



44 WORKING WOMEN'S HOSTELS IN INDIA: EXTENSIONS OF FAMILY CONTROL OR EXPANDERS OF URBAN CHOICE?

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In India, even today, the dominant set of relationships within which women acquire and can claim shelter is the family. These relationships entitle them to shelter as an extension of the family's cultural roles in protection and control of women. In this scheme, it is considered proper and even expected for women to claim shelter from more distant family sources if nearer ones, for any reason, are unavailable or unwilling to provide shelter. The strength of this patriarchal association is in its corollary—that few non-family alternatives exist from which women may obtain shelter. Only recently has the concept of shelter obtained in exchange for cash—through market relations, that is—has taken off on a much broader scale for Indian women. Until recently, acceptable non-family forms of shelter were restricted to young girls in boarding schools, destitute women and a narrow range of female occupations that employed migrant women (nurses from Kerala, for example).

This study offers an in-depth study of the opportunities and limitations of working women's hostels—one such acceptable, non-family form of shelter. This paper will examine, from the perspective and experience of their residents, the extent to which hostels extend and reinforce patriarchal family structures and the economic, social, and political opportunities they provide to women.

Working women's hostels have burgeoned in large cities around India to exploit the market demand by female migrants who have access to cash but not, because of distance from their families, to shelter. Facilitative or regulatory public policies have been slow to catch up, although municipal provision of women's hostels is not uncommon in cities. Working women's hostels can be found in other parts of Asia as well where large numbers of female migrants flood to cities (Foo 1987; Matsui 1989).

Based on a study of 126 women in 12 hostels in Bangalore, India, this report contributes important insights into hostel life and living and the doors hostels open (or do not open) for women who migrate to Bangalore. Over the past two decades, Bangalore has experienced a high degree of female autonomous migration (that is, migration that is not associational or family-based). The 1981 Census, the first that disaggregated female migration by reason for migration, reported that there were 22,000 female migrants, who had resided in Bangalore for 4 years or less, who migrated there education or employment. While the corresponding 1991 statistics have not yet been made public, at a conservative 20 percent increase this figure would be over 26,000 in 1990.

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Hostels as a source of shelter

Hostels are an attractive shelter alternative for single women migrants—attractive, that is, to the women and their families as well as to the community at large—because they are typically single-sex, collective residences; they tend to be cheaper than renting rooms in private homes; they provide food; and are considered to be safer as well. Safety is often attributed to the presence of a “warden” who simultaneously is responsible for the physical and moral protection—and control—of the women. While hostels tend to be common residential sources for male migrants as well, neither are they characterized by the same degree of personal and social control and restriction, nor are hostels the only socially acceptable alternative for men. Men not only have greater latitude to seek other shelter alternatives, but also higher possibility of securing them.

Hostels can vary significantly in their offerings, administrative structure, and costs although the quality of shelter seems to have a lower minimum than costs. At its worst, one hostel in Bangalore was run by a tyrannical brother of a Catholic nun on property owned by her. Rooms were crowded pens with bunks in rooms divided by rickety partitions, and with little space for storage of personal items, and little natural light or ventilation—a situation not unusual in hostels in general. However, hostel staff were repeatedly terrorized by physical and verbal abuse, all of which created a powerful environment of fear so that residents were fearful of talking to me despite interview locations distant from the hostel. Residents typically used this hostel as a temporary way-station while waiting to get into better hostels.

On the other end of the quality spectrum is a hostel that is run by a local feminist organization, providing decent accommodation; reasonable food, facilities and rules; and cordial relationships between management and residents characterized by mutual respect and open communication. All that was lacking, from my perspective, was a mechanism for formal participation of residents in hostel decision-making, although the residents seemed not to particularly care. This hostel had a governing board consisting of women professionals and activists who saw shelter for women as a great need in the community.

Most hostels are well located with respect to the city's commercial and administrative districts, and close to major bus routes. The down side of this generally advantageous location is a seeming disregard for the health and safety of residents in the location of a few hostels. Governed by land use policies that are less stringent than for family-oriented residential buildings, hostels can be found in the middle of busy commercial districts and in basements of commercial buildings. Often they are so overcrowded as to pose severe health and safety risks to their residents.

The following scenario was more common than hostel administrators like to admit. In a display of gracious hospitality, a group of women in one overcrowded hostel offered me tea while I interviewed them. They pulled out a

kerosene stove from under a two-tiered bunk-bed of which there were three in a room no bigger than 10 feet by 10 feet. Flammable nylon saris were hanging between the bunks, right above the stove on which tea was being made, making me fearful of my and their safety. Hostels which provide cooked meals typically do not permit kerosene or electric cooking stoves, but these rules are rarely enforced, and women often cook on their own to supplement bland hostel food, lacking in nutrition.

Hostels also vary in their design and spatial arrangements. Most have rooms occupied by between 2 to 8 women, with collective bathrooms on the floor or outside the main residential building. Bathrooms and toilets are often underprovided, shared by anywhere between 3 to 15 or more women. In one rather well-designed hostel, rooms opened out into a corridor wrapped around an internal courtyard. In this hostel, rooms were shared by 3 women to a room and had a bathroom attached as well. The owner of this hostel also owned two other somewhat dreary and overcrowded hostels in other parts of town, and must have requested a better design for the one that was to be adjacent to her own quite lavish-looking home. The most overcrowded hostel I was in during my field trip had 8 women in 4 bunk beds in each room of no more than 80 square feet. Most hostels also had collective dining rooms, a waiting area, and facilities for washing and drying clothes. Some, better organized, ones also had spaces for study and watching TV, although the dining room typically served these purposes.

Hostel costs can also vary quite a bit. During my initial study in 1994, hostel costs ranged from a highly subsidized Rupees 300 plus food (with food costs determined monthly by resident committees based on collective decisions for meals, amounting to between Rs. 150 to 200 each month), to a gouging Rs. 1,200 for quality no better. At the time of research then, Rs 100 officially equaled approximately \$4. Most hostels were in the Rs. 500-800 range, which included food. Relative to wages which ranged from Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 3,000, these costs were not out of the ordinary for the city, and in some cases, quite reasonable for the amenities they offered. In a review in late 1996, costs rose by between 10 to 20 percent, with greater increases for meals.

Most hostels are privately owned and managed, several by only a handful of women entrepreneurs who have discovered shelter for women as an unmet urban need and with great potential for huge profits. Four of these hostels are owned by the same individual. One hostel that, for reasons that are unclear, now has become abandoned,¹ was municipally provided, while another privately developed also received tremendous government subsidies and private donations. Despite this, however, this hostel was notorious for being among the more expensive ones, suggesting a high level of arbitrariness in price-setting and lack of government monitoring of prices in publicly subsidized hostels. Four were provided by local women's organizations, some of which were charitably oriented and therefore had lower prices. A few hostels were also attached to Catholic schools and convents; study of these was typically denied. The local YWCA had

two hostels, although one has recently been turned into an upscale guest house for mostly foreign tourists, thus rendering it inaccessible for middle-class working women. One hostel subsidized by the Dutch embassy was attached to a training institute for textile design. This hostel, while spacious and otherwise well provisioned also had western-style toilets with which the women were extremely dissatisfied!

Who are hostel residents?

Tables 1–6 document basic socio-demographic data for hostel residents. Most of the residents were between the ages of 20 and 29 (91 percent); almost all had 12 years of education or more (98 percent), with 78 percent possessing a baccalaureate or higher degree. Most were single (92 percent), while a handful were married (3 percent of 125 women) and divorced or separated (also 3 percent). Two persons of the 125 who responded to this question were widowed. Of the 117 who were not students, the majority earned between Rs. 1,000 and Rs 3,000 (US\$ 40 and 120 in 1994).

Most come from families that are comfortable placed, economically speaking. Most (89 percent) came from

households with monthly incomes of over Rs. 3,000. Hence, hostel residents of the majority of hostels in Bangalore are single, well-educated, employed, and come from middle class families. However, close to half of all women (47 percent), who responded to this question, contribute money to their families' coffers. In informal small group discussions, several women indicated that this money was being pooled for their dowries. Most of the residents were from the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh, with Karnataka, the home state, dominating.

Residents prefer hostels over extended kin-based shelter

In almost all cases, the move to the city followed the securing of jobs and school admissions. Hostels were typically identified and a "seat" secured before the actual move occurred, usually by the intervention of a friend or relative already in Bangalore. Hostels were chosen as the preferred form of shelter in most cases, almost without consideration of alternative, family-based options in cases where these were available. For example, one in four respondents had members

Table 1 Age of hostel residents

Age	Number	Percent
Under 20	6	5
20-25	80	63
26-30	35	28
Over 30	5	4
Total	126	100

Table 3 Education

Education	Number	Percent
Secondary	2	2
Secondary plus 2	25	20
Bachelor/Equivalent	47	38
Master/Professional	49	40
Total	123	100

Table 5 Family income

Monthly Income	Number	Percent
Less than Rs 3,000	13	11
3,000-4,499	35	30
4,500-5,999	30	26
6,000 or more	38	33
Total	116	100

Note: Rs. 25=\$1 (official 1994 exchange rate)

Table 2 Marital status

Marital Status	Number	Percent
Single	115	92
Married	4	3
Div/Separated	4	3
Widowed	2	2
Total	125	100

Table 4 Income (Students excluded)

Monthly Income	Number	Percent
Less than Rs 1,000	17	15
1,000-1,999	52	44
2,000-2,999	29	25
Rs 3,000 or more	19	16
Total	117	100

Table 6 Contribute income to household?

Contribute income?	Number	Percent
Yes	58	47
No	66	53
Total	126	100

of their extended family—uncles, aunts, cousins and so on—who lived in the city. These family members were, however, only seen as resources in an emergency, and were often requested to look in on the women in the hostel, rather than provide shelter on an ongoing basis. This is contrary to expectations of women's access to shelter through kin-based systems.

When asked why the women preferred to seek shelter in hostels despite the availability of extended families in the city with whom they could stay, a variety of reasons emerged. The most common theme was that women and their families did not want to become involved in the mutual, reciprocal relations of obligations and favors with their extended kin. Shelter, in this view, therefore was better obtained in exchange for a specific, known sum of money, in a single transaction, rather than through a system of reciprocal networks of family obligations which may be less unitary, have more uncertainty, and greater unpredictability in when they "came due."

Furthermore, women preferred receiving services such as meals and laundry in exchange for cash rather than implicitly in exchange for labor and household participation that would inevitably be expected of them in a family situation. In one interesting case, a newly married woman from New Delhi insisted on living in a hostel rather than at her mother-in-law's home as would be expected, while she and her husband searched for a house for themselves. It is important to remember that this pattern is typical of middle class segments of society characterized by a greater access to cash and lower dependence on reciprocal kin networks, the latter being more common to lower-income households. Whether poorer migrants seek family-based shelter in greater proportions than their middle-class counterparts, however, is a question that falls beyond the scope of this study, as does the issue of if or how middle class women who do seek family-based shelter differ from those who choose to reside in hostels.

Open-ended questions explored the contributions of hostels to women's lives and the limitations hostels posed to their aspirations for their futures. Three major themes emerged in how women perceived hostels' functions in their own lives: one, hostels as extensions of family networks of caring and nurturing; two, hostels as sources of institutional control (often in forms that were similar to family functions); and three, hostels as providing a foothold in the city for personal, social, and economic opportunities.

Hostels as extensions of family

Most women were escorted to the hostels by male kin—fathers or brothers—who also mediated the interactions with the management. The process of application to a hostel often requires the identification of a local "guardian" and letters of reference attesting to, among other things, the high morals of the candidate. Hostels may also be identified and places secured in them through friends and acquaintances from their hometowns who already live in the hostels. So, when hostel

admission is obtained, many women enter into familiar networks of friends and kin who preceded them in the hostel.

Having friends and acquaintances from their hometowns was mentioned by almost 40 percent of the respondents to be a highly satisfying feature of the hostel in which they lived. These previously existing networks and those created soon after entry into the hostel effectively substituted for family, providing relief from the monotonous routine of hostel life and work, opportunities for recreation, sharing of labor and resources, and for looking out for one-another in times of sickness and difficulty.

This sense of comfort and of familial relationship was enhanced when the institutional arrangements were flexible and accommodating of the women, and when wardens—the typical title for managers—were friendly and approachable rather than strict enforcers of hostel rules. In especially two hostels run by progressive women's groups, the management was perceived to be responsive to women's needs and complaints, and the manager or warden herself was described as flexible, approachable, friendly, and fair. This is quite rare; too often managers are more circumspect in their interactions with owners and board members than with residents, a phenomenon I witnessed in several hostels. Managers in many hostels were considered by their residents to be bullies, partial, authoritarian, and even corrupt.

Living in hostels also renders conflict-free relationships with extended kin who live in the city. Many women, who have members of their extended families in town, spend weekends and festive occasions there, and bring back pickles, sweets and other goodies to supplement their insipid hostel food. Many women also broadened their networks through co-workers and fellow students who lived with their families in the city. In this way, hostels permit an extension of the psychosocial and material support provided by families.

Hostels also extend women's relationships with their own families in substantive and qualitative ways. For example, nearly half of the women contribute to their family incomes. These contributions are predominantly used to enhance family consumption and thereby quality of life and status, build the human capital of siblings by enabling their higher education, or simply to accumulate their own dowries. In several informal focus groups that were convened to elaborate on the quantitative data, residents admitted to a sense of pride for their ability to contribute, and recognition and respect from family members arising from their contributions. Several women also indicated an improvement of their own situation within their families, reduced restrictions on their mobility and behavior, and greater say in family decisions.

Hostels as sources of institutional control

Hostels, however, are also not unlike the restrictive and controlling patriarchal family, albeit the nature of restriction may differ. For example, the extreme surveillance they experience on their movements and conduct, the restrictions

on dress and behavior, the monitoring of visitors and the limits on overnight stay outside the hostel are familiar family-based controls for Indian women. However, control experienced in hostels can be more oppressive in the cold, anonymous, and institutional nature of its expression. On some occasions, hostels offer new forms of control as well.

Unlike the emphasis on reproductive roles² within families, and the greater social permission (and pressure) to combine these with external wage-work for middle class, especially single, women, hostels permit only productive roles of their residents. This is clearly both an advantage as well as a disadvantage for the women. On the one hand, they are spared of the need to be on call to provide household labor as is expected of them in conventional family settings, and can purchase meals and other amenities. However, it is also important to remember that some of the relief that hostels provide women in narrowing their domestic obligations occurs only by shifting these burdens onto low-income hostel staff—generally women—who cook, clean, and maintain the hostel.

On the other hand, because hostels explicitly and without exception permit roles to women only in production, women can live in hostels only to prepare themselves for the labor market or participate in it. Without exception, hostels disallow children of residents, spouses and any roles in active reproduction in their environments. As such, hostel living is universally expected to be temporary—until the woman is married or finds an alternative form of social security (for which there are few non-family sources). This curtailment of roles and activities implicitly upholds the patriarchal family's role in all the responsibilities and privileges—such as they are—related to marriage, family life, reproduction, and security in old-age. Even the four married women who lived in hostels left behind husbands and children whose needs were served by husbands' kin, usually the mother. Thus hostels may be conceptualized as exploiting the social permission women have to separate themselves from their families to accumulate income before returning them to the family upon their marriage. Any reproductive responsibility that a woman wishes or has to undertake, involving others, during her stay in the hostel simply has to be carried on elsewhere—entailing a physical impossibility or an enormous expense for most women.

Restrictions on roles as a form of control are further bolstered by restrictions on length of stay. Hostel residence is typically restricted to three to five years, and shorter in some cases. This seems to serve many purposes. One, residents are not allowed to get too comfortable or so secure in their stay as to raise the possibility of long-term security or long term reciprocal relationships with other residents or between residents and management. Only in a few exceptional cases is this rule broken. One woman in her mid-fifties, for example, had her extended stay (over 12 years) in the women's hostel made possible by a charitable decision by board members in response to her abandonment by her married brothers following the death of her parents.

Two, restrictions on stay also permit greater arbitrariness in

Figure 1: Sample of hostel rules³

Residents will be required to furnish a letter of reference from a local guardian within one week of gaining entry into the hostel. Those who fail to do so will be asked to leave.

Residents will be required to maintain personal hygiene and keep their rooms clean. Rooms will contain no food or other items that will attract ants and other insects.

Residents will be required to take their morning coffee and meals by 8 AM and their evening meals between 8 and 9 PM on all days. Daily lunch will be provided at the time of the morning meals, for which residents must furnish appropriate, sealable containers. Residents are urged not to waste food.

No complaints about food and hostel routines will be entertained.

Residents will keep silence and maintain decorum at all times in the hostel; no shouting, loud music, singing, or running around will be allowed.

Residents will be dressed decently at all times in traditional clothes; short skirts, pants, or tight-fitting clothes will not be allowed.

Residents will stay in their rooms after lights-out; residents seen wandering outside their rooms after lights-out will be given a warning.

Residents who receive three warnings will be asked to leave the hostel.

Residents will be required to stay inside the hostel between 7 PM and 7 AM. Those who wish to leave for work or college earlier or stay away later must furnish a letter from their employer or principal certifying the need for leaving early or arriving late.

Hostel gates will be locked at 10 PM for the safety of residents. Residents who return after 9 PM will receive a warning.

Residents will be required to complete a night-out slip two days in advance for any night or nights they wish to stay outside the hostel. The warden reserves the right not to grant a night-out. Anyone taking a night-out without the prior authorization of the warden will be asked to leave the hostel immediately.

management decisions. One YWCA guest house raised their price from Rs. 15 a day in 1988 to Rs 150 a day for a room in 1993 and charges even more today. In one stroke, this action removed this hostel from the pool of shelter resources available to working women in the city.

Three, limits on stay generally constrain women's claims to shelter outside family contexts and once again force their dependence on family sources because few are able to buy independent shelter. Thus hostels are designed to complement rather than replace the family as a source of shelter for women. The women get this message loud and clear. Even the minority who wish to obtain alternatives to oppressive family environments know that their only real alternative would be to seek collective, private solutions with other, like-minded women—a strategy in which only a persistent few succeed.

Even the messages women get from their family and peers in the hostels confirms this. Over half (52 percent) of the informants who were asked about their future plans over the next five years responded that they expected to be married in the next one or two years. Marriage was universally expected to cause exit from the hostel as a matter of norm, and almost everyone expected to marry in the not too distant future. The older resident who could not, or chose not to be married, garnered much pity from residents in general. Many women also complained (with good reason) against the isolation of hostel environments from family networks, of the dull meals, and the physical discomfort of dirty bathrooms and rushed, rigid routines. Women were all too aware of the lack of sources of long-term security outside family settings. All this resulted in an environment in which hostels were simply not perceived as long term shelter options.

In their rules and in their rigid enforcement, hostels clearly overstep the need for protection and get into active control of residents. Figure 1 provides a sampling of rules from one of the more progressive hostels. Hostels often unreasonably require residents to be back by 7 or 7:30 PM showing tremendous ignorance of the work, study, and transportation needs and patterns of the women. Restrictions on visitors, elaborate permission processes for weekends out, rules for behavior and dress, and restrictive hostel routines (such as lights-out by 10 PM) only enforce the sense of isolation and institutional control.

Within the hostel, residents often complain of the difficulty of maintaining privacy in the hostel due to overcrowded conditions, lack of secure storage, and social pressures to conform. Thefts and petty quarrels are not uncommon. When combined with the inability of the city outside the hostel to provide an "escape" or relief, this sense of containment and oppression can be quite acute, although not as prevalent as one would have expected from a superficial examination of hostel environments. Hostel residents often are also captive consumers of basic supplies such as food, milk, fuel, and cooked food and can be fleeced by surrounding merchants for these. And finally, hostel residents complain of stereotypes within work places and neighborhoods of them as loose and immoral for choosing to live outside family settings. These external relations, while contributing both to objective conditions of control and women's subjective perceptions of control, however, seem not to trouble residents as much as internal ones—with other residents and with management. Presumably this is because women's experience of the public world was limited and constrained to begin with; hostels

simply provided a continuity with these previous experiences.

Hostels are therefore, unquestioning of the primacy of family relations and obligations socially prescribed therein for women. They explicitly define their space to coincide with the gap between residence with family of birth and family of marriage during which women may be permitted to engage in wage-work to provide for their family's sustenance, status, and social mobility. Hostels thus exploit changing gender norms for accumulation on the part of hostel providers, and for consumption and accumulation for women's current or future families (through dowry). Forty-seven percent of the 117 women who answered this question said yes when asked if they contributed cash to their households.

At the same time, in denying women the opportunities for long-term residence, providers of hostels seem to contradict market pressures to exploit demand for independent housing for growing numbers of women who now have incomes. When seen in the light of increasing numbers of women who enter into wage-work every year, and in the absence of any public form of social security for women aside from family-based assistance, the contradiction unwraps itself as sound business. In other words, for a finite total hostel capacity, hostel providers have few worries of diminished demand; nor, given restrictions on length of stay, do they have to worry about potential defaults in rent payments when a woman has to stop working for any reason or take a break from work.

Hostels provide women a foothold in the city

It would be inaccurate, however, to say that this is all that hostels are: extensions of the family; institutions that reinforce the primacy of family as a source of shelter and resources for women; and institutions for new forms of control of women through restrictive internal practices, limits on roles, and denial of long-term residence. From the perspective of women, hostels also serve extremely positive functions. By providing a foothold in the city, they expand the universe of social, economic, and political opportunities for women.

Hostels enable residence in the city—an opportunity otherwise unavailable to autonomously migrating women—to further their education, gain access to more remunerative employment and also increased choices in employment than in their places of origin. They help women, by facilitating non-family residence, gain a sense of autonomy from family networks, increased personal capacity, and a greater sense of freedom. Finally, in bringing women together who may share interests, hostels facilitate collective strategies to gain access to shelter and other urban services.

Comments such as the following were not uncommon in response to open-ended questions related to the benefits and attractiveness of their stay in Bangalore:

- I need a job; mine is a farmer's family. I can't do that kind of a job any more. Here I can work in a job that I like.
- I have studied here, and I am familiar with the city. (Living

- in Bangalore) is better than my village in Chittoor (in Andhra Pradesh). Plus I can study more here if I want.
- I have a diploma in computers. Here is where the jobs for my skills are.
 - I am used to living alone now. I can utilize my time the way I want, I am independent of thought and action and I couldn't do what I wanted at home.
 - I want to experience the city by myself.

In almost all cases, stay in Bangalore, the city, was perceived as congruent with residence in working women's hostels. Residents clearly did not perceive alternatives beyond living with family and living in hostels. Options such as renting a room with a family, collectively renting a house, or even independently owning a place—difficult as that is for anyone—were not part of the shelter universe of most of the women interviewed. Only a handful of more seasoned “hostelites” were aware of the possibility of collectively renting, and prepared as well to rent a house all by themselves.

In response to the question of whether or not the kind of job women currently held in Bangalore would have been available to them in their home-towns or at wages they currently obtained, the response was overwhelmingly in the negative. Holding a well-paid job in Bangalore not only increased their sense of personal autonomy and freedom, it also improved their relationship within their families and the latter's status in the community. Women appreciated the expansion of their economic and social choices, notwithstanding their awareness of the limitations that hostels posed.

One in five women who were interviewed reported that their stay in hostels enabled them opportunity to experience urban life on their own, away from protective, restrictive, dependent family environments, or alternatively, to escape from abusive family relationships. Even among those women whose families approved of or at least did not object to their stay in the hostel, sentiments expressing the freedom, mobility, and autonomy that the hostels provided were fairly common. One woman who was orphaned found living with her brother oppressive due to conflicts with her sister-in-law. She has since moved to her current hostel and her relationship with her brother's family has improved, absent the daily friction over responsibilities and chores.

In bringing together women from diverse backgrounds and experiences, hostels also promote a greater consciousness, through dialogue and reflection, of the situation of Indian women and their root causes. These opportunities are typically not available in smaller towns where communities are homogenous and women are relatively isolated in family settings. I was an observer as well as a participant in several spontaneous group discussions that analyzed the portrayal of women in the media, the struggles of some women in their homes and workplaces, their relationships with other women and men, and so on. In a couple of cases during my three-month stay in hostels for the duration of this study, women mobilized to seek changes in hostel policies on issues of concern to them. One such policy related to lock-outs, in which women who did not return to the hostel before its “lock-

out” time were effectively locked out, endangering them even further.⁴

Hostels also provide opportunities for local women, who are active in the boards of organizations that provide hostel accommodations, to effectively use shelter for women as the starting point for their activism. These women, who are often professionals in diverse fields, see their activities related to the provision and management of hostels as a base from which to advocate for increased choices for women in cities—choices that will help them gain a measure of control over their own lives. Local women's organizations in general are aware of the importance of decent, affordable shelter in opening up the city for women, especially migrant women.

Hostels then clearly provide a social space in the city for migrant women, and enhance choice and opportunity in a whole range of social, economic and political areas. However, these functions occur in a larger context characterized by the lack of alternatives for women for shelter and services. In the face of the absence of other meaningful shelter alternatives, hostels will also remain the powerfully restrictive, oppressive and controlling institutions they are for a significant proportion of the women who seek shelter in them.

Theoretical contributions

Policy-oriented research on gender and housing displays a concern with the need to enhance shelter choice and provide shelter that is both effective for and empowering of women. The set of issues related to effectiveness calls for housing that allows women, especially poor women, to perform effectively their socially prescribed roles in production, reproduction and collective consumption through appropriate location of settlements and integration of land uses (Moser and Peake 1987, Tinker 1993, Kusow 1993, Mahajan 1993, among others); that is well designed to be culturally sensitive to gender needs and issues (Brydon and Chant 1989, Dankelman and Davidson 1988, Waltz 1988, Imamura 1988); and that accommodates a variety of household structures and arrangements beyond the dominant nuclear family model (Pothukuchi 1993, Chant and Ward 1987, Chant 1997, Varley 1993). Arguments for effectiveness have central to them the need to involve women in planning and design of settlements, and to recognize the social disadvantages that women experience in effectively negotiating their own shelter arrangements (Moser and Peake 1987).

The second set—related to empowerment—typically centers around enabling greater control of women over their shelter, and through it, over their lives, households, and communities (see for example the cases in Moser and Peake 1987 and Dandekar 1993). Enhanced shelter security through ownership, legal titles, and secure tenure for women; innovative designs and decisions to help break the gender divisions of labor; the role of participatory women's organizations to advocate for policies to help integrate needs for effectiveness and empowerment for women through

shelter, are some of the issues that have often surfaced within the empowerment rubric.

The typical frameworks for effectiveness and empowerment in women's shelter are helpful for understanding the role that hostels play in providing non-family sources of shelter for women, and for identifying policies to improve alternative shelter environments for migrant women. They are, however, inadequate in completely explaining hostels in their contexts, and indeed, may be enriched from the elaboration this study offers these frameworks.

In restricting the roles of women to those in production; in the over-crowded, under-provided, and often unsafe environments and poor amenities they offer; in their institutional control; and in disallowing any participation by women in decisions, hostels, by and large, are rarely effective environments for the women in the ways that effectiveness is commonly discussed in the literature on gender and shelter. They explicitly disallow women the ability to combine productive and reproductive work on the cultural premise that unmarried women have few reproductive burdens that cannot be displaced onto other family women, especially mothers or wives of brothers. Hostels also do not permit diversity of household structure, although women, through their resourceful use of hostels, find new relationships of care, assistance, and relief.

Neither are they empowering in quite the sense embodied in more recent discussions of empowerment in connection with women's shelter. Oppressive in their variety of forms of control; disallowing women long-term residence let alone offering secure tenure; reinforcing of the family as the appropriate source of shelter and social security; and unresponsive to the needs and concerns of women, hostels can be quite disempowering as shelter alternatives or shelter relationships.

Yet, from this study, hostels appear to be at least partially effective as well as empowering. Their effectiveness and empowerment stem, most importantly, from providing a socially acceptable place to be beyond the family, and by providing a foothold in the city to engage in education, employment and other activities otherwise inaccessible to young women. By allowing an extension of more familiar and hospitable caring and nurturing networks of family and friends; providing the basic needs of survival even if at very dissatisfactory levels; helping women earn wages with which to contribute to their family survival and social mobility; and by facilitating experiences in autonomy otherwise unavailable to women, they allow women to extend their personal, social, economic, and political universe without losing connection to the familiar and comfortable.

Hence, this study indicates that shelter frameworks that discuss policy issues related to effectiveness and empowerment need also to incorporate issues related to female migration, life-cycle stage, and the need for autonomous interactions by women in arranging for their own shelter. They need to consider flexibility and choice in women's desires to pursue

only productive or reproductive activities, or a combination of both over time, without being threatened with loss of shelter or without being constrained to family sources for needing this flexibility. They also need to be informed of ways in which cultural norms continue to be incorporated in more modern arrangements, a dynamic that shifts the requirements for effective and empowering shelter. Most importantly, discussions of autonomous shelter for individual women cannot be separated from discussions of long-term social security so that women are not forced to return to family sources for support and sustenance when the labor market is unavailable or unable to provide the means for sustenance and support.

Hostels do expand personal, social, and economic choice for the women who use them, for the duration of their use, and this aspect of non-family shelter needs to be supported and expanded, while at the same time mitigating some of the limitations that hostels present. Hostels are the restrictive, controlling and oppressive environments they are because of the lack of choices for women in shelter. This is where action by public and women's organizations is needed. But first, it is important to ask what women valued and were satisfied with in relation to their hostels.

Policy Recommendations

The hostels that consistently received the highest ratings, often by residents of other hostels, had some of the following common elements to them:

1. They were affordable, or reasonably priced relative to the amenities that were provided (indicating that women were willing to make some price-quality trade-offs);
2. They offered decent amenities in terms of the amount and quality of living and storage space, cleanliness and maintenance, decent meals and other basic needs, and an environment secure from theft;
3. They had a management structure that was fair, flexible, accessible, and responsive;
4. They offered opportunities to build congenial relationship with other women, managers, and with staff; and,
5. They were located conveniently to work, study, or relatives' homes

Practically all hostels receiving high ratings were run by women's organizations which had social commitments to women's shelter, going beyond the profit-motive, and had mechanisms for communicating with women and responding to their needs and concerns.

Several recommendations for planning and policy emerge from this study. These are in three major areas:

- a) direct government action relative to hostels and housing. In this category, municipalities could:
 - provide systematic documentation and analysis of the need for shelter among migrant women

- provide increased hostel accommodations, directly or through subsidies to private parties
 - enforce building codes related to crowding, minimum living and storage space, natural lighting and ventilation, and basic amenities such as sanitation, water supply, and food
 - regulate hostels to prevent extortionist pricing
 - regulate management practices to ensure their responsiveness to resident needs and concerns, possibly by creating mechanisms for monitoring by local women's organizations
 - disallow discrimination by age, marital status, parental status, in hostels
- b) public and private support for feminist and community-based organizations that provide shelter for women in general but migrant women in particular. These may include
- public support to women's and community-based non-profits to provide hostels or other forms of collective alternatives, including technical assistance in development, wherever necessary
 - expanding the range of shelter alternatives by these organizations that would provide long-term shelter, reproductive roles, and resident participation in decisions
 - encouraging the development of women's housing cooperatives, and other alternatives that would give women control over tenure and title
 - eliminating monopolistic pricing by local merchants selling basic amenities to hostel residents by organizing resident buying clubs
 - providing forums for women who wish to come together to exchange information and advocate for improved shelter policies
 - providing forums for hostel providers to exchange lessons and experiences on women's shelter needs and advocate for gender-sensitive urban policies
- c) changes in hostel structures, policies and contexts. The market for shelter for migrant women is bound to become more competitive as more and more providers seek to exploit the burgeoning demand by women with access to cash. This may force private providers to become more competitive and improve the quality of their shelter. By studying women's needs in and issues causing satisfaction or dissatisfaction in hostels, hostels may improve their offerings without government regulation. At minimum, changes may involve
- improving the provision and quality of basic amenities such as food, water, and sanitation
 - providing more living and lockable storage space per resident
 - eliciting the participation of women in ongoing management and other decisions important to the quality of life in the hostel

extending the family's emotive and nurturing relationships, imposing new forms of control of women to keep them in their place and, simultaneously, expanding women's personal, social, economic and political universes. It seems possible, as discussed above, to enhance the opportunity aspect of hostels and mitigate the control aspect. Private hostel providers, non-profit women's groups, and policy, all have a role to play in implementing the requisite changes. However, progressive women's organizations that already provide decent shelter amenities at affordable prices and responsive relations, may be the place where change will both, begin and be substantial. These organizations already have shown a commitment to women and recognized the importance of shelter in developing women's autonomy and capacity, and need to be supported.

Notes

- ¹ Upon enquiry, it appeared that the scale at which the hostel was organized proved to be its undoing. Most hostels offer shelter to between 50 to 100 women. This hostel seemed to be designed to accommodate over 500 women; it is possible that the hostel was not provided with the requisite administrative and management supports. I was forbidden from entering this massive, 5-storey structure by a resident guard.
- ² The nature of reproductive burdens for married and unmarried Indian women clearly is distinct in a context where child-bearing, even sexual activity, outside marriage is strictly proscribed for women. For unmarried women, reproduction typically involves participation in family care, including care for siblings, domestic work in cooking and cleaning, and unpaid labor in subsistence or production activities. Married women, on the other hand, are expected to bear children and provide domestic services for their families.
- ³ This selection has been compiled from rules derived from different hostels, some of which have them posted prominently in dining and other meeting spaces. Language has been adapted to maintain confidentiality promised to hostel managements to enable the study. In reality, the warden has enormous discretion over the enforcement of rules; some residents manage consistently to get around them by maintaining good relationship with wardens.
- ⁴ On the whole, however, it must be noted that residents rarely voice dissatisfaction to hostel administrators. The overall scarcity of hostel accommodations, the higher cost of more reputed hostels, and the long wait-lists for the affordable ones run by women's organizations keep residents in their place. Residents often simply adjust to the situation, avoid those responsible for oppressive conditions, or collectively provide alternatives to satisfy unmet needs, especially in food.

To conclude then, hostels serve many functions, including

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