released on probation or on orders of counselling or community service. Data on the number of children rehabilitated is also not available.

Over the years, several significant strides have been made in the legal and policy framework to safeguard children's rights. However, implementation remains weak, and the engagement of practicing lawyers in addressing child rights violations, particularly those relating to children in conflict with the law, has been limited. While adults learn to navigate through the justice system and put up a struggle, children remain dependent on adults for legal representation and support. The right to be represented by a lawyer of one's choice remains a distant dream for them.

Articles 14 and 22(1) of the Constitution of India make it obligatory for the State to ensure equality before law and a legal system which promotes justice on the basis of equal opportunity to all. Article 39-A further directs the State to ensure that the operation of the legal system promotes justice on a basis of equal opportunities.

The 'ends of justice' as interpreted by various High Courts in the context of the provision relating to bail for children in conflict with the law (Section 12 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) Act, 2015) clearly refer to the welfare objective of the legislation. This

implies that justice in the context of children in conflict with the law is not only about ensuring that children are well represented but also that child-sensitive procedures built in the law are duly followed, children are able to access their right to be heard, they are able to navigate through the judicial process without undue duress and their experience of the juvenile justice system leaves a positive influence on them.

Measures that promote children's access to justice are key to achieving all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 16 on just, peaceful, and inclusive societies its targets 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation and all forms of violence against and torture of children and target 16.3 on promoting the rule of law and ensuring equal access to justice for all.

Article 14, paragraph 3 (d), of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that everyone should be entitled, among other rights, "to be tried in his presence, and to defend himself in person or through legal assistance of his own choosing; to be informed, if he does not have legal assistance, of this right; and to have legal assistance assigned to him in any case where the interests of justice so require, and without payment by him in any such case if he does not have sufficient means to pay for it".

About the Project

Improving children's access to justice and their experience of the juvenile justice system is the need of the hour. Enfold Proactive Health Trust seeks to work towards this through a Child Rights Fellowship Programme that will encourage litigating lawyers to represent children in conflict with the law in the Juvenile Justice Boards (JJBs), Children's Courts and High Court (if necessary) and advance rights-based and child-sensitive procedures and processes to help fulfil the project goals.

Project Objectives:

(i) Systemic Change

- Facilitate a strategic shift from application of conventional criminal justice approach and strategies to application of child rights and juvenile justice approaches, principles and strategies in litigation for children in conflict with the law
- Facilitate and encourage quality legal representation for children in conflict with the law
- Facilitate children's right to be heard and right to participate in the judicial process affecting them and improve their experience of the juvenile justice system
- Develop indicators of quality legal representation in the space of access to justice for children
- Identify systemic barriers in the access to and experience of justice by children in conflict with the law, and devise strategies to address them.

(ii) Leadership Development

- Mentor Fellows to claim greater space and voice within the legal profession, and build confidence to grow as leaders and role models within the profession, while ensuring access to justice for children in the juvenile justice system.

- Encourage Fellows to actively invest time in their professional growth and visibility as well as contribute to the discourse around child rights lawyering and access to justice for children.

(iii) Networking & Collaboration

- Facilitate development of a cadre of Child Rights Lawyers at the trial court level.
- Facilitate connections of Fellows with other legal professionals, civil society organisations and advocacy groups to strengthen their professional networks.
- Encourage Fellows to contribute to the local socio-legal aid ecosystem of legal aid.

Project Area

The Fellowship Programme has been rolled out in five districts in three states as follows:

➔ Karnataka (Kalaburagi and Yadgir districts)
➔ Uttarakhand (Nainital (Haldwani) district)
➔ Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal and Indore districts).

Enfold Plans to expand the Fellowship Programme to Tamil Nadu in the following Districts from April 2026:

➔ Tiruchirappalli
➔ Madurai

The Fellowship Programme:

The Fellowship Programme is designed with a three-pronged approach:

i. to provide legal assistance and representation to children in conflict with the law.
ii. to connect children to rehabilitative services and support on a case to case basis.
iii. to facilitate documentation that generates knowledge resources and evidence for wider dissemination and use to inform law, policy and practice on access to justice for children in the juvenile justice system.

More specific details are as follows:

1. The Fellowship Programme will identify 4 to 6 lawyers per district to represent children in the JJBs, Children's Court and High Court (if necessary).
2. Each Fellow will be required to provide quality legal representation and support to children in conflict with the law (CiCL), based on a set of guiding principles shared with them.
3. Selected Fellows will undergo a three days' orientation and training upon selection and a refresher training after one year.
4. Fellows will receive regular mentorship from identified experts. Mentors will facilitate their personal growth as child rights advocates, while guiding them in applying a child rights-based approach & juvenile justice principles to case analysis, legal strategies, and client interactions.
5. Fellows will document the cases and case experiences as per a pre-decided format shared with them.
6. Fellows will participate in online peer learning sessions and monthly webinars to develop their knowledge and skills and become part of a larger child rights fraternity.

7. Fellows will collaborate with an identified civil society organisation (CSO) to achieve the rehabilitative goals of the JJ Act. CiCL requiring rehabilitation support that cannot be met with the help of legal intervention can be referred to the identified CSO for support and follow-up.
8. Fellows will receive a monthly fellowship grant of Rs. 25000.

Who can apply:

- ➔ Persons with at least 2-3 years of litigation experience, especially who have previously worked on social causes.
- ➔ Self motivated and passionate about child rights.
- ➔ Should be based in the district where they are practicing.
- ➔ Can dedicate 26 months towards the fellowship programme.
- ➔ Preference will be given to fellows who belong to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, persons with disabilities, and persons belonging to gender minorities.

Screening Process

The Fellow will be selected though a rigorous screening process, which will entail the following:

(i) All applications will be online, using a Google Form in either English or Tamil and the **last date for filling the google form is 11:59 PM IST on 19 March 2026.**
(ii) Shortlisted applicants will be contacted by 23 March 2026 for a virtual interview round with a local selection panel.
(iii) Enfold will take two weeks to process the application.
(iv) The final selected legal fellows will be announced tentatively by March end.
(v) The legal fellowship for Tamil Nadu fellows will begin from 1 April 2026 and continue until May 2028.

Write to childrightsfellowship@enfoldindia.org in case of further queries.