

## ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF HOMELESS WOMEN LIVING IN SHELTER HOMES (RAIN BASERA) IN DELHI

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**Abstract:** A sizeable portion of Delhi's population comprises of homeless people, especially women. They live vulnerable lives on the streets and face numerous challenges for survival. The government runs shelter homes (night shelters or *Rain Basera*) for homeless women all over the city. Several of these shelter homes are managed by nongovernment organizations. This study was undertaken to identify the factors causing homelessness amongst women in Delhi; challenges faced by them to survive on the streets; their experience of living in shelter homes managed by nongovernment organizations, and various government services and programmes accessed by these women. The study sample comprised of homeless women living in shelter homes and staff managing the shelter homes. In-depth interviews were used for data collection from homeless women and semi-structured interviews were conducted to know the perspective of NGO staff. The women were found to be living on the streets for several years before moving into shelter homes. The findings indicated that the homeless women were mostly migrants, illiterate, unskilled and struggling to maintain their families. By virtue of living in shelter homes, they found safety from domestic violence, abuse, natural elements and adverse weather for themselves and their children. In the shelter homes women were able to avail several facilities without any payment. The study recommends introduction of skill based livelihood training and functional literacy classes for women living in shelter homes. Further, greater financial support from government along with collaboration with both governmental and nongovernment organizations would go a long way to improve the lives of homeless women and their families living in shelter homes.

**Keywords:** Shelter homes, Homelessness, Migration, Women.

**Introduction:** The phenomenon of homelessness exists in both rural and urban areas; its degree is much more prevalent and extensive in urban areas. Rural homelessness is mainly connected with landlessness and distressed housing, and to growing displacement due to perceived 'development', conflicts, and adversity (Chaudhry, Joseph, & Singh, 2010). Majority of the homeless people are migrants. They migrate to the urban areas for better services and prospects. Due to the absence of low cost accommodation for the deprived, they find themselves subjected to even worse forms of homelessness and uncertain living conditions in cities. People affected by expulsion and dislodgment, escapee, family disputes, communal conflict, natural calamities, and people with psychological problems are other groups of people who end up on the streets (Mishra, 2011). Homelessness is one of the worst forms of poverty and social susceptibility. It is a clear sign of the failure of governance and the state's assurance to a welfare state. The Census of India defines 'houseless people' as persons who are not living in 'census houses'. The latter refers to 'a structure with a roof'. Homelessness thus refers to individuals who are inadequately housed—without even basic shelter, not even a *kuccha* (unfinished) slum or shanty house. Homeless populations are usually stereotyped as antisocial, illegal and dangerous elements of a city and viewed as an obstacle to the development of a city, which is inappropriate (Mander & Jacob, 2010). Women are one of the worst affected groups. Women who do not have

access to secure housing and are bound to survive on the streets, suffer with various kinds of abuse and gender-based violence (Chaudhry, Joseph & Singh, 2010). In the case of females and particularly single women causes for homelessness are not a result of a conscious decision, but directed due to externally persuaded factors like abandonment, separation and forcible eviction by family (Mander, 2008). Majority of homeless women are unable to guard themselves and suffer a daily onslaught of their human rights in silence. The inter link between violence against women and women's right to adequate housing is well recognised around the globe. Lack of adequate housing can make women more susceptible to various forms of violence and, on the other hand, violence against women can lead to the violation of women's rights to adequate housing.

According to Chaudhry, Joseph & Singh; and Broadley 2010, in the Indian context a comprehensive list of structural, personal and social causes of homelessness are poverty, lack of affordable housing, slum destructions, evictions without rehabilitation and development-induced displacement ensuing from the construction and other infrastructure-related projects and inequitable planning and land use.

Homeless persons are one of our society's most economically, socially and politically marginalised constituencies. There is a need to draw attention to the issues, concerns and challenges of homeless people, especially women in India's capital city of Delhi. Understanding the programmes and services for home-

less women, accessibility and usage patterns of shelter homes by the homeless women will provide an opportunity to improve services in shelter homes and enable women and their families to lead better lives. Therefore, the present study was planned with the aim to study the issues and challenges of homeless women living in Delhi, factors causing homelessness amongst the women, various services available to homeless women in shelter homes and to understand the challenges faced by shelter home staff in working with homeless women.

The study was conducted in Delhi. Delhi attracts many people from different parts of our country. Delhi provides several facilities which attract migrants into it. Many of these migrants are not able to earn their livelihood after migrating and are often trapped in poverty. Thus they are not able to fulfil their basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter. It is for the safety and security of these people that Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) has set up shelter homes. Delhi had 246 shelter homes in October 2014 (Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board, 2015). The shelter homes offer accommodation to men and women separately, and to families. Sample was collected from shelter homes (also known as Night Shelter or 'Rain Baseera' for homeless women located in Chandani Chowk. These shelter homes have been set up by Government of National Capital Territory (GNCT) of Delhi and managed by Non-government organisations are set up to provide a safe, secure and comfortable environment to the homeless people in Delhi in all night shelters (Permanent/Temporary) and emergency rescue service by Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board.

To understand the issues and challenges of homeless women purposive sampling technique was used. Two Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)- Aman Biradari and Society for Promotion of Youth and Masses (SPYM) agreed to participate in the study. The sample was selected from women living in the shelter homes managed by these NGOs. Sample comprised of 30 women and 6 staff members of the NGOs managing the shelter homes. The inclusion criteria followed to identify the sample was women being 18 year and above with minimum duration of stay at shelter home to be 3 months. Staff associated with shelter homes for women for at least 6 months was included in the sample.

The present study was a descriptive study. The following tools were selected for the study: In-Depth interviews with homeless women, case study of homeless women, and Interview with NGO staff. The nature and purpose of the study was explained to both the homeless women and NGO staff. Their consent for participating in the study was sought. Data was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively.

### **Major Findings: Homeless Women in the Shelter Home:**

The findings of the study indicated that most of the homeless women were between 21-25 years and 36-40 years. About half of them reported that they had never attended school. One-third of the women had attended school up-to class 5. Almost 53% women had very low literacy status. Reasons for poor educational level were found to be early marriage and child labour as the women had started working at an early age due to poverty.

Approx. 43% than half of the women had 3 or more children. Almost all the women stated that they had children at an early age and with the limited income it was difficult for them to fulfil even their basic needs. This indicated that there was a need to make women aware about the importance of family planning and family planning methods.

One-fourth of the women were engaged in activities that fetched them some money in the form of daily wages or salary. These women worked as rag pickers, domestic helpers and care takers of shelter homes to earn their living to fulfil their and their family's needs. That is, apart from wage earnings, they also resorted to begging or collected scrap and sold it for money.

Women reported that whenever they got some unskilled work they were not given adequate remuneration and were exploited by the employers. Due to lack of skills and low income, the women had no other choice to sustain their families but to beg. It was found that almost half of the women (i.e. 47%) had been working (and/or begging) for more than 3 years. The findings indicated that women preferred to work within the vicinity of the shelter homes as it did not involve any travel expenses and they could look after their children easily. It was concluded that even the family members of the women were engaged in low paying and unskilled work. They could also benefit if some skill training was offered to them. This would help in enhancing the economic status of the families of the homeless women. One-third of the women from the sample belonged to Delhi and other women migrated to Delhi from Assam, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh for some reason was livelihood, family dispute or any other. It was also evident that rural areas of some states are trapped in vicious circle of poverty and there were lack of opportunities for people for employment and to survive. Thus, migration was found to be the major cause of homelessness.

Little less than half (40%) of the women mentioned that they did not want to go back to their place of origin. They did not find any opportunity to work and earn a decent livelihood at their place of origin. Multiple reasons were found for the migration and the most common reason for migrating to Delhi was livelihood. Few women told that they migrated to Delhi

because of the abusive relationship and other four women told that they migrated because they were married in Delhi. Other reasons for migrating to Delhi were fear of being killed by in-laws after husband's death, to find a missing person of their family, to visit Delhi separated from family, to overcome the habit of substance abuse of husband, abusive relationship with husband or family members.

It was evident that the most common reason for living on the streets was lack of affordability of rent. Nearly one-third of the women lived on streets because they were unable to pay the rent due to not having income to pay or high rent. It was found that one-fifth of women were born in the homeless family so they continued to live on streets.

The maximum period for which a woman had been staying in a shelter home was found to be five years. Homeless women moved into the shelter homes when the shelter staff directly motivated and contacted them about the benefits and facilities offered at such shelter homes. Women reported that they found themselves safe and secure in the shelter homes. They availed facilities of education, health care, counselling in the shelter homes. It was because of these facilities that women were living in the shelter homes. They had facilities to keep their belongings and could cook food also. They could also participate in some of the activities held in the shelter homes. Women also reported that they were provided with soaps, detergents, oil, sanitary pads as basic provisions in the shelter homes for their personal hygiene and sanitation needs.

It was found that majority of the women (80%) managed their need for food from multiple sources. Most of the times they paid for food from shops nearby or ate free food distributed by religious institutions like the local *gurudwara* or temples. They rarely cooked food themselves. It was found that various organisations that were working with the women of shelter homes provided food to the children and sick women living there. It was observed that some of the women were very thin and weak in appearance. This could be attributed to the lack of adequate and nutritious food, prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases and frequent pregnancies amongst the women. Some women shared that the NGO Aman Biradri provided them with free sanitary pads. Their daughters who went to government schools got free sanitary pads from their school. More than half of the women (57%) used health facilities offered by government hospitals and also consulted the visiting doctor at the shelter homes. The doctors referred sick cases to government hospitals for treatments. A majority of the women and children looked clean and wore clean clothes. Some of the women reported that they got soaps, oil, sanitary pads from the NGOs which helped them to maintain personal hygiene. It was found that

more than half of the women's children attended a preschool, government school or a private boarding school (sponsored by a NGO). The remaining children were either school drop-outs or had never attended any school. The women wanted their children to attend the school so that they could be independent and do well in their careers. Women whose children had left their schooling really wanted them to join back school as they felt that their children's prospects would certainly improve if they were educated.

**Awareness about Any Government Programmes or Schemes for Homeless People:** It was found very few women were aware about entitlements like issue of ration card, election card and Aadhar card. Some of the women also had acquired these cards with the help of the NGOs. However, when asked about using ration cards for getting raw food at subsidised rates, they did not avail the facility as most of them stated that they preferred to eat cooked food from local shops or religious places. The few women who cooked food reported that they purchased raw food ingredients in small quantities based on their earnings of the day.

**Suggestions to Improve Services at Shelter Homes:** About half of the women were satisfied with all the services been given. Some of the suggestions given were improved cleanliness, better storage facilities and facility for a separate kitchen for cooking. Women also wanted that skill based livelihood training should be given to them. A need for providing functional literacy was also expressed by about one-third of the women. Some of women wanted that food should be provided to them regularly.

**Managing Shelter Homes: Perspective of NGO Staff:** Services provided to homeless women in Shelter Homes: The NGO staff reported that women and their children were given free health, toilet and education facilities in the shelter homes. Various other NGOs were also engaged with homeless women living in these shelter homes and provided them with some services including education and support classes for children, clothes and some also give food to children living in the shelter homes.

Some NGOs also gave food to destitute and sick children, women and elderly in the shelter homes. During winter months (1<sup>st</sup> December to 15<sup>th</sup> March, 2015), the women were given morning tea and biscuits as per Delhi government guidelines. Toilet and bathing facilities were also there for women living in the shelter home. Women were also offered health care facility. Patients who were living in the shelter homes during recovery were also provided with food. Women were taken to doctors when they were unwell, and in case of emergency they were referred to hospitals and NGO staff accompanied them. The NGO Aman Biradri had executed a pilot project to train some homeless women as housekeepers. This livelihood training

was well received by the women but it offered its own set of challenges as the women were not literate, were weak and unwell, had small children to look after or were pregnant. Hence, they could not take up jobs. Women were also given counselling at different points of time like when they started living in shelter home about how they could be benefited by living in the shelter home and how they could be safe and secure from various factors. NGO staff also offered women counselling when they had difference with their family and husband. While living in the Shelter Homes the women were also made aware about government services like issue of identity cards, Aadhar cards, ration cards, bank accounts, etc. Many women were helped to avail these services with the help of NGO staff. Motivating women to live in the shelter home instead of living on the streets was a challenge expressed by the NGO staff. Despite informing the women about the benefits of living in a shelter home, it was difficult to convince the women to move in the shelter homes with their families. However, once a woman moved into a shelter home, it was easy to convince other women like her to also move in the shelter home.

The shelter home staff also reported that they found it difficult to make women open up and speak about their health problems. Women were often found to be weak, under nourished, and suffering from anaemia and sexually transmitted diseases. Women also had repeated pregnancies. Women's health and hygiene were other major areas of concern. From time to time the NGOs were found to be organising

health checkups, cancer surveillance and immunisation camps. However, they felt that there was scope to do more to improve the lives of these women and their children.

**Suggestions for Improving Services at Shelter Home:** Homelessness is a social reality precipitated by factors poverty, population, lack of education, poor living conditions and lack of opportunities in villages and small towns, early marriage and children, break down of social structures, domestic violence and substance abuse. Hence, tackling these factors by engaging various stakeholders can play a role in managing homelessness. Provision of lockers and store rooms, bunk beds and television with cable network were some of the new initiatives introduced by the NGO SPYM in the shelter homes for women and children. Livelihood and life skills trainings along with opportunities for employment, functional literacy, support for children's education, remedial and tuition classes, health and nutritional support, guidance for sexual and reproductive health, family planning, family counselling and rehabilitation of spouses who are in the habit of substance abuse are initiatives which can go a long way in improving the lives of homeless women and their families. For the better management of the shelter homes there should be greater financial support from the State government. Development of a strong linkage and support network amongst government Organisations and NGOs would also help to improve services for the homeless women and their families in shelter homes.

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