



EMERGING EVIDENCE

BEYOND THE ROOF: Women Survivors of Violence and Shelter Homes in Delhi

SHELTER HOMES: A RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Numerous studies have explored sexual and physical violence against women in Delhi and found that most survivors have faced violence at the hands of intimate partners. Violence or abuse may result in women fleeing or being thrown out of their homes. Because abuse and violence within a relationship can wax and wane, some women leave their partners and return home multiple times.

While all women experiencing homelessness face challenges related to poverty, survivors of violence often have unique needs that are not met by nonspecialized shelters. In turn, being homeless for any reason can increase women's vulnerability to harassment and violence.

Shelters for women in Delhi began with a welfare model and were designed to serve as protective rescue homes for women and girls. Over the years, different types of shelter homes in Delhi have been created by the government and by faith-based, nonprofit or women's rights organizations. Despite the growth in the number of shelter homes, they do not adequately serve Delhi's increasing population of homeless women, especially those in distress due to violence. Women survivors of violence who live in shelter homes for the homeless rarely get the services they need to heal from trauma and rebuild their lives. Women escaping violence due to gender identity or sexual orientation may also have unique service needs unlikely to be met in Delhi's shelter homes.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Understand the status and conditions of survivors of violence in shelter homes in Delhi
- Build the research capacities of staff members from participating nonprofit organizations through training in qualitative research methodology and ethics
- Use the findings to start or sustain empowering programs for survivors of violence and staff who work in shelters

- Interrogate stereotypes regarding women survivors of violence and how they are seen

METHODS

- April to November 2018
- In-depth interviews across eight shelter homes with survivors (n=28) and key informants (n=17) as well as focus group discussions (n=18) and informal conversations with a range of stakeholders; iterative consultations with study teams in the other four states as part of the broader initiative
- Feminist approach: cyclical research design; close attention to ethics; politically committed to lending more power to study participants, who possess critical knowledge

SELECT FINDINGS

Challenges with Current Shelter Programs

- **Insufficient investment:** Staff are paid below city or national wage requirements, resulting in low retention of skilled and motivated staff; budget allocations for residents are not commensurate with cost of living; shelter home staff capacities are not built or strengthened.
- **Disempowering framing:** Staff use paternalistic and patronizing language and often treat residents as inmates or victims and deny them agency and mobility; sex workers are often forced into shelter homes for so-called rescue, without their consent.
- **Impractical approaches to empowerment:** Within shelter homes, there is no consideration of trauma and other challenges girls and women face; no support to help women pursue employment or limited trainings focused only on low-income traditional livelihoods for women; no discourse on issues related to women's right to property; a focus on protective, rather than rights-based approaches.

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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, "Beyond the Roof: An Action-Research Study on Women Survivors of Violence and Shelter Homes in Delhi," is by Action India, Jagori and Nazariya on behalf of Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu, a national network in India working toward improved and expanded shelter services for women.

Issues Affecting Shelter Residents

- **Strict regulations:** Residents must hand over mobile phones; calls are supervised by staff; women are not allowed to leave or enter without permission.
- **Reinforced dependency:** Women are sometimes prohibited from holding a job or not supported to do so; residents are told to provide services like cooking for staff; no childcare options are available.
- **Prioritization of safety over choice:** Women are sometimes asked to leave if they enter any relationship with a man; staff make sure residents never sleep together.
- **No consistency in support services:** There are no common or minimum quality standards; there is a lack of confidentiality; shelter staff rarely provide referrals to other services.

Context of Survivors and Shelter Homes

- **Admission issues:** There are a limited number of shelters; admission is based on strict criteria (often court or police referral) and requires medical exams that can aggravate trauma; stigma associated with shelter homes prevents women from accessing support.
- **Experiences with violence:** Many women seek shelter after forced marriage and experiences of emotional, physical, financial and/or sexual abuse; many women interviewed also experienced family violence in parents' home, including child sexual abuse.
- **Insufficient time for rehabilitation:** Government expects rehabilitation to be reported every few months—timing that's not realistic for traumatized women to become emotionally and economically self-reliant; shelters prioritize reintegration into family or husband's home, regardless of emotional readiness and feasibility.
- **Critical need for shelter:** Shelters play a positive role for many residents, despite being a last resort.
- **Legal needs:** Police, protection officers and legal aids are overworked; there is little coordination; problematic practices are common (e.g. asking for bribes).
- **Counseling needs:** There is no common approach; many counselors are untrained; they often prioritize family unity over survivor wellbeing and offer no follow-up.

More Vulnerable Survivors Denied Access

- **Lesbian and bisexual individuals:** These survivors need access to safe spaces after experiences of family violence, but they're often excluded from accessing shelters at all.

- **Transgender communities:** Trans women often have high exposure to sexual violence, but they are not served by shelter homes.
- **Differently abled women:** They often face neglect, violence and discrimination that increases their dependency on others and risk of abuse; yet they are often denied admission by non-specialized shelter homes.
- **Older women and widows:** Older women, especially widows, are more susceptible to violence because of their limited power within their family and community; and yet many shelter homes cap admission at age 45.
- **Women with children:** Mothers and children are often separated in different homes with limited ability to meet; most shelter homes refuse children under age 7; children in shelter homes rarely receive adequate healthcare, food and education.
- **Women with mental health issues:** Those needing psychiatric attention have limited access to long-term care and follow-up.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Increase funding for shelter homes and increase the ability of shelter homes to better meet demands for beds and services, especially for vulnerable and underprivileged women
- Shift traditional welfare practices and reporting, and integrate women's experiences into new policies
- Raise awareness of women's rights and relevant issues in shelter homes with key stakeholders
- Foster coordination and new alliances across agencies and nongovernmental organizations
- Establish pathways to access mental health treatment and make post-shelter follow-up a mandatory service
- Develop more holistic approaches to building life skills and offer residents choices when possible, including non-traditional livelihoods training

NEXT STEPS

The researchers are using the findings to advocate locally, regionally and nationally for improved shelter homes and services for women and girls. The researchers are also educating staff who work in shelter homes and offering workshops designed to empower residents.

Visit ajws.org/research for more insights on CEFM and gender inequality—in India and around the globe. For questions or to sign up for updates on AJWS research, email EmergingEvidence@ajws.org.

American Jewish World Service

45 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018

t: 212.792.2900
800.889.7146
f: 212.792.2930

ajws.org · ajws@ajws.org
[f /americanjewishworldservice](https://www.facebook.com/americanjewishworldservice)
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