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Pushpa Basnet was a 21-year-old social-work student when a child inside a Nepali prison grabbed her shawl and smiled.

The moment stayed with her because the child had committed no crime. She was there because her parent was incarcerated and there was no safe guardian outside.

For many people, seeing such a situation might produce sympathy. Basnet turned it into a life project.

In 2005 she founded the Early Childhood Development Center, beginning with a small programme that allowed young children to leave prison during the day. What started as daycare later expanded into residential care, education and a home for children whose childhoods might otherwise have unfolded behind bars.

The children serving somebody else’s sentence

When a parent is imprisoned, the legal sentence applies to the adult. The consequences spread much further.

In Nepal, young children without another safe caregiver have sometimes lived inside prison with an incarcerated parent. The arrangement can keep mother and child together, but it also places a child inside an environment built for punishment rather than development.

Basnet encountered this reality while studying social work.

She later recalled that one girl’s simple interaction made the issue impossible to forget. The question became direct: if the child had done nothing wrong, why should prison define her childhood?

Starting before feeling ready

Basnet was not an established philanthropist. She was barely into adulthood herself.

That made the beginning uncertain. She had to persuade prison officials, earn the trust of parents and find resources for children whose needs continued every day whether donations arrived or not.

The Early Childhood Development Center began in 2005. At first, the programme brought children out of prison during the day for food, play and learning before returning them to their parents in the evening.

It was a practical compromise. The children could remain connected to their parents while gaining access to a more normal environment.

From daycare to home

By 2007, Basnet’s work expanded into residential care for older children.

This changed the nature of the project. A daycare can close at the end of the afternoon. A home cannot.

Children needed school fees, meals, clothing, health care, supervision, emotional support and adults who would remain present through ordinary crises.

Basnet became known to the children as “Mamu”. The name captured what the organisation had become: not an institution

that simply extracted children from prison, but an unconventional family built around continuity.

The importance of staying connected

Child-protection work becomes ethically complicated when helping a child requires separating them from a parent.

Incarceration does not automatically erase a parent-child bond. Many incarcerated parents remain deeply important to their children.

Basnet’s model therefore emphasised care outside prison while maintaining relationships where appropriate.

This is a crucial distinction. The goal is not to punish parents again by taking children away. It is to prevent the child from experiencing incarceration as their own sentence.

Recognition from far away

Basnet’s work attracted international attention. In 2012 she was named CNN Hero of the Year.

The recognition brought money and visibility to the Early Childhood Development Center, but it also changed how the world saw her.

Suddenly, a young Nepali social worker running a modest programme was being presented on an international stage as an example of extraordinary service.

The award did not remove the everyday responsibilities waiting back home. Children still needed breakfast, school preparation, medical appointments and reassurance.

That contrast is one of the most revealing parts of social work: public praise happens occasionally; care happens every day.

The earthquake and rebuilding

The 2015 earthquake tested that routine dramatically.

Basnet later described being displaced with dozens of children and living temporarily in an open field. Buildings could be rebuilt, she said in a later interview, because what mattered first was that the children were alive.

For somebody already responsible for a large household, disaster multiplied every task.

It also showed why institutions built around vulnerable children need resilience beyond one founder’s energy. Emergencies expose whether systems can continue when normal routines collapse.

Butterfly Home

The residential project became widely known as Butterfly Home, an image that fits the philosophy behind it.

A child’s circumstances at one moment should not determine the shape of the entire life.

The metaphor can sound sentimental, but the work behind it is practical: stable housing, education, nutrition, routine and consistent adults.

These are ordinary things. Their power comes precisely from being ordinary.

For a child living amid legal uncertainty and parental incarceration, ordinary childhood can be transformative.

What the story says about prisons

Pushpa Basnet’s work is often told as a story of personal compassion. It is also a story about gaps in public systems.

If children enter prison because there is nowhere safe for them to go, the problem cannot be solved only by asking private citizens to become heroes.

Governments, courts, prisons and social services need clear policies for children of incarcerated parents. Families need support before crisis becomes institutionalisation.

Basnet’s contribution shows what is possible. It also shows what should not depend on one person.

The family she chose

When Basnet began at 21, people around her reportedly thought the plan was unrealistic.

There was some logic to that concern. The commitment she was making had no simple endpoint. Children grow. Their needs become more complicated. Education becomes more expensive. Adolescence brings new questions about identity, family and independence.

But long-term care is built by staying after the inspiring moment has passed.

That is what makes Basnet’s story different from a rescue narrative.

The girl who grabbed her shawl did not simply prompt an act of charity. She changed the architecture of Basnet’s life.

More than two decades later, the principle behind the work remains direct: a child should not grow up behind bars because of an adult’s sentence.

Everything else—the daycare, the home, the awards and the public recognition—grew from refusing to accept that one fact as normal.

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