



EMERGING EVIDENCE

Time for Overhauls: State-Run Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable Populations in India



Awaaz-e-Niswaan counselors Saira Banu and Aisha Khun speak with women seeking advice. Awaaz, an AJWS grantee, helps Muslim women and adolescent girls in Mumbai deal with a range of issues, including domestic violence, child marriage and divorce. Photo by Jonathan Torgovnik. *This photo was not taken as part of the research described in this report.*

SHELTER HOMES: A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In India, as in the rest of the world, women and girls suffer numerous violations of their rights. At home, they face the burden of unpaid, undervalued domestic labor and often have little or no choice about who they marry. Outside the home, women are denied access to public spaces and are uniquely impacted by poverty, a lack of housing rights and a lack of political rights.

Women and girls also face astounding levels of verbal, physical and sexual violence, forcing many to leave their homes and sleep on the streets. Homelessness, in turn, makes these women and girls highly vulnerable to additional sexual and physical violence, as well as other health risks—creating a cycle of violence and other harms.

To respond to this challenge, India's government set up shelter homes in the 1950s. In addition to those escaping abusive relationships, women who have stigmatized identities or vocations—such as sex workers and girls who have eloped—may also be forced into shelter homes. Currently, there are a variety of shelter programs for women funded and run by a diverse group of stakeholders from the central government, faith-based organizations and women's groups.

To consolidate learning across the multiple stakeholders involved with shelter homes in India, Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu—meaning “to lead the way under the vista of stars”—convened two national meetings. This document provides a summary of learning from those meetings.

NEGLECT OF WOMEN'S SHELTER HOMES

At the Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu meetings, participants shared their observations and experiences, as well as secondary data and case studies, about the status of women and girls in Indian shelter homes and the conditions they face. The group raised many concerns:

- The acute shortage of shelter homes leads to unavailability and rampant overcrowding. For example: for every 10,000 homeless women living in Delhi in 2013, there was only one permanent shelter home.
- Adolescent girls between ages 16 and 18 make up a sizable population of shelter home residents, but do not receive services relevant to their unique experiences and needs.
- Shelter homes are poorly and inconsistently funded. This situation leads to extremely poor sanitary conditions,

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Emerging Evidence is a series of short summaries of research that American Jewish World Service (AJWS) supports as part of our strategy to advance gender equality and end child, early and forced (CEFM) marriage in India.

The AJWS-funded report described here, “Time for Overhauls: Report of a National Consultation on Services in and around State-Run and -Funded Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable Populations,” is by Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu, a national network in India working toward improved and expanded shelter services for women.

a lack of hygiene supplies, and poor quality food and drinking water, and it limits the development of innovative shelter home services and activities.

- Residents receive no support for their physical or mental health. Staff have no training on mental health issues, and other residents are often tasked with caring for women and girls suffering from mental illness.
- Women and girls are often denied agency, respect and a voice in decisions within shelter homes. Many were forced to enter the shelter home system in the first place.
- Marginalized groups of women have additional difficulty gaining access to shelter homes and often face discrimination upon entry. Women with children may not be allowed to stay, and women who have not filed a domestic incident report may be turned away. Lesbian women, transgender persons and others with non-normative sexual or gender identities are often denied access to shelter homes.
- Homes originally built to keep women safe have often become sites of violence and exploitation. Young women and women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable within shelter homes. As one resident noted, “I tie my daughter’s arm to mine with a dupatta every night because I fear that someone may pick her up ... I get up every five minutes to check on her. Such is the fear. Do we not deserve to sleep peacefully?”
- There are no mechanisms for sharing or addressing complaints in shelter homes, and there is limited record maintenance and external monitoring and evaluation. This greatly limits transparency regarding the state of shelter homes and their operations.
- Shelter homes do not effectively support women to seek long-term housing, employment or other supportive services. Very few shelter homes refer residents to other NGOs and women’s organizations that provide a range of support services and education about human rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To truly serve residents’ needs, the entire Indian shelter home system must be overhauled. The report outlines recommendations to begin this process:

- Increase funding for building shelter homes and repairing existing facilities.

- Increase the range of support services offered to include psychological care and medical and legal aid.
- Commission short- and long-term research to better understand the current functioning of shelter homes.
- Reframe the purpose and mission of shelter homes with a feminist perspective and a value of human rights, prioritizing empowerment and emphasizing inclusion of vulnerable populations.
- Institutionalize training, capacity-building and sensitization as a mandatory part of employment at shelter homes.
- Launch routine monitoring and evaluation of shelter homes via independent bodies that comprise individuals across different sectors, and establish grievance and redressal mechanisms within shelters.

NEXT STEPS

- Members of Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu from different parts of India have agreed to collaborate on a range of activities, such as building evidence to better document the insights noted above, facilitating resource sharing and developing new alliances and spaces for dialogue and learning.
- In addition, a coalition of network members has initiated an action research study on women and girls’ experiences with accessing and living in shelter homes in five states in India: Delhi, Assam, Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Their study will contribute to a growing body of evidence that can be used to advocate for improved services by the Indian government. Because the coalition encompasses women’s rights, child rights and LGBTI rights groups, it will enable a diverse population to bring their shelter-related concerns to the government.

“I tie my daughter’s arm to mine with a dupatta every night because I fear that someone may pick her up ... I get up every five minutes to check on her. Such is the fear. Do we not deserve to sleep peacefully?” — Shelter Home Resident

To learn more about our partners’ research in India, visit ajws.org/research or contact us at EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

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