

Chapter 15

Shelter Homes: A Need to Develop a New Approach for Women in Familial Distress

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Women in India are always viewed as dependent creatures with hardly any right over the family property. Very few women in India can claim to possess a shelter of their own. In many situations, a woman is forced to leave her house because of the familial conflicts. If she is denied support by relatives and friends, she has to seek admission in one of the Shelter Homes to overcome the crisis.

In India, Shelter Homes for women in crisis have a long history. The first Shelter Home for women in crisis was started in the state of Maharashtra in 1868. There are now 25 different organizations in Bombay actively involved in helping women in distress. These organizations can be classified into two groups:

1. The Shelter Homes managed by different voluntary bodies or religious trusts and the Homes run by the Government.
2. The support cells or counseling centers managed by different autonomous women's groups.

The majority of Shelter Homes have a long tradition and are equipped with spacious buildings, open spaces to build additional structures, and the necessary infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of women. In most of these Homes, more than 50% of the seats are always available. In contrast to this, the support cells are of recent origin and do not have shelter facilities. They are trying to set up new Homes for the women who approach them for help. This paper tries to highlight the existing rules and regulations for admission to these Homes and ways to utilize the available resources more effectively and meet the needs of women in distress in the present social system. A more liberal approach is needed to help women in crisis. They should be treated as responsible adults who need a little support and guidance to cope with their situation.

Background

In Indian culture, a woman is always viewed as a dependent creature from her childhood to old age. She is supposed to be protected by her father or brother in childhood, by her husband after marriage, and by her son during old age or widowhood. Traditionally, Indian women, by and large, did not have property rights. Now, even after legal reforms in this direction, very few women get a share in the family property. As a result, only a small percentage of Indian women can claim to possess a shelter of their own. Usually, a woman is supposed to be living in her father's, brother's, or husband's house. Unfortunately, many women themselves have a similar perception, irrespective of their

significant contributions to the family income. Many situations force a woman to leave home: family conflicts, marital conflicts, personal problems, or physical and mental torture. It is quite common that women are driven out of the house at odd hours.

The problems of Indian women should be viewed within their cultural context. The class and caste structure in Indian society has a great influence over the status of women. Formerly, the higher the caste, the more restrictions or sanctions on women. Among women of higher castes, a married woman had the highest social status as compared to the unmarried woman or a widow. Her status was enhanced further by giving birth to a male child. When society changed from a matrilineal system to a patriarchal one, the only purpose of a woman's life was to reproduce. To control this process of reproduction, more and more sanctions were laid on her, especially in the higher castes. She was denied the opportunity to receive a formal education. The age at marriage for a woman decreased progressively and a stage came when the parents of a girl child started to get her married in the cradle! The parents were supposed to arrange the marriage of their daughter before she reached menstruation. The religious scriptures considered a father sinful if he failed to get his daughter married before her puberty. However, a bridegroom could be any age. Polygamy and remarriage of a widower were socially accepted practices. The network of health services being very poor, the mortality rate, in general, was very high. Because of epidemics and high rates of child mortality, many girls and boys lost their spouses at a very early age. The boy could easily remarry but no new marriage was possible for a widow, irrespective of her age. The percentage of women dying during child birth was quite high. The widower, in such cases, had no alternative but to marry a very young girl. Because of the large age difference among such couples, the percentage of widows in the younger age group increased considerably. All these factors put together gave rise to an alarmingly high percentage of child widows in India. A close look at Table 1 will give us a fair idea of the intensity of the problem.

A widow had no status in society. She was considered to be most inauspicious and was not allowed to participate in social or religious functions. Young widows were often forced into embarrassing situations because of sexual abuse and illegitimate pregnancies. Many cases of suicides and infanticides were reported during the first half of the nineteenth century. This was the major social problem in those days. The first Shelter Home for women in distress was started in 1868 by

Table 1: Distribution by age of Hindu widowers and widows in India in the year 1988

Age	Hindu widowers	Hindu widows
Below 10	21,000	63,000
10-19	173,000	486,000
20-29	539,000	1,571,000
30-39	786,000	2,797,000
40-60	1,744,000	7,007,000
Above 60	1,133,000	4,177,000

Based on reports of the 1891 census, it was estimated that in the Brahmin community (highest caste among Hindus), more than 33% of women were widows and about one-third of them were child widows (Source: Renade Pratibha, Stree Prashnanchi Charcha, 1991, p. 172).

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, a great social reformer, in the city of Poona in the state of Maharashtra. The main purpose of this Home was to give shelter to the widows for delivery. It also offered a facility for children abandoned in the Home. The first Shelter Home was closed within a few days, but it was indeed a very progressive step toward helping women in distress. Within a few years, many such Homes were started by different religious groups as well as by social reformers. These Homes were situated at places of pilgrimage or in big cities. Widows or deserted women used to take shelter in a Home where they did not have to disclose their identity.

Shelter Homes for women in distress thus have a long history. They responded to the needs of women by giving them shelter during crisis and saved the lives of many women who otherwise could have been ostracized. With the spread of education and the introduction of various social reforms, the status of women of the higher castes improved considerably. The incidence of child widows, polygamy, and desertion by husbands decreased markedly. But the lower castes, in the process of upward social mobility, started introducing more and more restrictions on their women. The communities which readily accepted divorce and remarriage for widows and divorcees have now started to become more rigid in these matters. The 1981 census report (Census of India, 1981, Series-I, India, Part II special, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commission for India, pp. 15 and 23) shows that the sex ratio in India is progressively decreasing and there is still a very high percentage of illiteracy among women—only 24.8% of women are literate as compared to 46.9% of men. The enrollment of women in vocational and professional courses continues to be very low. Although women are

making some entry into various professions, they are generally confined to teacher's training courses and nursing. Poor women are invisible workers. The 1981 census report shows the workforce participation rate among females as just 14% (main workers) as compared to 51.6% among males. An overwhelming proportion of women (i.e., 93% or more) are engaged in the unorganized, informal sector mainly as self-employed wage earners, non-wage earners, or casual workers. Thus, most women in India have hardly any possibility of owning a house or having enough resources to stay independent if they lose family support. The need to have Shelter Homes for women in familial distress and also for destitute, orphaned women still exists. It is possible that Shelter Homes may need to offer a different set of services to these women. The next section reviews services offered by various Shelter Homes in Bombay, the needs of women approaching them for help, and different alternatives that can be considered to fulfill these needs.

Organizations for Women in Distress

More than 25 different organizations are actively involved in Bombay in helping women in distress. These organizations may be broadly classified into two groups:

1. The Shelter Homes managed by different voluntary bodies or religious trusts and the Homes run by the Government.

The majority of Shelter Homes were set up more than 50 years ago and possess wide experience in this field. Some of these homes offer packages of services for women in distress, women from different age groups with different needs. Some homes have a limited scope of activities. In spite of their long-established reputation, some of these Homes have experienced a decrease in the number of women inmates from the age group 18 to 60 years during recent years. The demand for admission to old-age homes is ever increasing. In most Shelter Homes for women, more than 50% of the spaces are always available. Some of these Shelter Homes have spacious buildings, open spaces to build additional structures, and all the necessary infrastructure to accommodate many more women.

2. The support cells or counseling centers managed by different autonomous women's groups or women's organizations.

The support cells are of relatively recent origin, having been established during the last 10 to 15 years. Most of these cells are managed by active workers from the feminist movement. These support cells do not have

residential facilities for women. Many of them do not even have a proper office of their own. They offer pre-and post-marital counseling. The number of women approaching these cells is increasing day by day. Many times it becomes necessary to make arrangements for shelter for the clients. Having no residential facilities, the support cells have to refer such cases to local Shelter Homes. They face some difficulties in making such arrangements. Some workers from the support cells feel that the inability to make proper arrangements for shelter for their clients is a major hurdle in their work. Many support cells are approaching the Government for grants to build their own Homes. In a city like Bombay, with its high land and construction costs, it is not so easy to build a new structure having all the basic infrastructure.

The situation of shelter facilities for women in familial distress is thus paradoxical: on the one hand, the existing Shelter Homes have more than 50% vacancies and these resources are underutilized; on the other hand, the support cells are struggling hard to collect the necessary resources to establish new Shelter Homes. Is there no need for such services because of the changes in the social status of women? Or are there some drawbacks to the nature of the services offered by these Homes? The women who are usually in need of shelter may be grouped as follows:

1. Women with marital problems:
 - (a) Unemployed women,
 - (b) Working women, and
 - (c) Working or unemployed women leaving home with children.
2. Unwed mothers.
3. Mentally disturbed women.
4. Women in need of permanent shelter:
 - (a) Middle-aged, single women, and
 - (b) Aged women.

I will not include the shelter-related needs of aged women in this discussion. Their problems are different from the other groups and the majority of old-age homes are fully occupied, with long waiting lists. Table 2 presents data on policies and services of different Shelter Homes in Bombay.

A Review of the Admission Policies of Different Shelter Homes in Bombay

A close look at the admission policies of Shelter Homes makes it clear that a large number of women do not become eligible for admission in these homes because of set rules. Only two institutions admit working women. A women engaged in a low-paid job cannot stay in the

Table 2: Policies for admission to and services offered by the shelter homes in Bombay

Name	Admission Policies	Services Offered
1. Sukh Shanti	Any woman in distress along w/her children under 6, and unwed mothers.	Vocational training above the age of marital counseling. Facility to go out and work in exceptional cases.
2. Asha Sadan	Children under 6, women between 14-20, & unwed mothers.	Work center & vocational training.
3. Govt Reception Center	Any woman between 18-40 & unwed mothers.	Rehabilitation through marriage or counseling.
4. Shishu Bhavan	Only unwed mothers	
5. Shraddhanan Mahila Ashram	Women from any age, boys under 6, & unwed mothers	Vocational training, work center, marriage counseling, facility to keep boys under 6 & girls any age along with mother.
6. St. Catherine's Home	Girls under 18 & unwed mothers	Vocational training & educational facilities for girls
7. Bapnu Ghar	Women with marital problems only	Marital counseling, hostel for working women having income below Rs 1500/-p.m, facility to keep children under 6 along with mothers
8. Haji Allarkha Sonawala Andh	Any blind, retarded, handicapped women above 16	All medical facilities with the help of local Municipal Hospital
9. YWCA Working Women's Hostel	Two beds in each of 4 hostels for women in distress	Temporary shelter until she gets a job or other arrangement for long-term shelter could be made
10. Bal Anand	Only unwed mothers	
11. Bal Asha	Only unwed mothers	
12. Salvation Army	Girls under 18 & unwed mothers	Education for girls
13. Manav Seva Sangh	Girls under 6, women with children under 6 if they are willing to work in the institution	Employment for the women & shelter for her children

Working Women's Hostel. She has to leave her job if she wishes to stay in a Shelter Home. Shelter Homes do not want to take the risk of sending women out to work. Because of a few negative experiences in the past, most Shelter Homes segregate women from the outside world. Some Shelter Homes are planning to set up a hostel for women from the lower-income group where there will be a crèche in the same premises. Then the women can stay with their children. One such hostel recently started. But they are not ready to mix working and unemployed women.

The Working Women's Hostel is mainly for women earning more than Rs.800/- p.m. With the exception of two hostels which recently opened, these hostels are fully occupied and do not have the capability of admit-

ting children. Thus, it is not easy to get immediate admission in one of these hostels for a working woman in distress, especially if she is from the lower-income group.

No institutions, except the Government Reception Centers, are ready to admit rescue cases (women rescued from brothels). The living conditions and the treatment of the inmates in the Government Reception Centers impel most of the women to try to leave within a few days after admission.

Nine different institutions shelter unwed mothers. Of these, five have restricted their admission of women to unwed mothers. During the last few years, very few unwed mothers have come to them for shelter and

delivery. They often receive calls from the Private or Municipal Nursing homes to collect the new-born babies. Most of them are now engaged in providing for the welfare of destitute and orphaned children, including adoption.

In one institution, services are restricted to married women with familial distress. They concentrate on marriage counseling and legal aid and also offer premarital counseling. Three institutions admit any woman in distress, irrespective of her age and marital status, but do not offer systematic marriage counseling or legal aid.

No home wants to admit and treat V.D., T. B., and leprosy cases. Patients with an advanced stage of such diseases require hospitalization but, once they are non-infectious, can be admitted in Shelter Homes. However, such cases are usually rejected by everyone—family members as well as institutions for women.

There is only one institution for blind and disabled destitute women and it is usually fully occupied. Most institutions are not equipped to deal with mentally disturbed women. Sometimes, these women are in a disturbed state of mind because of familial problems. There are two groups in such cases. Some women need special care and treatment but, for some, a few days of institutionalization works as therapy. Because of a stay in Shelter Homes for a few days, the woman gets some time to reflect on her problem and is able to make up her mind about her future. In such cases, all that is needed is a separation from the family for a few days.

Very few institutions admit women with their children. In some Homes, a woman is allowed to stay with her children under 6. Many times, the child stays in the same institution but away from the mother. Thus, existing Shelter Homes cater mainly to either destitute and orphaned girls or destitute women above the age of 60. Almost twelve institutions give shelter to old and infirm women above the age of 60.

From discussions with committee members, social workers, and others working with women in distress, it was evident that the present situation needs review and appropriate changes need to be made. Before we proceed to the suggestions for change, let us also have a look at the practical problems faced by women coming for shelter and the staff members of shelter homes, as well as the support cells.

Problematic Experiences of Women after Admission to Shelter Homes

Many educated women do not want to apply for admission to Shelter Homes because of the social stigma. When they finally agree to stay there, they are often quite apprehensive about their stay in the institution. If a woman is admitted to a Shelter Home, her familial problem is no longer private. Other people then come into the picture. It is very difficult for the woman to accept such a situation. The atmosphere inside Shelter Homes is such that many women face the problems of adjustment. The way food is served or the remarks by staff members and other inmates are sometimes quite insulting. Such negative experiences result in leaving the Home within a few days.

It appears that Shelter Homes and support cells differ in the approaches toward the causes of distress within families. The Committee members of the Shelter Homes have a certain ideology of "family" as an institution. They consider it to be very "sacred" and, hence, that it should not be broken if at all possible. The woman having a familial problem is considered a deviant, if not a fallen woman. The rehabilitation of such a woman within the family is the best solution. After counseling of her husband and other family members, she is sent back to her family. Very rarely is she encouraged to seek legal remedy. There is a kind of patronizing attitude toward the inmates. An out-of-wedlock pregnancy is considered a "social offense." Since the man cannot be traced in most of these cases, the woman has to suffer alone. In some institutions, the woman admitted for delivery has to pay some amount for her stay in the institution. This money has to be paid as a "Token Fine" for her social offense. Shelter Homes are usually influenced by religious philosophy.

Support cells have emerged as a part of the women's movement. Their approaches toward the causes of distress are different. They do not want to condemn the woman because she violated so-called social norms. They believe in programs that can help women to know their rights and gain strength to protest injustice. A woman in familial distress should be helped to make a decision for her future and then guided accordingly. Because of the differences in the perceptions of the two types of organizations, sometimes there are problems, e.g., a woman decides to leave home after a long struggle and is not in a position to accept reconciliation. When such a case is referred by the support cell to the

Shelter Home, the woman does not receive the necessary support. The woman sometimes has to agree to reconciliation because of the pressures put on her by the staff members of the Shelter Home. If the woman faces problems after going back to her husband, she loses faith in counseling. Or if she does not want to compromise, she leaves the Home within a few days.

Women admitted to Shelter Homes are often refused the freedom to leave the institution, to try to face their problems in their own way and to come back if they fail to do so. In some institutions, when a woman leaves the institution on her own, she has to sign a written statement that she is fully aware of the policy that, after leaving the institution, she will not be readmitted. This policy also applies to women who are married through the institution and face marital problems afterwards. The reason cited for such a policy is to prevent the women from leaving and coming back every now and then, and so the inmates do not develop the erroneous belief that they have the freedom to come back to the institution for any petty reason.

Once the woman is admitted to a Shelter Home, she should not remain idle for more than a week. The institution should be in a position to offer her some occupation where she can engage herself for a minimum number of hours a day. The institution should have some activities which can accommodate women with different educational backgrounds and aptitudes. It often happens that the lack of occupation makes her feel more depressed and she does not have the patience to wait until necessary action can be taken on the problem which caused her to enter the Home.

There is a lack of proper communication between staff members of the support cells and Shelter Homes. Whenever a woman approaches any support cell for help, a social worker or counselor tries to find out all the details about her problem. If the woman needs Shelter facilities, she is referred to a Shelter Home or is helped to secure admission to a Shelter Home. Afterwards, if there is very little dialogue between the counselor from the support cell and that of the Shelter Home, the woman has to face another round of investigations. In some cases, the woman in familial distress is treated so that she leaves the Shelter Home within a few days. In some cases, the support cells fail to keep in touch with the woman after her admission in the Shelter Home, which causes inconvenience for staff members as well as the woman. In places like Working Women's Hostels where there is a facility to admit a few cases of women in distress, the staff is not trained to deal with

such cases. The referring organization is expected to do the necessary follow-up in these cases. When such a follow-up is not done, there are problems.

Suggestions for Better Utilization of Existing Shelter Home Facilities

From the review of the situation presented so far, we may state that the existing Shelter Homes already possess the basic resources such as building, staff, funds, and other infrastructure. All these facilities are under-utilized at present and may remain so if proper policy changes are not implemented. There is also a possibility that some of them may change the focus of their activities to some other target group and utilize existing infra-structures, such as buildings, for them. At the same time, the shelter-related needs of women with familial distress will keep on increasing. A few suggestions for better utilization of existing Shelter Homes follow:

1. The Shelter Homes should review their admission policies and rules in the context of the changing needs of women and move towards a more open institutional framework to expand the scope of their work.
2. There is a need to have proper communication between the Shelter Homes and support cells. Any case referred by the support cell to the Shelter Home should be discussed properly and a joint decision for further action should be made. In the absence of such an understanding, the woman gets confused due to the contradictory messages she receives.
3. The support cells should prepare the woman for admission to a Shelter Home. She should have some information regarding life in a Shelter Home. It will help her to adjust in the home after admission.
4. Many women are mentally disturbed because of their familial problems. Instead of refusing to admit such cases, the institutions should have the facilities for proper medical treatment. They should have one or two rooms for the isolation of difficult cases.
5. The Shelter Homes should admit working women. They may be housed along with the other inmates or in a separate room if necessary. Similarly, the admission of women with their children will be of great help. With the proper understanding of the nearby schools, the problem of school-going children could be overcome and the children could be admitted to the hostels in due course. Liaison with the hostels should be maintained.
6. There is a need to develop an institutional framework in which the inmates will be treated as responsible adults, free to make decisions, after providing them with the necessary guidance. Women should feel confident that they can ask

for support if they face problems after leaving the institution. In the case of genuine problems, a woman should get at least one or two chances to come back for help.

Suggestions for Alternate Institutional Frameworks

1. Groups of women with familial problems and the need for shelter can stay together and manage their day-to-day living through assistance received from the Government. Such an arrangement should be for a fixed duration.
2. The institution may have separate rooms to permit a woman to occupy one room with her children, like a hostel for women and children together. (It is reported that such an arrangement has been tried in Haryana.)
3. The institution should have a vocational training center on the campus where, along with the inmates, other women can also enroll for the training courses. If the institution becomes a multipurpose center for women, it will help to lessen the segregation between the inmates and outside women.
4. The Government should have a special scheme for those who do not want to stay in a Shelter Home and need to have a permanent shelter. It could be in the form of financial aid to buy an accommodation or some reservations in the housing colonies for single women.
5. The institutions should offer a package of services to women with familial distress. The woman should have a choice of appropriate programs as needed. The package should include the following: counseling center with legal aid facilities, different types of vocational training programs, income generation, activities in which many women can be accommodated after a short period of training, the ability of working in the income-generation project for single women who would like to stay independent or in a group of single women and be self-reliant after the initial support.

These suggestions are based on the understanding that women in familial distress should be viewed as victims of the prevailing social conditions, not as fallen women. They should be treated as responsible adults who need a little support and guidance to cope with their situation. Unless the existing Shelter Homes recognize women in this light, they will not be in a position to help them.