

“VOICES FROM THE FRINGES”

EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE SURVIVORS
OF VIOLENCE IN SHELTER HOMES
ASSAM STATE ACTION-RESEARCH STUDY

NORTH EAST NETWORK

2018



VOICES FROM THE FRINGES

Experiences of female¹ survivors of violence in shelter homes Assam State Action Research Study

(This report is an outcome of the shelter home study conducted in five states of India with support from the American Jewish World Service)

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Consent has been taken for publication of all pictures used in this study.

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¹ We use the term 'female' in the title of the study as the study primarily captured voices of persons who identify as women, are 'female-bodied', or queer identities in some cases.

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FOREWORD

The study “Voices from the Fringes: Experiences of female survivors of violence in shelter homes: Assam state action research study” is a one-of-a-kind effort in assessing the status-quo of shelter homes in the country. I am glad that the national study captures the scenario of two states- Assam and Meghalaya in the northeast region of India. While talking of Assam and its status of shelter homes, it was felt, in course of this study, that there is a lot that remains to be done at multiple levels, on part of various service providers, for the overall smooth functioning of shelter homes. This is evident in our study and we hope that the findings of the study are critically analysed and acted upon by state agencies and other stakeholders that play pivotal roles in policy framing and service delivery. This will help in gearing towards a positive shift and transformation as far as the status of these homes and their accessibility to vulnerable women is concerned across the state of Assam.

Our highlight in this study is also for those women who need support both from civil society as well as the government systems for strengthening their linkages to shelters and for making such spaces easily accessible to women across categories. It is only then that we can envision a shelter that ensure women safety, dignity, autonomy and accessibility to various rights and entitlements in the truest sense of the term.

We hope this study will also pave way for future research to be initiated and that it will channelise change in the desired direction.

Dr. Monisha Behal
CEO, North East Network

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PREFACE

For long, despite policy interventions, the state of affairs in shelter homes, including their accessibility and services across states in India, has continued to remain bleak. In an attempt to address the pressing concerns around homelessness vis-à-vis shelter homes, and the range of constraints, lapses and pitfalls involved in the subject, a five-state action research was initiated under the network Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu (LCN). Dedicated to understanding the operational conditions of such homes, to providing evidence-based knowledge through narratives and lived experiences, and to advocating for accountability on the part of the state, this network envisions a much-needed intensive discourse on the issue.

Established in 2016, LCN – which translates to ‘leading the way under the vista of stars’ – is a phrase derived from three Indian languages: Khasi, Telugu and Kannada. It signifies a collective vision of organisations and individuals across India to capture regional specificities and contexts from a feminist perspective towards reimagining shelter homes as safe, liberating spaces.

The increasing occurrence of newer forms of violence against women (VAW) is a disturbing trend. This includes technology-related crimes against women, incestuous crimes, honour killings, cross-border crimes against women and violence against queer persons. No doubt there have been efforts to address these critical concerns; however, these areas require a more sensitive and holistic approach than has been displayed so far. Until now, most of the narratives around shelter homes have been framed through a very narrow lens. Shelter homes remain restricting places that limit women’s rights, autonomy and agency. Further, to locate the very processes that compel women to seek such shelters, the subjective experiences of having stayed in these spaces also need deeper reflections.

‘In the north east of India, women enjoy greater mobility and visibility than women of other communities in the country. This is often cited to portray a picture of equity between men and women in the region and has given rise to the presumption that VAW is not a major concern in the area. Data collected by the North East Network however suggests that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is on the rise in the North-east.’²

Women in challenging situations in Assam range from rape survivors to survivors of domestic violence, trafficked women, women living with HIV/AIDS, those deserted by families, women suffering from mental illness, women and children fleeing ethnic conflict, women survivors of natural disasters, women victimised by harmful customary or traditional practices, those branded as witches, women on whom violence is perpetrated by state agencies, those who are survivors of marriage by abduction, and so on. The right interventions are needed to help rehabilitate and empower them.

This study attempts to locate the issue of homelessness and vulnerabilities of women who seek shelter within the geographical landscape of Assam, and more importantly, within the complex socio-politico milieu of the region. It brings out the key concerns relating to the multiple forms of violence that women are subjected to, in both the private and public spheres within the context of homelessness.

² ‘Unheard: Domestic Violence in Rural Assam, A Study by North East Network in 30 Panchayats and 10 Village Council Development Committees in 8 districts of Assam’(2015).

The study delves into the silenced narrative of homeless women, whose accounts do not find space within dominant discourses, bringing out voices from the margins and tracing the contours of women's lived experiences in the context of the North East India. The immediate goal is to push for quality and accessible shelter homes and institutional care services, by spurring immediate and proactive action from multiple stakeholders. The research throws light on the specificities of the location in relation to the awareness, accessibility and status of shelter homes (both state- and NGO-run), substantiating the findings with qualitative and quantitative evidence.

This report aims to flag off an alternate discourse looking at various nodes that are crucial in ensuring accessibility to shelter homes for vulnerable women and their safety and well-being. In order to bring out women's voices from the fringes and assess women's awareness of the existence of these homes, an attempt has been made to qualitatively understand the experiences of women who have left their families and are seeking an alternate shelter.

The aim here is to initiate the required interventions keeping in view the vulnerabilities of the different groups of women who seek shelter, and the need to ensure a safe and healthy living environment for them. To do so, the study traverses the contextual underpinnings, the kind of violence that women face, the impact of those, and most importantly, women's awareness and knowledge about these homes. Given the specificity of the location, which is rife with conflict and displacement, endemic violence amongst communities has also been taken into account as a concern. The study looks at how these structured patterns of violence, in both direct and indirect forms, have marginalised women.

The study brings out the concerns of some of the most vulnerable women such as those from tea tribe communities, women in conflict areas, women with disabilities, migrant construction workers, street vendors, queer identities, to cite a few. It shapes the discussion around the concerns that cripple women in multiple forms and deny them empowerment, emancipation and human rights. As future actions, specific recommendations have been suggested that will hopefully change the existing conditions of shelter homes and transform them into the safe spaces they are meant to be.

We hope this report will be an important reference point for advocacy, and will impact policy and its implementation such that every stakeholder becomes a key player. Importantly, this is one of the first documents that gives space to women survivors of violence in shelter homes and their lived experiences. It is also a means to reimagine a feminist safe space or shelter for women.

INTRODUCTION

Context: Violence and Homelessness

Homelessness in India is an economic and socio-political problem.³ In the current study, ‘homelessness’ has been understood from the perspective and lived experiences of women who are survivors of violence or at risk of being rendered homeless or abandoned for various reasons. Such experiences could relate to gender dynamics, the position of women in society and the socio-political climate in which they live.

Assam has 22,116 destitute people of which 14,847 are women – double the number of men.⁴ This has been recorded in the 2011 Census. Assam also has the fourth highest number of women beggars in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 2016, Assam has witnessed 23,258 incidents of crime against women. The NCRB data from 2016 shows that at 131%, Assam is second only to Delhi (160%) in the highest rate of cognizable crimes against women in India. Forms of gender-based violence against women – such as cruelty by husband or relatives (Assam ranks the highest nationally at 58.7% of the total cases registered under the Indian Penal Code 498A), acid attacks (Assam ranks 2nd), women survivors of human trafficking (Assam ranks 5th), rape (Assam ranks 8th), sexual harassment (Assam is one of the 10 states in India with the highest rates) – are also rampant in Assam. 31.4% rural women in the age group of 15-49 years have faced spousal violence according to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) 4 (2015-16) and 3.5% have experienced violence during pregnancy (the all-India figure for spousal violence being 28.8%).⁵

Witch-hunting is also a major form of violence in the case of Assam. Targeting women who are widows or single is easier, making them more vulnerable. Social and economic exclusion of those people once labelled a ‘daini’ (Assamese word for ‘witch’) is extremely high. The labelling is accompanied by brutal violence and exclusion; in several cases women are thrown out of their houses and rendered homeless.

Displacement because of ethnic clashes which is a frequent occurrence in North East India, is a factor in homelessness of women in the region. Conflicts of various kinds over the years have displaced women and children to relief sites and rehabilitation camps where living conditions are extremely poor. No special services/care facilities are available to meet the needs of pregnant women, lactating mothers, survivors of rape and assault and women with disabilities.

A respondent from a conflict area spoke of how one woman in her village was targeted as a ‘witch’ by her son and daughter-in-law. They got her drunk and then put her on a train to far-off Rajasthan, thus making her vulnerable to further violence and homelessness.

³ Sanjukta Sattar, ‘Homelessness in India’, Shelter 15:1.

⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/guwahati/assam-has-highest-number-of-beggars-in-northeast/articleshow/63408092.cms>.

⁵ <http://ncrb.gov.in/StatPublications/CII/CII2016/pdfs/Crime%20Statistics%20-%202016.pdf>.

In places like the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) such camps continue to exist even now where communities have been displaced overnight as a result of communal conflict. For the protection of the rights of women in distress in conflict areas and to provide refuge to them, there are no separate shelter homes that act as safe spaces for women.

Again, across India, women are discriminated against with regard to their rights to own, access, use and control over land, housing and property. Whether through social control measures, absence of adequate laws and education or patriarchal practices, women seldom enjoy the full realisation of their human rights.⁶

A resident at a shelter home reported that when she was pregnant with her third child, her husband continued to beat her up. She could not take it any more and ran away from the house one afternoon while her husband was at work.

Another resident spoke of how she was raped as a minor girl and was later forced to marry the perpetrator who soon left her. She was deserted by her family and left all alone with her child.

Such cases bring out the lack of access to safe spaces, even within their homes and families, for women. Some women who commute a long way for the purpose of daily work have no respite or roof after their hard day's labour. Women in relief camps inside conflict areas, many in construction sites and women abandoned by families lack a safe haven that they can call 'home'.

These vicious and traumatic forms of VAW over the years call for a serious reflection on the power structures, the dominant versus the suppressed power play, and the importance of contextual intersectionalities in understanding the scenario. There is no dearth of evidence for the grave consequences that both direct and indirect forms of violence have on women and children in particular. Women's experiences of violence range across a wide spectrum of intersectionalities. Homelessness is a situation or an outcome of a form of violence meted out to a woman that compels and pushes her to extreme vulnerabilities.⁷ This lack of access to basic services further enhances the risks and threats to a woman's personal safety and security.

A robust body of literature has explored the link between VAW and homelessness from different perspectives. A number of reports have explored the avenues for alleviating the problem of homelessness for women. There is no single pathway to homelessness for women who experience domestic and family violence. Broadly, however, the literature recognises that it is safety concerns that primarily drive most women and children into homelessness. The complex power structures that oppress women in multiple forms have devastating consequences on their physical, emotional and psycho-socio well-being. They also sometimes threaten women's right to life and security. The exploitative structures of caste, tribe and ethnicity, amongst other

⁶ State of the Urban Poor Report 2015: Gender and Urban Poverty (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, Government of India, 2016).

⁷ 'Time for Overhauls: Report of a National Consultation on Services in and around State-run and Funded Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable populations' (Lam-lynti Chittaru Neralu, 2016).

factors, have connived in various ways to degrade, manipulate and inflict terror on women, particularly those who are powerless and vulnerable. This kind of structural violence combined with other systemic forces of state neglect and violence has deepened the contextual risks and vulnerability of women. Hence, the question of security of women in India is highly complex because of the existing deep-rooted multiple exclusions faced by vulnerable groups and communities.

Many of the women reach a crisis point where their fear for themselves or their children's safety compels them to leave the violent spaces. Two key critical determinants for women and children's homelessness as a result of violence are the lack of an independent income and poverty.⁸ However, one should also consider the multiple subjectivities of women who come from diverse backgrounds. Violence and homelessness are interrelated, and the occurrence of one may lead to the latter and vice versa. This has been widely noted at global advocacy forums.

India ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) in 1993, and is obligated to end all forms of discrimination and violence on women. North East Network contributed to India's 4th and 5th NGO Alternative Report on CEDAW⁹ prepared jointly by organisations and activists from India. This is a historic document because it is India's first reporting after the adoption of the General Recommendation No. 30 in 2013 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations. CEDAW recommends ensuring that:

- *Establish, without delay, one-stop crisis centres providing women and girls victims of violence and rape with free and immediate access to medical attention, psychological counselling, legal aid, shelters and other support services*
- *Ensure that trafficked women and girls have access to victim and witness protection shelters, quality medical care, counselling, support programmes for alternative income-generation programmes, for their reintegration in the education system and labour market, as well as access to adequate housing and free legal aid*
- *Abolish traditional practices and customs that prevent rural women from inheriting and acquiring land and from fully enjoying their rights, and guarantee land ownership rights to women*

In the context of North East India, the Committee observed thus,

- *The significant number of displaced women and girl as a result of sporadic communal violence, their precarious living conditions and exposure to serious human rights violations and the lack of gender sensitive interventions at all stages of the displacement cycle*
- *The lack of centres providing medical, psychological, legal and socioeconomic support to women and girls who are victims of sexual violence in conflict-affected areas*

These recommendations highlight the interlinkages between violence against women and homelessness and other forms of insecurity of their living conditions.

⁸ The Impact of Housing on the Lives of Women and Children: Post Domestic Violence Crisis Accommodation' (New South Wales Women's Refuge Movement Resource Centre, 2009).

⁹ <http://www.northeastnetwork.org/convention-on-the-elimination-of-all-forms-of-discrimination-against-women-cedaw/>.

The Need For Shelter

Shelter is a basic human requirement that needs to be met on a priority basis. Housing is an important source of shelter, comfort and social status, as ‘home’ performs basic protective and symbolic functions.¹⁰ *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states in Article 25.1: ‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.’*

Women’s right to safe and adequate housing and living conditions constitute an integral, inalienable, indivisible part of a basic human right. It is, thus, the legal responsibility of the state to respect, promote and fulfill this right for all its citizens as guaranteed in both national and international law. Though India has ratified several international human rights instruments like CEDAW and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and is also bound by national law, the human right to adequate housing still eludes a large number of Indians.¹¹ United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, Leilani Farha, who visited India in April 2016, strongly recommended that the Indian policymakers should frame and implement a policy completely based on human rights to eradicate poverty and inequality; this should be a housing policy targeting the people living on the streets and slums.¹²

Most of the literature on women, housing and homelessness has focused on the need to provide better services through processes that are more efficient and minimise the distress of the women affected. The literature has also observed that appropriate housing that ensures safety, flexibility, stability and satisfaction to women and children needs to be immediately addressed. A number of feminist studies have explored the concept of home for vulnerable women, including women who have experienced domestic and family violence. These explorations have noted that the voices of women and those advocating on their behalf are often not taken into consideration by policymakers and hence, are not reflected in the design and provision of services of the homes. Marjorie Bard notes that narratives of ‘homeless women not only describe (in their storytelling) the manner in which they have become marginal members of society and are surviving despite disturbing inabilities and injustices, they posit solutions to problems which exist in the public and private sectors which may be unrecognised, underestimated, ignored, misunderstood, and/or mismanaged’.¹³ Such disconnection represents a challenge for providing vulnerable people with housing that contributes to their well-being.¹⁴

It should be kept in mind that a ‘shelter is only the first point of intervention and cannot replace the right to housing for all. Beyond the immediate intervention of shelters, a robust housing policy for all (like the Kerala Housing Policy) is a key requirement.¹⁵ There is also a need to address the denial of other rights of the homeless, including their right to food, healthcare, education and employment. Therefore, any scheme

¹⁰ D.M. Smith, *Human Geography: A Welfare Approach* (Edward Arnold, 1977).

¹¹ Lora Prabhu and Sarah Pilot, eds., *The Fear that Stalks: Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2011).

¹² <https://blog.ipleaders.in/homeless-india-schemes/>

¹³ Marjorie Bard, *Shadow Women: Homeless Women’s Survival Stories* (Routledge Revivals, 2016).

¹⁴ *The Impact of Housing on the Lives of Women and Children: Post Domestic Violence Crisis Accommodation* (New South Wales Women’s Refuge Movement Resource Centre, 2009).

¹⁵ <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/4oCm9fvJxh7qQifauFjdcN/How-Kerela-plans-to-give-free-houses-to-homeless-people.html>

should focus on urban homeless shelters, only as a specific starting element of an overall programme.’¹⁶ Another study observes: ‘The public presentation of the shelter home’s work and goals, and the prolonged retention of many of the residents seemed to be at odds.’¹⁷ However, there is no doubt that shelter homes play an indispensable role as a safe haven for people in distress, especially women.

The History Of Shelter Homes In India

Currently, there are a variety of shelter programmes in India for women funded and run by a diverse group of stakeholders ranging from the central government to faith-based organisations and women’s groups. The emergence of state-run and state-supported shelter homes in the country can be traced to the late 1950s. The early institutions of shelter homes had social welfarist origins. Some of the first shelter homes were aimed at ‘social and moral hygiene’ and so the state started ‘proactive’ and ‘rescue’ homes in different parts of the country primarily for girls and women rescued from sex work. As the nomenclature suggests, the relationship between the state and its female citizens was that of a benefactor and beneficiary, wherein the state was the ‘saviour’ of helpless women. An analysis of the trajectory of shelter homes reveals the evolution of language and perspective; both of these shifted from welfare to development around 1980s. Influenced by the feminist perspectives of the women’s movement, a rights-based, entitlements-focused approach also made space for itself in the developmental landscape of the state.¹⁸

The earliest services of these shelters included responding to women suffering from physical injuries, catering to the emotional aspects of violence, as well as those leaving a relationship or facing difficulties in escaping violence and in need of legal, social and medical aid.¹⁹

In 1969, the Government of India launched **Short Stay Homes** (SSHs) for women and girls. The SSHs, under the state SWDs, provide ‘temporary accommodation, maintenance and rehabilitative services to women and girls rendered homeless due to family discord, crime, violence, mental stress, social ostracism or (those who) are being forced “into prostitution and are in moral danger”.

Another scheme with the similar objectives namely Swadhar – A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances was launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MoWCD) in 2001-02. The scheme through the provisions of shelter, food, clothing, counselling, training, clinical and legal aid aims to rehabilitate such women in difficult circumstance.²⁰ In 2015, the **Swadhar Greh** scheme was launched for women ‘of unfortunate circumstances who are in need of institutional support for rehabilitation so that they could lead their life with dignity’. The shelter scheme has now evolved to address the problems of girls and women arising out of marital conflicts, rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, migration, etc.

¹⁶ ‘Shelters for the Urban Homeless: A Handbook for Administrators and Policymakers’ (Commissioners of the Supreme Court in the Case of Writ Petition (Civil) 196 of 2001, 2014).

¹⁷ Barnali Das, ‘Who Would Like to Live in this Cage? Voices from a Shelter Home in Assam’, *Economic and Political Weekly* 51: 44 & 45 (November 2016).

¹⁸ From Being Shelters to Becoming Homes: Situation Analysis and Recommendations Based on a Study of Shelter Homes in Gujarat’ (Society for Women’s Action and Training Initiatives and Women’s Studies and Research Centre, MS University, 2015).

¹⁹ ‘Shelter for Women and Girls at Risk of or Survivors of Violence’, March 2013; Canadian Network of Women’s Shelter & Transition House; UN Women.

²⁰ <http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Revised%20Guidelines%20Swadhar%20Greh%2C2015%20%28%20English%29.pdf>.

The *Swadhar Grehs*²¹ are supposed to provide residential facilities that ensure a respectable and dignified standard of living for the residents. Accordingly, every Swadhar Greh should provide a residential space of approximately 80 sq. ft. per inmate excluding common space and utilities. Every Swadhar Greh should be properly ventilated with adequate facilities of bathrooms, toilets, dining hall and a multi-purpose hall to be used as a common room/entertainment room/training hall. Premises for Swadhar Greh should be clearly defined and no other residential programmes should operate in the premises. The government shall grant assistance for the construction of rooms/cottages/huts for the shelter of the residents and common facilities (kitchen, bathroom, recreation room, etc.) as well as for infrastructure facilities (water, electricity, etc.).

Services Offered under Swadhar Greh Scheme²²

Legal Service:

The legal assistance requirements of the beneficiaries shall be met through the District Legal Services Authority (DLSA). In case such assistance is not available from DLSA, the implementing organisation will arrange alternative suitable legal assistance.

Vocational Training:

Arrangement would be made by the implementing organisation for providing vocational training to the women through the Vocational Training Institutes recognised by Directorate General of Employment and Training under the Ministry of Labour and Employment.

Medical Facilities:

Health check-up and medical facilities will be tied up with the local civil hospital/Community Health Centre/Primary Health Centre/National AIDS Controls Organisation. However, the implementing organisation should engage a part-time doctor for Swadhar Greh who should visit the shelter home at least once a week to ensure general health of the residents.

Counselling:

The staff proposed under Swadhar Greh scheme will provide counselling and the expenses towards the telephone calls will be met from the 'contingency' head. State governments will nominate suitable agencies for orientation programmes for the functionaries of Swadhar Greh to improve the quality of services to be provided in these homes.

²¹ http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines7815_2.pdf.

²² http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines7815_2.pdf.

Services Offered under Ujjawala Scheme²³

In 2007, the MoWCD launched *Ujjawala*, a comprehensive scheme for prevention of trafficking and rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation. It is specifically designed to provide both immediate and long-term shelter to girls and women who are survivors of commercial sexual exploitation.²⁴

The scheme has the following main components:

1. Prevention 2. Rescue 3. Rehabilitation 4. Reintegration 5. Repatriation

Vocational Training and Income Generation Activities:

In order to completely rehabilitate the survivor it is necessary to provide alternate livelihood options. Therefore, support for vocational training is provided.

Half Way Home:

A Half Way Home is a home within the community from where a group of survivors, ready for reintegration, live and work out. It is meant for a group of survivors who are gainfully employed and can live semi-independently with minimum supervision. This is a phased approach to reintegration into the community.

The *One Stop Centre* (OSC) scheme launched in 2015 of the MoWCD seeks to provide integrated services to women in distress; services include police assistance, medical aid, psycho-social counselling, legal aid and counselling, temporary stay for five days, etc. These centres are being established across the country to provide integrated support under one roof, in a phased manner, to women affected by violence, in both private and public spaces. In Assam there are five OSCs in the districts of Kamrup, Kokrajhar, Jorhat, Cachar and Nagaon.

Services Offered under One Stop Centre Scheme²⁵

The Centres will be integrated with a Women Helpline to facilitate access to the following services.

Emergency Response and Rescue Services:

OSCs will provide rescue and referral services to women affected by violence. For this, linkages will be developed with existing mechanisms such as National Health Mission (NHM), 108 Women Helpline service and police so that a woman affected by violence can either be rescued from the location and referred to the nearest medical facility (public/private) or shelter home.

²³ <http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Ujjawala%20New%20Scheme.pdf>.

²⁴ Barnali Das, 'Who Would Like to Live in this Cage? Voices from a Shelter Home in Assam', *Economic and Political Weekly* 51: 44 & 45 (November 2016).

²⁵ <http://vikaspedia.in/social-welfare/women-and-child-development/women-development-1/poorna-shakti-kendras>

Medical Assistance:

Women affected by violence would be referred to the nearest hospital for medical aid/examination which would be undertaken as per the guidelines and protocols developed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Psycho-social Support/Counselling:

A skilled counsellor providing psycho-social counselling services would be available on call. This counselling process will give women confidence and support to address violence or to seek justice for the violence perpetuated.

Legal Aid and Counselling:

To facilitate access to justice for women affected by violence, legal aid and counselling would be provided at OSCs through empanelled lawyers or the National/State/District Legal Service Authority.

Shelter:

OSCs will provide temporary shelter facility to aggrieved women. For long term shelter requirements, arrangements will be made with Swadhar Greh/Short Stay Homes (managed by/affiliated with the government/NGO). Women affected by violence along with their children (girls of all ages and boys up till eight years of age) can avail temporary shelter at the OSC for a maximum period of five days.

Other Schemes

In 2007, the **National Urban Livelihoods Mission** (NULM) scheme was launched to ensure availability and access of the urban homeless population to permanent shelters including basic infrastructure facilities like water supply, sanitation, safety and security. Special provisions may be made for working women, single women, women and their dependents and others. In Assam, Shelter for Urban Homeless (SUH) component is being implemented by Guwahati Municipal Corporation.²⁶

The **Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana**, which has been conceptualised as a pro-women scheme, envisages housing for all by 2022. This scheme targets women, irrespective of caste and religion; preference is to be given to women applicants in general.²⁷

The DSW in Assam has established seven **Night Shelter Homes** in Guwahati and they are run by NGOs for homeless people and beggars. The residents are provided with food and lodging in these shelters. In the absence of any permanent homes for these people, these shelter homes are primarily meant for beggars who are involved in begging on the streets the entire day and need space to spend the night. However, authorities observed that some homeless people are allowed to stay in these shelters on genuine grounds during the day as well.

²⁶ <https://gmc.assam.gov.in/schemes/national-urban-livelihoods-mission-nulm>

²⁷ <http://pmjandhanyojana.co.in/awas-yojana-housing-for-all-2022-scheme/>.

Homelessness in a Home

Most of the times the shelter homes for women are far from ideal, as we shall see, and perhaps do not appeal to large numbers of women who need safe spaces; many of them are also not aware of the existence of such spaces. Moreover, women's usage pattern of shelters is dictated by their fears and social security struggles. Many homeless women refuse to go to shelters because they do not want to lose their cattle or weaving shed, etc. In Guwahati, for example, female vendors and beggars leave the night shelter well before sunrise to claim their space on the streets or outside the temple, markets, footpaths or railways stations. They also doubt their possessions are safe in the homes.²⁸

A resident of a shelter home spoke of how apprehensive and unhappy she felt when she came to the shelter. She wanted to go home from day one but the staff was not allowing her to go back to her children or her sister.

The seven night shelters set up in Guwahati by the SWD, for instance, are hardly used by destitute people, according to a recent news report.²⁹ The current plight of these homes and the lack of facilities deter women from availing these spaces; they prefer to remain shelter-less on the streets.

This brings to light the feeling of 'homelessness' inside a shelter home. Further, it highlights how the infrastructural provision of a shelter is not enough to create a space where women feel safe and empowered.

Barnali Das, in 'Who would Like to Live in this Cage?'³⁰ gives voice to the experiences of women living in shelter homes in Assam. She elaborates on the different forms of abuse and discrimination faced by women in shelter homes at the hands of staff members.

Similar experiences were shared during our field work.

A resident mentions that she and her daughter are extremely unhappy with the staff at the shelter home and are eagerly waiting for the police to come and take them to her brother's place. She talks of how the residents sometimes contemplate running away and living on the streets just like before.

Another resident talks about a Residential Superintendent who beats her and her daughter if they do not follow instructions. Most of the time the staff are rude to them, which is another reason why they want to leave the shelter home.

²⁸ Time for Overhauls: Report of a National Consultation on Services in and around State-run and Funded Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable Populations' (Lam-lyntiChittaruNeralu, 2016)

²⁹ <https://www.google.com/amp/www.guwahatipius.com/article-detail/night-shelter-homes-in-the-city-remain-underutilised.amp>.

³⁰ Barnali Das, 'Who Would Like to Live in this Cage? Voices from a Shelter Home in Assam', Economic and Political Weekly 51: 44 & 45 (November 2016).

A social audit of 110 shelter homes commissioned by the Bihar state government that was done by a TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2018) team revealed the horrific sexual and physical abuse of at least 34 out of 44 minor girls at a shelter home in the town of Muzaffarpur in Bihar.³¹ This study is significant in that it stirred the entire nation, more so as it was commissioned by the government. There are plenty of instances in Assam, too, of such abuse of shelter home residents by the staff. It was recently reported that in Sivasagar district, a minor resident of a shelter home was allegedly drugged and raped repeatedly by the superintendent of the home. In September 2018, she somehow managed to flee; despite two First Information Reports (FIR), filed against him, the alleged rapist was out on anticipatory bail. In December 2018, a charge-sheet was submitted by the Sivasagar police.³²

These instances highlight the need for alternate safe spaces for women who face violence and abuse in multiple forms in their homes and also at the hands of service providers of the state.

Alternative Safe Spaces In Assam

Despite the fact that the approach to shelter homes has shifted from a welfarist to a developmentalist perspective, many of these spaces continue to be threatening for women. Apart from the government-funded shelters for women fleeing violence or those abandoned, there have been alternate attempts to provide shelter to women. In Assam, alternate spaces for women have existed in the form of safe spaces through women's networks and collectives.

NEN Assam's initiative of creating spaces were for women through the Gramin Mahila Kendras (GMKs) deserves special mention. These spaces started in 2018 as a response to domestic violence cases and in course of time became safe spaces for women who are survivors of violence, in most cases domestic violence. The women receive psycho-social care and counselling from the community 'barefoot counsellor' who also makes home visits and attempts to mitigate conflict in abusive relationships and sexual violence. The process provided an alternative space to women's voices and their issues, resulting in their empowerment. Initially the initiative was met with a lot of resistance from the community who resorted to stone pelting, name-calling and different forms of verbal abuse, but is gradually finding acceptance.



Gramin Mahila Kendra
– a NEN initiative

³¹ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.firstpost.com/india/muzaffarpur-shelter-home-rapes-tiss-report-found-facility-running-in-highly-questionable-manner-4902271.html/amp>.

³² <https://m.timesofindia.com/city/guwahati/shelter-home-rape-charge-sheet-filed/articleshow/67199065.cms>.

Trained by NEN in collaboration with MIND India³³, Guwahati, the barefoot counsellors take up issues that are extremely personal, such as inherent domestic violence, dowry violence, physical, emotional and economic abuse and sexual violence. Over the years, the women in these areas have gained more confidence; they meet at these Kendras to discuss and raise issues. The women also come here to avail livelihood opportunities and information on government schemes and entitlements.

Another alternate safe space for women in Assam is Ashadeep – A Mental Health Society. A social worker contacted at the centre informed us that residents are rescued from different places in Assam. Most often cases are referred by local people, police or people working in the area of mental health. After appropriate socio-psycho intervention which includes psychiatric treatment, they are reintegrated with the families. Residents who choose to stay back or whose home address is not found are placed in independent shared housing with a health worker. This programme of Ashadeep is known as ‘Home Again’.

Other alternate space structures for women in Assam include religious sites like temples and gurudwaras. The gurudwaras across the state have also given shelter to women at times of crisis, even if these may not be permanent provisions or night shelters. Likewise, temples in many parts of the state also provide distressed women shelter and food. In Guwahati city, temples like Ugratara Devalaya and Sukreswar Devalaya have for decades provided women with free food following the temple bhog (offering) during the day.

An interview with a street vendor brought to light that Oxfam India had once constructed a storehouse for storing the produce and items for sale that women bring from far away. There are many women who stay back at this storehouse.

In the case of the queer community, queer women who are abandoned by their families hardly have access to safe spaces. The discourse on lesbian, bisexual and queer women in North East India, as elsewhere, has not generated the attention it deserves. Xukia, the first queer collective in Assam, has been making attempts to link survivors of violence to the right service providers, ranging from counsellors to women’s rights organisations, etc. Members of Xukia mentioned that they often get requests for creating/providing safe spaces for the community. Varta Trust and Xomonnoy have initiated queer friendly services through online portals, but there is still a lot that needs to be done.³⁴ This is a challenging area that needs immediate attention from multiple stakeholders. Officials in shelter homes do not feel the need or are not sensitised enough on issues of sexuality. Therefore, they are in a corrective mode as they perceive these issues as behavioural and personality disorders. While the recent Supreme Court judgment on the repeal of Sec 377 is heartening, there needs to be a greater sense of urgency in addressing the concerns of marginal queer persons looking for shelter support that caters to their specific needs. It also becomes pertinent to understand whether existing shelter homes can accommodate violence-affected trans-women, gender queer women and trans-men.

³³ <https://www.mindindia.org>

³⁴ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/health-legal-services-for-lgbtq-community-in-city-a-click-away/articleshow/66011012.cms>.

Budgets: Then and Now

In the current political moment, there has been talk of ‘women’s empowerment’. However, this has not translated directly into fund outlays except for the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (save the daughter, educate the daughter) scheme. Before 2015-16, funds to states for implementation of Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, were unutilised while after 2015-16, there have been no allocations.³⁵

From 2014-15 (refer Table 1.1), there has been a considerable decrease in allocations for women’s programmes, including shelter homes (SwadharGreh) and the National Mission for Empowerment of Women. The Nirbhaya Fund³⁶ has had very low utilisation and even the coverage of OSCs has been reduced from one centre per district to one per state. Since NGOs depend on the government for funds, they find it difficult to sustain shelter homes without a secure stream of support.³⁷

TABLE 1.1: Funds Released in the NE States between 2014-15 and 2015-16 (in INR/ lac) for women’s programmes, including shelter homes (SwadharGreh) and the National Mission for Empowerment of Women

State	Amount released in 2014-15	Amount released in 2015-16
Assam	128.91	2.68
Arunachal Pradesh	0	0
Mizoram	2.51	0
Manipur	106.63	0
Meghalaya	0	0
Nagaland	0	0
Sikkim	0	0
Tripura	0	0

Source: Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 4519 for 19.12.2014 and Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 729 for 24.07.2015.

For prevention of trafficking, the Ujjawala scheme sanctions an annual amount of INR 1,00,000 to the implementing agencies. Further, to facilitate the rescue of trafficked girls and women, the scheme gives implementing agencies an annual amount of INR 23,500. To rehabilitate rescued survivors of trafficking, the scheme provides an annual amount of INR 24,93,500 for Grade A cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad) and INR 23,73,500 for Grade B cities (other cities).³⁸ In Assam the yearly allocation under Swadhar is INR 16,00,000. Under the NULM scheme, the Government of India (GoI) funds 75% of the cost of construction of the shelters; 25% is contributed by the respective state. Assam falls under the Special Category States and thus, the ratio is 90:10. The Central Government provides more than 75% of the Operations & Maintenance (O&M) cost for each shelter for the first five years of operation. For O&M of one shelter catering to 50 urban homeless, an amount of INR 6,00,000 per annum is provisioned.³⁹

³⁵ Time for Overhauls: Report of a National Consultation on Services in and around State-run and Funded Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable Populations’ (Lam-lynti Chittaru Neralu, 2016).

³⁶ <http://www.wcd.nic.in/acts/nirbhaya-fund-guidelines>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Barnali Das, ‘Who Would Like to Live in this Cage? Voices from a Shelter Home in Assam’, Economic and Political Weekly 51: 44 & 45 (November 2016).

³⁹ http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines7815_2.pdf.

Table 1.2: Break-up of Total O&M Cost

Sl.No.	Expenditure Heads	Details
1	Annual maintenance cost/shelter	Includes expenditure for electricity and other misc. expenses
2	Annual servicing cost	Includes cost of upkeep, maintenance, replenishment of bedding and kitchen equipment, etc.
3	Annual cost of providing free food	Restricted to 10% of residents who are old, infirm, etc. and cannot pay
4	Staff salary	Includes 3 caregivers in 8-hour shifts and 1 full-time manager

Goalposts of this Research

As discussed in the preceding section, the attempt in this research study has been to approach the concerns relating to shelter homes from a more holistic perspective, keeping in view regional specificities and the role of various key players in ensuring basic services to the homes. The effort here has also been to look at regional contexts and historical underpinnings that might be contributing factors for compelling women to seek shelter in the first place.

Following are the goalposts of the research in Assam:

- 1. Enrich the existing body of knowledge around shelter homes and the women that approach them:**
 - Reimagine shelter homes according to feminist ideas
 - Redefine homelessness as a socio-political process
- 2. Gather evidence on the current state of shelter homes, including from the residents' lived experiences of these homes, identify the gaps and advocate for improvements thereof:**
 - Document the current state of infrastructure/services/conditions in shelter homes
 - Record entry-to-exit experiences of women residents (current and former)
 - Map entitlement-based linkages to services
- 3. Build/enhance perspectives and capacities for better access to rights and entitlements:**
 - Of staff of participating organisations in feminist research and methodologies
 - Of shelter home staff on gender and rights

METHODOLOGY

Feminist Research

The focal entry point in this research is through a feminist lens of bringing out women's narratives. Feminist research methods mostly seek to bring forth women's narratives as part of their everyday experiences and explore how these contribute to the larger shaping of social realities and state policies. Most feminists have critiqued the dominant approaches that have failed to represent women's narratives from their own standpoint. Feminist standpoint theory sees women as agents of knowledge and strives for a more balanced understanding of human relations, through the struggles of women.⁴⁰

Most of what is seen as feminist research was initially within the dominant framework of sociological methods, and women's voices and narratives hardly found space within this. It was only later that women and feminist-oriented scholars and researchers began to use a different approach and standpoint to understand women's experiences. This also led to the emergence of new strands and epistemologies within the larger feminist methodological school.⁴¹

The research uses a feminist vantage point in drawing upon the oral narratives captured in the course of fieldwork. Oral narratives form an essential method in data collection in this study, which aims to provide scope for the inclusion of women's experiences and voices in the larger understanding of social realities. It breaks down the hierarchical relations between respondents in positioning all voices equally; it captures the raw voices of women unfiltered by expert grids, thus, firmly integrating women's standpoints within the research. These subjective experiences and descriptions of women's experiences are understood within a specific ambit of their social placing and intersectionality of class, tribe, caste, religion, etc. The narratives are later thematically analysed for a more composite and comprehensive understanding of the social issues and subjects.

In the recording of women's oral narratives, those that are often less emphasised or ignored, those that are taken as ordinary and mundane, in fact, contribute to the production of knowledge systems that value women's accounts to the same degree as those of men's. These voices are more important than statistical numbers, as they bring out the lived realities and essence of being survivors of various forms of violence and experiences such as life in a shelter home. The method of capturing experiences that make social histories is fascinating in itself as it encompasses the nuances of people's lives.

This study gives centre-stage to the voices of female survivors of violence at shelter homes. We also look at women who do not necessarily live in shelter homes but face high risks and vulnerabilities of becoming shelter-less at any given time. The study aims to address factual data or descriptions of the background to these women's identities, their experience of direct or indirect forms of violence, and their experiences and information about shelter homes.

⁴⁰ Aparna Rayaprol, *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora*(Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Ibid.



FGD conducted with women with disabilities in a conflict area

Area of the Study

The study seeks to understand homelessness as an individual experience of the female survivors of violence, their understanding of the lived experience of violence and the services provided in shelter homes, along with the knowledge of the rights and entitlements of such survivors of violence.

NEN identified shelter homes under the Ujjawala and Swadhar schemes across nine districts of Assam for the study. Fieldwork was conducted at shelter homes across the districts of Kamrup (Metro), Kamrup (Rural), Cachar, Hailakandi, Nagaon, Golaghat, Morigaon, Sonitpur and Darrang. FGDs were also conducted in Kokrajhar district. A pilot study was conducted by the project staff. With the finalised tools received from the consultants, the NEN team started its field research on 23 February 2018 at a shelter home in Boko, Kamrup district, as identified during the process of scoping. It shelters 'destitute women' and 'helpless widows'.⁴²

It was realised that the major challenge in conducting these interviews was getting the initial permission to visit the shelter homes as they host a number of trafficked women as well as survivors of domestic violence. Hence, the staff members of these shelter homes are very cautious about protecting the identity of the residents as well as preventing double-victimisation while narrating individual experiences. Based on the findings, the guiding questions were fine-tuned to suit the research.

Tools and Training

Data was collected using a range of tools. The primary tools used are:

- Key Informant Interview (KII)
- In-depth Interview (IDI)
- Focused Group Discussion (FGD)

⁴² <https://community.data.gov.in/fund-released-for-widows-and-destitute-women-under-swadhar-scheme-from-2012-13-to-2014-15/>.

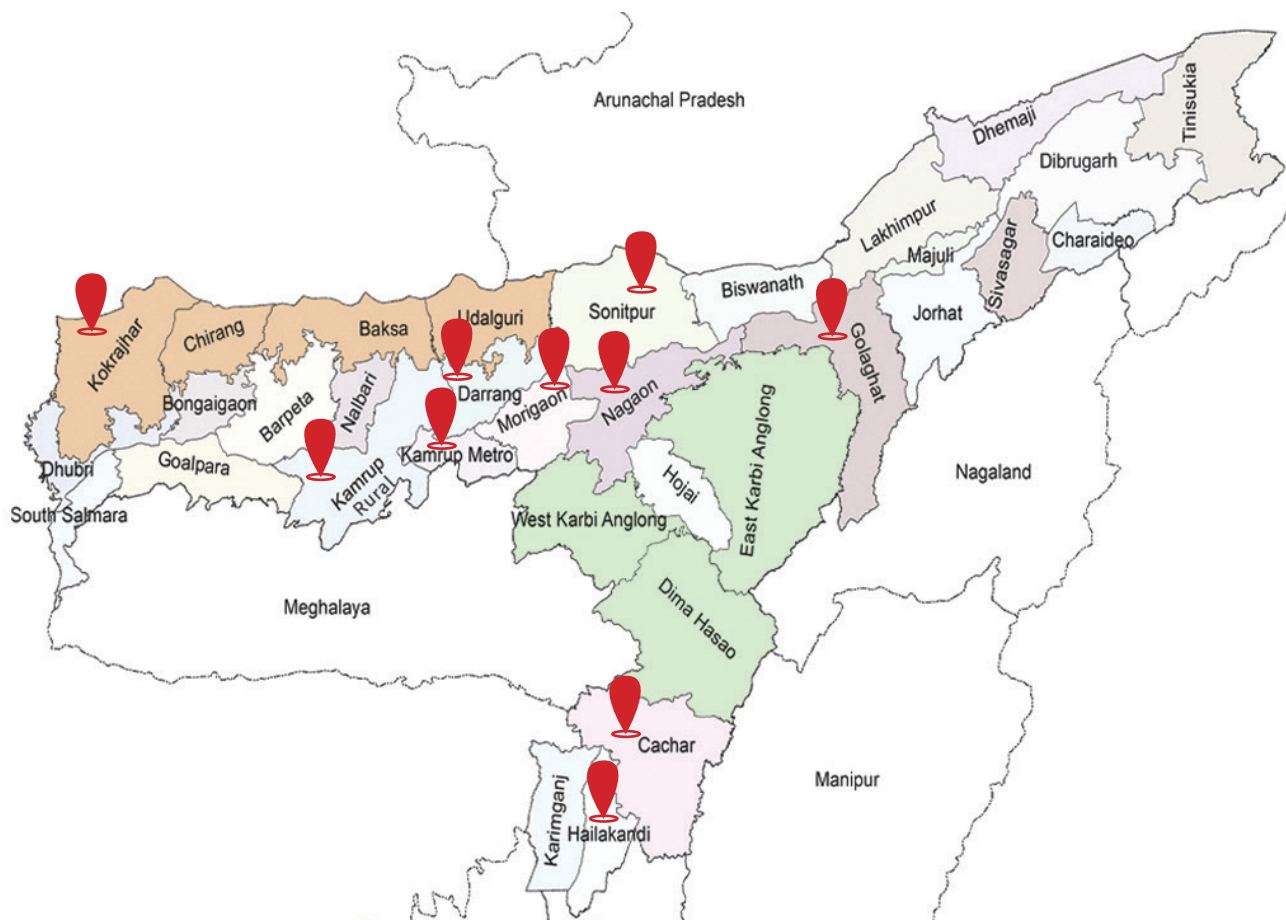
Key Informant Interviews were carried out with concerned officials of government departments, shelter home superintendants, police, representatives from various civil society organisations and women’s helpline. A total of 16 KIIs were conducted in the course of the study.

In-depth Interviews covered residents of shelter homes, survivors of violence and women from vulnerable communities. Two such interviews were conducted with LBT persons over telephone as they were not willing to meet in person for a face-to-face interview. A total of 33 IDIs were conducted during the study.

Focus Group Discussions were conducted with groups of women from vulnerable backgrounds, such as migrant construction workers, tea garden communities, street vendors, women with disabilities and others. A total of 5 FGDs were conducted in the course of this research.

Data collection was conducted across the geographical landscape of Assam with the aim of covering different contexts ranging from tea garden communities, street vendors, migrant workers to people in conflict affected areas, etc., covering both Barak and Brahmaputra valleys.

Figure 2.1: Districts covered by the study



(Nagaon, Kamrup(M), Kamrup(R), Kokrajhar, Cachar, Hailakandi, Golaghat, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Darrang)

The team participated in a training conducted by Amrita Nandy and Ananya Basu, national consultants for the project. The training on ‘Shelter Home Study’ was held in Guwahati, Assam on 29–31 January 2018.

The training covered:

- Objectives, methodology and ethics in conducting field research, including privacy and confidentiality issues
- Consent and consent forms
- Conducting KIIs, IDIs and FGDs, including note-taking
- Discussion on North East India specific issues

Scope of the Study

In early 2018, the NEN Assam team started the process of scoping which included:

- Identifying of shelter homes across 10 districts of Assam.
- Obtaining permission from the Directorate of Social Welfare, Government of Assam, to conduct research in shelter homes run by the government as well as NGOs under different government schemes.
- Updating the already existing NEN Resource Directory which has information on shelter homes (for children, women, persons with disability, old age home and others).

The next stage was a pilot survey conducted by the NEN Assam team after permission was granted by the Additional Director, DSW (order no. DSW (G) Misc/2017/Pt/172), Government of Assam, on 18th January 2018 to conduct the research study.

During the initial planning phase, shelter homes in the districts of Sonitpur, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup (Rural), Kamrup (Metropolitan), Golaghat and others were identified in order to conduct KIIs and IDIs. In addition, different groups for FGDs were identified, such as migrant workers, community women’s groups and women street vendors, and queers across the state of Assam.

The pilot testing included 1 KII and 2 IDIs conducted at one of the shelter homes. The results of the pilot testing helped in the finalisation of tools by the central consultants.

A matron at this home revealed the protocol followed by the SWD. An application is submitted by the applicant to the District Social Welfare Office (DSWO). The DSWO then starts an inquiry to find out whether the woman is a destitute/helpless person. Based on the report the DSWO decides if the woman should be provided shelter. The matron also observed that most of the residents are survivors of violence and deserted by husbands.

A resident at the same home disclosed that after her husband’s death her nephew forcibly took away her land and threw her out of the house. She sought refuge at the shelter home and now has no contact with her family.

The pilot gave the team access to first-hand accounts of violence experienced by survivors of violence, the condition of the shelter homes and the services provided to the residents. It helped in giving an idea of the functioning and running of these homes.

NEN also used the process to gain more information on shelter homes across all districts of Assam in order to update its Resource Directory, visiting them when necessary. NEN made visits to the SWD in each of the districts covered during this period and received information on Non Government Organisations (NGO) running shelter homes as well.

Ethics and Self-Reflexivity

Maintaining ethics is central to any research. This is all the more true when one does social science research, primarily because research in social sciences deals with humans and human emotions; sometimes this might even trigger memories of trauma, grief, loss and struggles. As a researcher one has to be constantly aware and conscious of aspects that might not seem important such as gestures, body language, expressions and the overall outlook of participants. All ethical concerns were kept in view at every step of the research work.

Consent was taken from all respondents and it was ensured that respondents were comfortable about speaking about the issue. It was also ensured that the conversations occurred in safe spaces. All photographs used in the research have been consented to.

Constraints of the Study

While permission was obtained from the DSW, it was nonetheless difficult to get information in certain homes as officials were not easily accessible. Some of the shelter home staff were not keen on NEN organising programmes and activities related to awareness building and sensitisation at the homes. In a few cases, the presence of staff while the interviews were being conducted created problems as the residents could not speak freely and this became a barrier to collection of information. Since there is hardly any data available on shelter homes in Assam, gathering literature was a challenge. Further, collection of quantitative facts and figures was also difficult. There was also a lack of perspective amongst officials; hence it was difficult to make them understand certain issues related to violence and gender.

FINDINGS

Women in Assam

‘Though Assam had been historically known to be a state where women never faced the threat of violence, yet, over the years, there has been an increase in incidences of violence on women. The state has witnessed an increase in incidences of rape, molestation, domestic violence, and dowry deaths. Among all forms of violence, cruelty by the husband and his relatives is the highest among the types of violence against women in the state. The perpetuation of violence on women by the husband and his family reflects the patriarchal domination in social settings of the state. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) for Assam as a whole is found to be 0.375. This implies that due to the existing level of gender disparity in the state, there is a loss of some 37 percent of potential human development.’⁴³

There are insufficient avenues available for women to take recourse to in the face of such abuse. The state is the main service provider. The government needs to adequately focus on women’s human rights at each stage of policy implementation, which has not been the case so far. As a result, there is a constant bargaining situation between the state and the individual. In the case of domestic violence, such a situation is highly problematic because of the complexities in alleviating with women’s unequal status by the state. The state is obligated to challenge the stereotypical mindset that leads to women’s subordinate position in society.

The Assam Chief Minister’s Vision Document for Women and Children (2016) states that ‘though there has been an improvement in all the indicators but the improvement from 1996 to 2006 has been marginal in terms of both Gender Development Index (which includes the parameters of health, education and income) and in Gender Empowerment Index (which includes parameters such as household decision-making capacity, workforce participation rate and control over resources) are lower for the women of Assam in comparison to India’.⁴⁴

In Assam, women face high degrees of vulnerabilities and exploitation. In a written reply to a query, a Parliamentary Affairs Minister told the Assembly that 8,771 cases of physical assault, 1,552 rapes and 4,794 incidents of kidnapping were registered with the police during the fiscal year 2016-2017.⁴⁵ The state’s geographical location as well as its history make it a very fertile ground for trafficking of minor girls and women.

In spite of the fact that women have participated equally with men in political and social movements in Assam since time immemorial, when it comes to inclusion of women in local decision-making bodies or representation in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assembly, the numbers are found to be pathetically low. As per the available records, the number of elected women to the Assam Legislative Assembly has never exceeded 11%, from the first Assembly to the 14th Assembly. In the first Assembly, there was only one woman member. It increased to five in the second Assembly. In the present Assembly, there are only eight women MLAs (6.35%) in the 126-member House.⁴⁶ Therefore, the socio-political scenario of the state, when it comes to women’s participation in decision-making, continues to be dismal. Considerable scope exists for the inclusion of more women in the equitable processes of gender inclusive policy.

⁴³ Assam Human Development Report 2014: Managing Diversities, Achieving Human Development’ (Government of Assam and UNDP, 2014).

⁴⁴ http://www.in.undp.org/content/dam/india/docs/Assam_HDR_2014.pdf.

⁴⁵ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/over-29k-cases-of-crime-against-women-in-assam-in-2-years-govt/articleshow/62985428.cms>.

⁴⁶ <https://thenewsmill.com/womens-participation-assam-politics-needs-upward-thrust/>.

Profile of the Respondents

The current study looks at the contours of vulnerabilities for women through the narratives of the survivors of violence and those seeking shelter at homes. It attempts to delve into the layered subjectivities and aspects of a woman's survival, right to security, autonomy and justice. The graphical quantitative depictions present the profile of the respondents of the study living in shelter homes.

Figure 3.1: Distribution of age of sample respondents

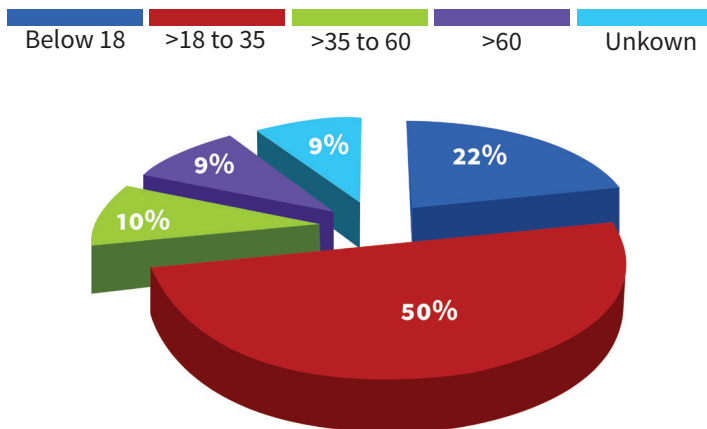


Figure 3.3: Distribution of religion of sample respondents

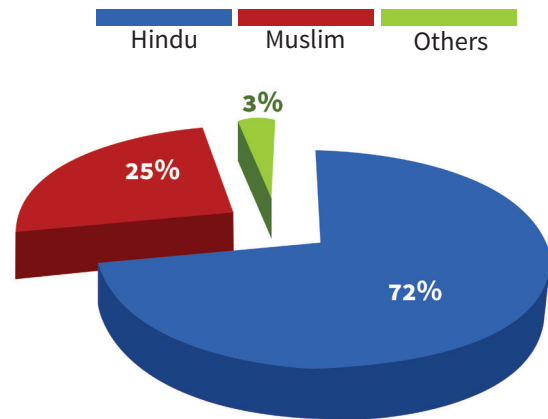


Figure 3.2: Distribution of educational qualification of sample respondents

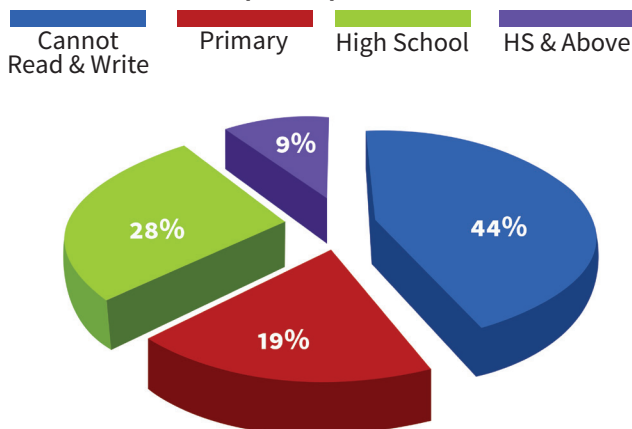
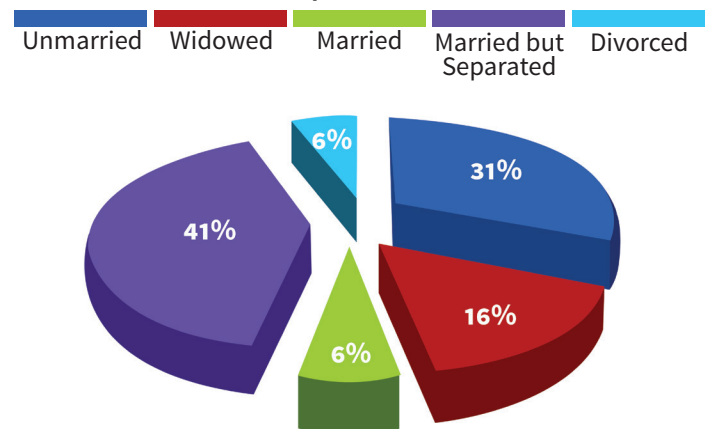


Figure 3.4: Distribution of marital status of sample respondents



The graphs show the distribution of sample respondents as per age, educational qualification, religion and marital status. The data from the IDIs reveal that:

- **More than 50% of respondents in shelter homes are in the age group of 18-35 years.** This is a category of women who are young adults. Most of them had been married off at an early age and are forced to leave their respective homes on being subjected to violence. There are also cases where women in this age group have been rescued from trafficking rackets and accommodated in these homes.

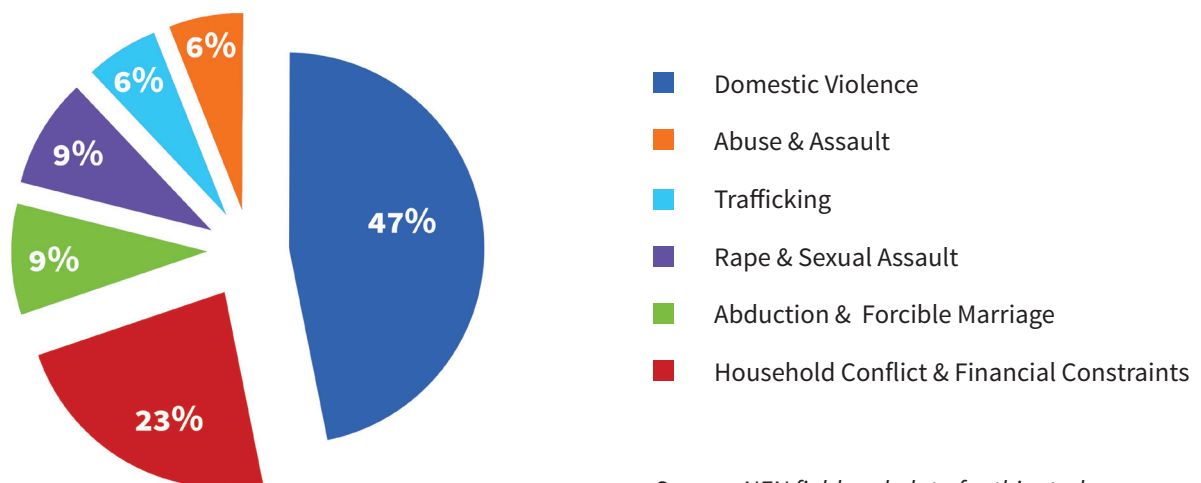
- **More than 44% of respondents in shelter homes cannot read and write.** Education and marginalisation are intrinsically linked. Most of the women at these homes are either dropouts or have never attended school. Only six women had their voter IDs, three had ration cards and five women had bank accounts. This also increases their vulnerability and affects their access to information and entitlements.
- **More than 72% in these homes are Hindus.** This influences the everyday religious practices in the homes. The narratives bring out that these spaces are rarely secular; they are mostly Hinduised spaces where there would be limited options for women from diverse religious backgrounds to express their religious practices. There were a total of two Scheduled Castes, two Scheduled Tribes, two Other Backward Classes, two Adivasis, one Muslim and others from the general category, as far as the caste background of respondents was concerned.
- **More than 41% respondents are married but separated.** In Assam, there is a high rate of violence committed by husbands leading to desertion, separation, etc. as in evident from the study.

Forms of Violence Faced by the Respondents

As discussed above, incidents of molestation, trafficking, murder and domestic violence have escalated in present times. The current study indicates a trend where women residing in shelter homes are direct or indirect survivors of violence in some form or the other. The background context of violence for residents of shelter homes fall mainly under the following categories:

- Domestic violence (coupled with dowry demands and alcoholism in a majority of cases)
- Sexual assault/rape
- Trafficking for labour as well as for selling women into sex work
- Household conflicts created by financial constraints
- Abduction and forcible marriage

Figure 3.5: Percentage of women facing different kinds of violence



Source: NEN fieldwork data for this study.

Domestic Violence

The UN CEDAW in Article 14 of its General Recommendation No. 19 (1992) defines domestic violence (DV) as thus: *'Family violence is one of the most insidious forms of violence against women. It is prevalent in all societies. Within family relationships women of all ages are subjected to violence of all kinds, including battering, rape, other forms of sexual assault, mental and other forms of violence, which are perpetuated by traditional attitudes. These forms of violence put women's health at risk and impair their ability to participate in family life and public life on a basis of equality.'*

In Assam, domestic violence accounts for the highest number of crimes against women. As per recent data, there were about 6,000 cases of DV in 2017-18 reported till September 2018.⁴⁷ Figure 3.5 clearly indicates that a major chunk of responses lean towards cases of DV. The data collected through the IDIs with residents of shelter homes across Assam show that the majority of the women in these homes are DV survivors –married women who faced constant abuse from husbands and in-laws. In many cases they faced physical and sexual abuse from their husbands under the influence of alcohol. These women have either fled from their homes or were compelled to take refuge in shelter homes when police found them on the streets or working as sex workers. The narratives below highlight the various kinds of DV that residents of shelter homes in Assam have been subjected to.

A 20-year-old resident of an Ujjawala home revealed that her mother-in-law used to verbally abuse her and her father-in-law had sexually abused her. One day when her husband asked her to make chapatis/bread, she said she did not know how to make them; he slapped her and threw her out of the house. She decided to go to her maternal uncle's place. However, on the way she was forcibly taken away by a few boys and gang-raped. The next day, the police found her and connected her with a local NGO. She was then moved to the home.

A resident aged about 28 years reported that her husband, under the influence of alcohol, used a 'daa' (hatchet) on her, badly injuring her right hand. The villagers and her husband's family had to take her to the district Head Quarter for plastic surgery which cost them almost INR 1 lac. The doctors showed concern when she told them she had accidentally cut her hand while chopping meat. They insisted that she tell the truth but she did not tell them about the violence she was facing from her husband. When she was pregnant with her third child, he continued to beat her. Finally unable to take it anymore, she left the house while her husband was at work. She was four months' pregnant when she took her son and daughter and fled from her husband's home. She lodged an FIR against her husband and later sought refuge at a shelter home.

⁴⁷ https://www.google.com/amp/s/m/timesofindia.com/city/guwahati/6000-cases-of-domestic-violence-in-assam-this-year/amp_articles/65752864.cms.

There were also cases where DV was a result of community dynamics.

A Muslim man was not observing fast during the month of Ramzan. When the community came to know of this, he was beaten black and blue and then paraded in the village. Suspecting that his wife had informed people about him not fasting, the man beat his wife and threw her out of the house. She and her three children went to her natal home and stayed with her parents. Some relatives suggested moving to a shelter home. Soon after she shifted to a shelter home with her children and has been staying there since then.

Violence in the private sphere is, thus, manifested in nuanced and subtle forms; it is not always a direct power structure that involves only man and wife.

In intersectional understanding or descriptions of DV, perceptions vary from community to state and also amongst individuals. Community perceptions put the issue at the lowest rung of the social ladder of concerns. DV is perceived as a local strategy within homes and families to keep family honour and harmony intact, and to maintain gender inequality by controlling women and children. It is seen as an issue to be confined to the four walls of the house and within a marital context.

The different forms of DV experienced by non-married women within a domestic space continue to remain unaddressed despite the passing of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (PWDVA) in 2005 by the Government of India (GoI). The PWDVA is a legislation aimed at protecting women from violence in domestic relationships. So far as the right to reside in a shared household is concerned, this is what the Act stipulates:

1. *Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force, every woman in a domestic relationship shall have the right to reside in the shared household, whether or not she has any right, title or beneficial interest in the same.*
2. *The aggrieved person shall not be evicted or excluded from the shared household or any part of it by the respondent save in accordance with the procedure established by law.⁴⁸*

Despite such a provision offering legal protection and the right to reside in a shared household, women are often thrown out and forced to seek shelter. Moreover, the PWDVA stipulates that any shelter home maybe notified by the State Government to provide shelter to survivors of domestic violence. However, in the state of Assam due to non compliance of this provision of the Act, there remains deficits in ensuring women's access to entitlements and shelter

A shelter home resident faced everyday violence in the hands of her husband and son when she refused to give them money. On one such occasion, the husband became extremely violent and threw her out of the house. For two nights she stayed on the streets, expecting her husband to take her back, but he did not. Later she was rescued by a social worker and taken to the home.

Economic violence is a common ploy used by a perpetrator or abuser to gain control and power over women. It may be explicit or implicit, and includes manifestations such as limiting access to common assets, control over family resources or denial of basic needs. These, in the long run, do not allow a woman any independence, and threaten her and her dependents' safety and long-term security.

⁴⁸ http://chdlsa.gov.in/right_menu/act/pdf/domviolence.pdf.

Trafficking

Trafficking has become a raging issue in certain pockets of Assam, such as Udalguri, Baksa, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, etc. Women from tea garden communities, conflict-affected areas and border areas and extremely impoverished backgrounds are taken away by traffickers who engage them as domestic help in metros or in sex work.

According to the data for 2015 released by the NCRB, Assam is a major trafficking hub of the country. With 1,494 cases, the state accounts for 22% of the total reported cases of trafficking across India. Assam also has the highest number of child trafficking – 1,317 cases – which account for 38% of the national figure. UNICEF identifies Assam as the second highest trafficking zone in India. Further, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ranks Assam as one of eight Indian states where child trafficking is rampant. The UNODC reports that 5,023 girls and 2,765 boys went missing from Assam between 2009 and 2014.⁴⁹ The government's Ujjawala scheme specifically aims at the rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation.⁵⁰

In an interview with an ex-resident of a shelter home, she explained how she was tricked by a woman from a neighbouring village and trafficked to Mumbai on the pretext of a job at a textile firm. She found herself trapped in a prostitution racket, where she was impregnated and had to undergo an abortion. She later managed to flee with the help of the local police and her husband who went to rescue her. On her return to the village, she along with her two children were ostracised by the entire community. After a point it became difficult for her to bear the daily humiliation, and so she decided to stay at an NGO-run shelter home. However, this home did not have provisions for children, so she sent her daughter to another home; since then the girl has been there, having now completed her matriculation examination. The respondent has now moved back to her village and lives with her husband and son, but the daughter continues to live at the shelter home.

A 15-year-old resident disclosed that after the death of her father, her mother brought her to the district headquarter for studies. However, instead of being admitted to school, she was compelled to work as a domestic help. In one of the households where she worked, the family was very abusive and when she rebelled, she was thrown out of the house. Her mother then took her to a man who got her into a car with another man under the pretext of giving her a job. However, she was suspicious about the situation; she tricked them into stopping the car to go to the toilet and fled. Finally, she reached a police station, where she narrated the entire incident. The police then placed her at a NGO-run shelter home.

⁴⁹ Barnali Das, 'Who Would Like to Live in this Cage? Voices from a Shelter Home in Assam', Economic and Political Weekly 51: 44 & 45 (November 2016).

⁵⁰ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/north-east/assam-trafficking-figures-present-grim-picture/cid/1428694>.

A respondent reported that once when she visited her eldest sister and brother-in-law, her sister asked her to accompany two strangers – a man and a woman – to a market place. However, she was taken not to the market but elsewhere in a public bus. The man told her that she was now his property as he had bought her from her elder sister. Hearing this, she started shouting and crying, drawing attention of the public in the bus. When the passengers heard her story, they called the police. The couple escaped in the commotion. The woman was taken to the local police station and placed in an Ujjawala home.

A woman with disability recounted how she was taken to a village in Rajasthan by a stranger couple. She was locked in a house, beaten up and pressurised to marry. After having succumbed to the pressure and agreeing to the marriage proposal, she was allowed to move somewhat freely around the house. On one occasion she managed to lay her hands on a mobile phone and contacted people in her village. Someone from her village was in Rajasthan around that time; they got in touch with the police and she was rescued and brought back home. Having returned to her village, the community blamed her, saying she herself had gone out to seek other men for sexual favours. She has never lived in a shelter home as there are still no such homes in her district. She remarked that she would have definitely availed the services of a shelter home, had there been one, in order to get away from the social ostracisation.

Elopement as an outcome of coercion/violence

Several narratives in the study involved instances where women were compelled to elope. While the elopement was consensual in some cases, there were several instances of marriage by force or constant pressure of marriage where in some cases the survivor was also a minor; in several cases, the woman became a target of domestic violence post marriage.

An 18-year-old resident in a shelter home revealed that she was seeing a boy in the same village who was three years older and worked as a carpenter. However, the young woman's paternal uncle arranged her marriage with another man. She then eloped with her boyfriend and got married to him in another village in the presence of his sister's husband. Her paternal uncle filed a case of kidnapping and rape. The couple was advised to come back and surrender to the police and they complied. While the young man was taken into police custody, she was sent to an Ujjawala home, as she was still a minor. She was taken for medical examination where the doctors found she was pregnant. As the couple had both consented to the marriage and both families were willing to accept them, she was sent back to her mother with the understanding that she would move to her husband's place after she turned 18. Meanwhile, her uncle made several attempts to abort her unborn child and mentally tortured her and her family. She informed the staff of the shelter home where she had been temporarily lodged earlier; they rescued her and she plans to be in the shelter home until childbirth.

In North East India, marriage by elopement has been a common practice amongst many tribal communities, like the Bodos, the Rabhas, and others.⁵¹ However, the narratives here point to elopement as a process that is a result of coercion and violence in some form or the other. Often immense coercion and suffering, which may be manifested in nuanced or overt forms, lead women to elope. Poverty and family conditions also compel them to elope, when they are sometimes lured with money. There are cases of women being entangled in illegal rackets who become double/triple survivors of violence. Conservative and typically patriarchal norms clubbed with repressive gender relations often lead to elopement with its overlapping linkages with other forms of violence. During such times, a woman loses her safety net, and is exposed to multiple vulnerabilities and rights violations. The narratives have also highlighted the lack of a proper network of service providers, which prevents women from finding safe spaces for themselves.

There is also an angle of ownership of inherited property and lineage, which is a primary reason why men are not left in shelter homes or abandoned, in comparison to the numbers that we see for women. Marginalised, homeless women bereft of any ancestral property, shelter or home spaces often find refuge in shelter homes. Another group of women found in shelter homes are the mentally ill. According to a 2016 report by the National Commission for Women, families that willfully abandon mentally ill women do so mainly because of social stigma. Other reasons include a lack of space in the house, the old age of caregivers or because they fear for the safety of the women themselves.⁵² In addition to those escaping abusive relationships, women who have stigmatised identities or vocations – such as sex workers and girls who have eloped – may also be forced into shelter homes.

What Brings Women to Shelter Homes – A Glimpse

The narratives below reveal the multiple forms of violence that women are subjected to, both in the private and the public spheres.

1. **Single woman:**

This resident was a widow who had been brought to the home by her nephew. She has been living there for four and a half years. She disclosed that because of her own aggressive nature, she could not tolerate her daughter-in-law. After an argument one day, she left the house, as she did not want to jeopardise her daughter-in-law's relationship with her son. She was homeless for a while and was later brought to the home by her nephew.

2. **Dowry-related harassment:**

The resident was brought to the home by the police when she had gone to lodge a complaint against her alcoholic husband who would regularly beat her up. She had eloped to get married to him, but soon after his drinking habit got worse and he would beat her every day for not bringing money from her natal home. The village headman tried to solve the case but in vain, and soon she lodged a complaint.

⁵¹ <http://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.%202022%20Issue6/Version-2/I2206025863.pdf>.

⁵² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-45861899>.

3. *Marriage against choice:*

The resident's parents were dead and she had five elder brothers, all of whom were married. One of her brothers was forcing her to marry an old man. She was very unhappy and informed the villagers who in turn informed the police. Her brother and the old man were arrested and she was brought to the shelter home.

4. *Marriage without consent and related abuse:*

This resident was living with her sister who married her off without her consent. Her husband used to work as a driver; he was an alcoholic and often beat her. On one such occasion, her husband in a fit of rage threw her out of the house. She asked her husband to hand over her son but he refused. She had no option but to leave the place. She rented a room along with a friend. Soon she learnt that her husband had remarried and had moved elsewhere. In the meantime, she also discovered that she was pregnant with her second child. To sustain herself, she worked in different workplaces nearby. Finally, she borrowed money from a few people and managed to open a shop near a showroom. The owner of the showroom saw her state and brought her to the shelter home.

5. *Sexual violence:*

One resident was raped and impregnated by a man who was then asked to marry her. However, soon after marriage he left her and her daughter. To sustain herself and her daughter, she joined the Home Guard services and retired years later. After that, she went to live with her brother; however, her sister-in-law was not in favour of this arrangement and so she decided to stay on the street with her daughter. It was while they were on the streets that the police took them to a faith-based NGO. However, she and her daughter were treated badly by the staff and ran away. They again resorted to living on the streets. The second time, the police took them to a shelter home at the district headquarter from where they were shifted to the present shelter home.

6. *Threat to life:*

This resident had migrated from her village to work in a company. She was staying with her sister in the city. One day her brother-in-law told her she had to marry him or else she would be killed. In fear she married him, with the consent of both families. When she learnt she was pregnant, she went to his house in the village only to be beaten by him. Later she was given shelter by his relatives and gave birth to their daughter. After getting to know about her condition, her landlord in the city who happened to be the in-charge of the shelter home at that time brought her there.

7. *Child marriage:*

At the age of 17 years, one resident was married to a man who turned out to be an alcoholic; he would verbally abuse her. Her in-laws could not control him. She decided to leave him and went to live with her parents. Later, the community leaders intervened; realising she did not want to go back to her husband's house, they brought her to the shelter home.

8. *Abusive domestic work:*

A resident was working as a domestic help at a household from where she ran away because of physical abuse. She was found by the police and placed in a state home.

9. *Old age:*

One resident was working as a domestic help in a house in Guwahati, and was brought to the shelter home by her employer when she became old. She had no home of her own back in the village; she had been forced to elope with a man at a young age and had faced violence at the hands of her husband.

10. Adoption-related abuse:

One resident was adopted by a family and was showered with love and care during the initial years. However, when the couple had their biological child, she was ill treated. She was physically assaulted by the father and verbally abused by the mother. One day her teacher in school noticed her crying and brought her to an NGO's shelter home where the teacher also stayed. She lived in the shelter home for a while but was taken back by her family. Immediately after this, she was made to leave school and work as a domestic help. Her adoptive father beat her, and she registered a complaint against the violence faced at home. But only solution the police offered was that she should marry someone she liked and leave the house. In disbelief and without any delay, she packed her bags and came to stay again at the shelter home.

11. Character assassination and moral policing:

After the death of her father, one resident had to start working as domestic help to sustain herself and her mother. The people in her village started to feel she was a bad influence on the other girls in the village. Hence, the community leaders collectively took the decision to keep her in this shelter home and thereby keep her away from the village.

12. Marriage without consent and domestic violence:

One resident used to live with her stepmother who did not have children. At around the age of 16/17 years, she was married off against her wishes to a man in the same village. Every day, the husband would beat her on the suspicion of her having affairs with other men. When the community came to know about it, they encouraged her to stay in a shelter home. Finally she took her child and moved to the home.

Violence that is physical, sexual and psychological is a traumatizing challenge for women in Assam today. This includes threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. The structural forms of violence begin in the family and extend to the community and then to the state. The linkage between violence and homelessness is undoubtedly strong and the data generated in the course of this study reveals that violence faced in various forms over time and space have compelled women to seek refuge in shelter homes.

The Most Vulnerable Groups

Some of the most vulnerable groups covered in this area are street vendors, women from rural communities, displaced women and disabled women in conflict areas, Adivasi⁵³ women working in tea gardens, queer persons and migrant construction workers. Case narratives of women from these vulnerable groups show the urgent need for alternate safe spaces for them. These groups often have no information about shelter homes or other safe spaces.

Following are some voices of women from various high-risk categories that reveal their vulnerabilities so far as being shelter-less or being prone to the same is concerned.

⁵³ <https://scroll.in/article/773759/adivasis-indias-original-inhabitants-have-suffered-the-most-at-its-hands>.

Street Vendors

A respondent talks of everyday verbal abuse while commuting to work. Rickshaw pullers ask them to go 'somewhere' with them, people on the street ask them uncomfortable questions with sexual connotations. Some customers abuse them verbally. The local youth (representing themselves as government agents) and the police illegally collect money from the vendors. But sometimes the police are helpful and have even let her stock her vegetables and other products in a safe space.

Women street vendors constantly struggle for a safe space. They express the need for night shelters which could reduce the hassle of commuting daily. This group of women requires a space to stock their produce and spend the night, as they otherwise have to travel every day from remote locations.

In Assam, under NULM, Support to Urban Street Vendors constitutes an important segment so far as the issue of urban homelessness is concerned. The State Urban Livelihoods Mission is the nodal agency responsible for implementation of programmes through Urban Local Bodies.⁵⁴ However, not much intervention for women street vendors has occurred.

Migrant Construction Workers

A 45-year-old respondent spoke of migrating to the city in search of work, along with a few other women from her village. When she moved to the city, she had no idea how she would survive without a roof over her head. It has been more than 15 years now in the city and she is continuing to work as a daily wage labour. She lives in harsh conditions where, most of the time, she has little access to basic needs such as water, a toilet, etc. She recalls the time when she lived with a few other women from her village in a shack. Later when she shifted to a rented room, there were instances when the house had to be immediately vacated when the rent could not be paid on time.

The living conditions of most women migrant construction workers is dismal, with a majority of them crammed into slums or flimsy makeshift shelters made from tarpaulin sheets. In India, there is an estimated 1.8 million (both men and women) migrant construction workers who remain homeless, despite laws aimed at providing them with shelter.⁵⁵ In the case of Assam, the Assam Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board was formed in 2007; it is mandated to ensure that workers benefit from social security schemes through the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Services Act, 1996. However, the reality is that there is hardly any woman who has benefitted from the scheme.⁵⁶ The current need is for an inclusive urbanisation approach that ensures migrant workers, more so women and children, the basic right to proper housing and a safe space.



Migrant construction workers participating in a FGD

⁵⁴ <https://gmc.assam.gov.in/schemes/national-urban-livelihoods-mission-nulm>.

⁵⁵ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN1FE0EZ>.

⁵⁶ <https://www.google.com/amp/s/abdulkazad.wordpress.com/2013/10/06/plight-of-the-construction-workers-of-guwahati/amp/>.

The major forms of violence faced by these women were in the public space, while commuting to work and at work. These women are hardly aware of any government schemes, provisions of free legal aid and procedures for registering such cases with the police. There is also lack of awareness on their rights and entitlements, as most women were illiterate and came from economically poor backgrounds. Most participants were not aware of shelter homes and the facilities provided by them to women survivors of violence.

Adivasi Women Working in Tea Gardens

Adivasi women who are pre-dominantly a migrant community working in tea gardens of Assam constitute as one of the most vulnerable and backward group of women in Assam. Amidst extreme marginalisation and scant opportunities, scores of Adivasi women who form a large part of the workforce in the tea gardens continue to live in extreme hardship that is manifested in nuanced forms. This extends to the extreme impoverishment that is faced by women and children of the community; their rights are violated at multiple levels – from their basic right to survival to education, health, hygiene, housing, safety, etc.



Adivasi women participating in a FGD

In one of the FGDs, a respondent spoke of cases where young girls from the garden areas had been trafficked to places like Chennai and Haryana. For example, a young girl after coming in contact with a man and exchanging mobile numbers, was missing for months. Later she came back home with a child. The respondent recounted cases where middle man takes money to engage girls in work; they are then sent off to faraway places. She also spoke of a particular case of witch-hunting where a woman was branded a witch by the community and taken to the police station.

Women in tea gardens experience diverse forms of violence and exploitation, which sometimes compel women to flee their homes and seek shelter elsewhere. However, alternate safe spaces for women in the tea gardens are non-existent; nor do the women have information on various schemes, policies and shelter homes.

Displaced Women

In Assam, the perennial floods create havoc for women and many women lose shelter and access to safe spaces. In the aftermath of floods, many take shelter in relief camps; sometimes when they do not have access to a shelter home, they are forced to make makeshift arrangements with tarpaulin sheets along the roads. Once the floodwaters recede, it is the women who are solely responsible for rebuilding the family homes as the men go out to work.⁵⁷ The same is also true when an area is hit by conflict and the community is

⁵⁷ <https://www.newsdeeply.com/womenandgirls/articles/2017/07/27/assam-floods-drive-trafficking-child-marriage-and-womens-ill-health>.

immediately displaced. Women run higher risks of losing their homes, property, access to basic rights and entitlements, etc.

‘According to the Asian Centre for Human Rights, Assam has the highest number of conflict-induced internally displaced population in India – nearly 3.5 lakh – and the highest in the world in 2015. There is no disaggregated data about the number of women that are part of this set of displaced persons, and the government has no policy on internal displacement. Although women are often survivors of conflict, they can also be active participants. Women combatants who want to surrender are a category that needs safe shelter. The camps set up by the government can often be stigmatising spaces for these women. Experience shows that once the pro-peace talks are over and a settlement is reached, these women are largely neglected. Besides, post-conflict camps get erected and dismantled periodically. These can be unsafe and do not meet the needs of women. From the camps it is clear that the understanding of the government is limited to bed and food. To avoid sexual harassment and violence at the camps, parents can rush their daughters into marriage. The government does not accommodate these women in shelters such as Ujjawala or Swadhar.’⁵⁸

Studies highlight that the relief camps set up after conflict in certain districts of Assam are insufficient in number and lack basic facilities, making them unsuitable for human habitation. Residents faced several issues, such as the outbreak of contagious diseases, primarily caused by the unhygienic conditions prevailing in all the camps due to lack of sanitation and scarcity of water. The role of the state in the entire displacement process has been neutral/passive. In this entire process, children and women have suffered the most, with several cases of human trafficking and sexual harassment reported. In spite of this, no special attention has been given to them. Conflicts in North East India have left women particularly vulnerable to different types of violence, including sexual violence.⁵⁹ State intervention in this regard has been minimal and not much has been done for the rehabilitation and resettlement of internally displaced people. The absence of a national policy makes them vulnerable and susceptible to violence and different forms of harassment.⁶⁰

A NEN field study in BTAD post the 2012 conflict recounts some poignant stories. A few survivors of violence at a camp shared:

We were helpless and had to run for our lives, leaving behind our house on which we had spent over a lakh rupees, as we did not feel safe in the conflict-ridden situation.

What is the point in spending money and building a house, when there is no certainty? Conflicts have happened so often in the past that there is always a feeling that a conflict would erupt at any moment and we will be forced to flee, leaving behind everything.

Our safest shelters are these relief camps – they do not meet all our needs but we prefer to stay here.

⁵⁸ Time for Overhauls: Report of a National Consultation on Services in and around State-run and Funded Shelter Homes for Girls, Women and Other Vulnerable populations’ (Lam-lyntiChittaruNeralu, 2016).

⁵⁹ Roshmi Goswami, Sreekala MG and Meghna Goswami, ‘Women in Armed Conflict Situations’ (North East Network, 2005).

⁶⁰ Internally Displaced Women in Dotoma Block of Kokrajhar District, Assam Post 2012 Ethnic Conflict’ (NEN Field Report, 2017).

Furthermore, women and girls with disabilities are subjected to multiple forms of discrimination, and in a context of conflict, the marginalisation and denial of rights are even higher. In Assam, some districts affected by conflict and violence have no shelter homes. Conflict over the years has displaced communities and crippled sustainable development in multiple ways. Women and children have always been the worst hit in such situations, bearing the brunt and severe repercussions of conflict and violence. However, the dominant discourse invisibilises this narrative, especially that of women with disabilities living in a context of conflict.

One respondent observed that during conflicts families are often compelled to leave their homes and flee to a safe location. During the Bodo-Adivasi conflict in 1996, when the respondent was a young schoolgirl, she had to flee her home and live in a relief camp. During such times, women with disability are amongst the worst sufferers, she opined. She talked of an incident where a disabled couple from the community had gone to collect firewood; the husband was tied to a tree and the wife was raped in front of him.

Queer Identities

The respondents did not agree to be part of an FGD; hence telephonic conversations were conducted.

A trans-woman expressed the multiple layers of violence that she currently faces, from the home to her college from where she is currently suspended for 'being different from the others.' The respondent is currently desperately looking for a job and wants to flee to Guwahati, Kolkata or some other neighbouring city. She was initially in search of a shelter home but could not get any information about homes catering to trans-persons. On one occasion when she approached the district-level social welfare authorities, she was ridiculed. The respondent who is in her early 20s, is depressed and has attempted suicide. While she now intends to find a job and a shelter in some other town/city, she is aware that even finding a place for rent as a trans-person would be a major challenge.

Accessibility to shelter homes for marginalised sexual identities is still not a reality in Assam. This will perhaps take some time to materialise. Policies and schemes are limiting on several counts.

One respondent observed that there are many cases where, due to pressure of marriage and other societal coercion, queer persons are in search of refuge/shelter. There are many who are thrown out of their houses and left to fend for themselves.

It is important to mention that often the tendency amongst officials at institutional care centres is in the direction of correctional behaviour as persons with alternate sexualities are still hugely stigmatised in society. It is also important to note that queer persons may have multiple intersections of being asset less, socially and religiously excluded, disabled, tribal and conflict-affected (apart from being queer).

Women and Assam's National Registry of Citizens (NRC)

Assam's NRC⁶¹ draft has also left many women high and dry. Despite having submitted to and followed the stringent verification process, many women from the *char*/riverine areas, one of the most vulnerable groups, were axed from the NRC registry; the repercussions of this are yet to unfold.⁶² If rendered homeless, yet another huge challenge lies in store for these women.

Harsh Mander's detailed report on the detention camps talks of the human tragedy at these camps and the extensive flouting of national and international laws, with the status of residents being worse than prisoners. The women's detention centre is even more cramped than that of the men, and they have not been allowed to move outside a confined space of 500 square feet for close to a decade. Mander notes that in the women's camps in particular, the 'residents' wailed continuously, as though in permanent mourning.⁶³

Convergence of Services in Shelter Homes in Assam

As we have seen, India's first 'rescue homes', designed for girls and women rescued from sex work, date back to the early 20th century. With the passage of time and public recognition of other forms of distress affecting women – domestic abuse, abandonment and political dislocation – the focus of these homes changed to include women needing 'shelter'. Theoretically, these homes are concerned with the rehabilitation of the girls and women they receive, and aim to help them begin new lives.⁶⁴

All the government schemes – Swadhar Greh, Ujjawala, OSCs, etc. – mention legal aid, vocational trainings, psycho-social care and counselling and medical facilities as the primary services and provisions to be provided for the homeless and survivors of violence at shelter homes. Shelters are meant to be a space for convergence and provisions of various entitlements of social security, food, education and health care systems. All homeless persons in shelters should be given priority under the various schemes and government programmes. To ensure the provisions as per guidelines mandated in the schemes, the convergence of various service providers is of utmost importance. In Assam there are 18 Swadhar Greh homes and 23 Ujjawala homes run by NGOs. Government-run homes are 7 in number.

An official at a social service organisation spoke of the poor state of convergence of services as well as of the expertise and facilities available at shelter homes. She mentioned that these homes need to be reimaged as per the needs of diverse groups of women and the violence that they have been subjected to. It is important for the redress mechanism to play a more effective role so as to make every functionary accountable and transparent in the system.

⁶¹ <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/q9a4WgZptGXE64r8jghD0L/Explainer-What-is-National-Register-of-Citizens-NRC-of-As.html>.

⁶² https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/many-married-women-left-out-in-nrc/amp_articleshow/65266070.cms.

⁶³ <https://www.google.com/amp/www.deccanherald.com/amp%3fparams=LzlwMTgVMDYvMzAvNjc4MTI3>

⁶⁴ http://www.academia.edu/34233402/Unspoken_Voices_of_the_Trafficked_Women_and_Children_Pages_69-76_.



Living conditions in a shelter home

Infrastructural provisions

Our research shows that while some premises were rented houses, some were in their own buildings and the exclusively government-run shelter homes in their own spaces. All shelter homes have a kitchen, a dining hall, a room for providing trainings, resident rooms and toilets. Some homes also have a separate space for children who live with residents, and they are taught art work and other activities. However, this is not the case across all homes. Some homes have dormitory arrangements for residents and they are packed together in numbers beyond the capacity of the rooms.

One resident of an Ujjawala home disclosed that the home had been accommodated within the hostel premises of a school for the physically challenged; the Ujjawala home women was sharing rooms with resident persons with disability and their families. They had a common kitchen, bathing space and vocational training centre.

As and when a woman arrives at a home, her details are taken down and the residential superintendent as well as a counsellor sits with the woman to get her case history. Sometimes it takes more than a week for the women to talk about the abuse they have faced. On the first day, they are provided with a kit with clothes (the Assamese attire mekhela-sador or a salwar kurta-pyjamas, etc. are provided) and other essentials such as soap, shampoo, oil, comb, sanitary napkins, etc. At some homes, they are provided with clothes during festivals and winter wear. The Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) or Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) worker visits some homes and provides sanitary napkins for INR 10 per packet as well as medicines.

Staff

In a number of homes, only the superintendent is a residential staff member; the rest of the staff come on a daily basis. In one shelter home, the president and the caretaker were the residential staff. On an average, there were about six to seven staff members in these homes. Several staff members did not seem well informed about the running of a shelter home and related government schemes. There also seemed to be limited capacity building efforts for the shelter home staff.

A staff member of a shelter home on being asked about the available schemes, said that she knew that it was a government-run home but she was not aware of the schemes. She also said that she was not aware of any written records kept at the shelter home.

The matron at a government-run shelter home disclosed that since joining the home, she had attended only one training on counselling. Thereafter, she has not got the opportunity to attend any such trainings.

Meals and nutrition

The schemes do not mention any specific menu that has to be followed, but it is the responsibility of the shelter home management to have a proper system in place as to who prepares the menu and ensure the menu is being followed regularly. Also, if a certain menu is followed, it needs to be changed at regular intervals.

The interviews highlighted that all the shelter homes studied have a separate space as a kitchen. However, the condition of some of the kitchens was poor and they have traditional chulhas/cooking arrangements. The menu at most shelter homes is not fixed and keeps changing frequently. There are specific timings

for meals. Residents are provided tea and biscuits in the morning, followed by breakfast which may include roti, sabji, khichdi,⁶⁵ boiled rice. Lunch and dinner mostly comprise rice, roti, dal, sabji, with non-vegetarian items served on specific days. On rare occasions some shelter homes have a nutritious diet for ailing residents, if any. It also came to light that while a cook can be appointed as per the government guidelines, at most shelter homes, it is one of the residents who is engaged as a cook.



Traditional kitchen at a shelter home in Assam

A number of residents complained that they are made to cook the meals and there is a lack of nutritional food for children. They also complained about the quality as well as the quantity of food that was served.

⁶⁵ Indian food items.

Medical facilities

Our research reveals that due to fund crunch, some homes could not pay the doctors and they had discontinued visits to the homes. In a number of cases, the matron had to bear the expenses of taking residents to nearby hospitals in case of emergencies. Also, there is no consistency in the number of visits a doctor makes to the homes. While in some cases doctors came every week, in other homes doctors came only once a month. Most homes have doctors on call. In emergency cases and for serious ailments, residents are sent to nearby hospitals.

One resident mentioned that there was no doctor visiting the home. It was the superintendent who provided them with medicines when they complained of any illness.

In one home, the social worker mentioned two doctors (psychiatrist and physician) visit the residents once a week or in case of emergency. However, a resident stated that she had not met any doctor during her stay so far in the home.

Grievance Redress Mechanism

The majority of respondents said that there was no proper mechanism for addressing grievances and residents often went directly to the matron to resolve their issues.

Legal Aid

In order to facilitate access to justice for survivors of violence, legal aid is one of the most important aspects to be ensured for residents of shelter homes. However, the IDIs revealed that access to legal aid is absent in nearly all homes. Only five respondents out of a total of 32 revealed that they had access to legal aid at their shelter home. Most residents did not know of lawyers visiting the home and that they could avail legal services.

A resident stated that the lawyers visit the home whenever there is a case or they accompany a woman to the shelter home. Other than that, there are no legal services specifically provided to the residents. Sometimes the caretakers accompany residents for court cases.

We also observed that staff members at shelter homes show an inherent urge to settle matters outside the court rather than breaking up the family with filing of divorce.

In one of the cases, the staff tried to resolve matters between the husband and wife even after the court had taken cognizance of the case. However, there was no follow-through; the husband went back to beating his wife even after a written apology and declaration that he would not beat her again.

Counselling

In most of the shelter homes a counsellor was available for the residents. While some residents met the counsellors as and when they needed to, there were some homes where the counsellor was accessible only occasionally. It also came to light that on some instances, the position of a counsellor was just randomly filled without proper validation of qualifications and credentials. At some homes, group counselling on important issues is also conducted at regular intervals.

One resident reported that a male counsellor is present daily in the home; they can talk to him when they feel the need. On enquiry, it was found that the counsellor was a sports person now employed as a counsellor due to his educational background in psychology.

Another resident shared that sometimes the counsellor at the shelter home conducted group counselling for the entire group on important issues.

Vocational training

Under Swadhar Greh scheme as mentioned earlier, arrangements are to be made by the implementing organisation to provide vocational training to the women. Training and examination fee would be reimbursed on submission of the certificate issued by the institute on successful completion of training. Under Ujjawala, in order to completely rehabilitate the survivor, it is necessary to provide alternate livelihood options. Therefore, support for vocational training is provided.

At one of the shelter homes, training in weaving was organised for the residents. However, the weaving instructor does not come regularly. Also, due to their advanced age, some of the residents have problems with their eyesight which acts as a hindrance.

All the shelter homes from where data was collected had provisions for various vocational skill trainings, except for one old age home in one district; two respondents from this home said that there was no opportunity for them to engage in any skill or vocational training. The trainings mostly included stitching, weaving, tailoring, artificial flower making, embroidery, etc. Only one shelter home had a beauty parlour course for residents. The options for women are very limited. These conventional forms of trainings do not motivate women to venture outside vocations that have traditionally been associated with women.

One resident revealed that she had studied till Class 7 and wanted to be a beautician. However, the home superintendent did not keep her promise of training her in a beauty parlour and now she is unwilling to go for classes for tailoring and stitching curtains.

During the course of implementation of the Swadhar scheme, state governments as well as implementing organisations should establish necessary linkages with other programmes relating to non-formal education, skill development and other programmes of the states as well as of the GoI.⁶⁶ Ways could be devised to connect these homes and the trainings with new schemes of the government, such as the Skill India programme, Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna, trainings conducted under the National Skill Development Corporation, etc.⁶⁷

A typical day for a resident at a home is generally monotonous. Other than managing daily chores and engaging in conventional vocational trainings such as stitching and knitting, embroidery, flower making, there is little to do. Those with children are engaged with various activities related to their children, such as taking them to the Anganwadi /Pre-School centres. Most of the women are involved in various duties that are thrust upon them, such as cleaning the premises including toilets, cooking, attending to sick residents, etc.; this is when the schemes specifically mention that cooks, cleaners, etc. are to be employed for these jobs. In such a situation, there are very few opportunities for residents to explore, engage and creatively invest towards enriching experiences and empowerment.

Some Drawbacks of Shelter Homes in Assam

The conditions of most shelter homes, both state and NGO-run in Assam are dismal. One also needs to understand there are various challenges involved in executing the right interventions. While schemes may be in place, there are layers of issues that often delay or cripple interventions.

The issues faced by residents of shelter homes can be categorised into different levels. At the micro level, the shelter homes lack many of the essentials for a safe haven. The basic medical provisions, including regular visits by doctors to assess their health and provide medication, are lacking in most homes. In case of rehabilitation of these women, provisions for vocational training, informal education and workshops to promote skill development are minimal. Hence, the purpose of rehabilitation of these women is not met. Sometimes the staff show discriminatory behaviour in taking care of the women who are physically challenged, survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, women with different gender and sexual identities and others. Further, at times the counsellors appointed focus on the issue of morality rather than providing rights-based counselling to the women.

At the macro level, there is the issue of poor allocation of funds which ultimately leads to poor amenities for these women. In case of the survivors of trafficking, reintegration takes a back seat due to several reasons, such as fear of the woman being trafficked again, requirement to testify against the traffickers and families remaining untraceable. In certain cases, even if the staff are able to trace the families, the women are not reunited with their family. This is followed to keep the number of the residents higher so as to receive more grants for the homes.

⁶⁶ http://wcd.nic.in/sites/default/files/Guidelines7815_2.pdf.

⁶⁷ <https://www.nationalskillsnetwork.in/skill-india-empowers-35-lakh-women/>.

As far as the religious aspect is concerned, certain shelter homes are by no means secular; for example, residents are allowed to worship only Hindu gods and goddesses in some homes. There seemed to be an innate dislike towards other religious communities as a whole in some shelter homes. No steps have been taken by the authorities to ensure a secular safe space in these homes.

When it comes to contact with family members, most residents have contact with family members dropping in at times to meet them. However, there were several cases where the meetings were allowed only in the presence of matrons, which curtail their right to privacy. During festivals residents are sometimes 'allowed' to visit and stay with family members if they wish to do so; however, in most cases they are denied permission. Mobility of residents is often restricted and there is gross violation of the right to choice and autonomy, even when it comes to keeping contact with family. In one of the homes, there was strict vigilance on residents and no mobile phones were allowed. If someone possessed a phone, it had to be submitted to the Matron. Officials claim such arrangements are necessary due to the complicated nature of some cases and security concerns.

Thus, these women are re-victimised in the very spaces whose main purpose is to provide care and protection for women in distress. Many of the women living in shelter homes are mere residents and have few rights.

Perspectives on Shelter Homes

The organisational point of view

The paucity of funds which are now routed through the state government, delays several processes in service delivery. Most of the staff members are contractual, and due to low pays, they may leave their job which creates problems in the functioning of the homes. The delay in the release of funds has also led to problems in the maintenance of homes and payment of salaries of permanent staff (sometimes up to seven months at a stretch). Often it was noted that the homes do not have vehicles to take the residents to the hospitals during emergency. Oftentimes, the strong political connections of shelter home owners make it difficult for staff to intervene.

A staff member of a home spoke about the lack of timely fund transfers which creates major problems, ultimately leading to poor services in the running of homes. Due to this, various services like that of a doctor, lawyer, counsellor, cook and others are discontinued, and the services are compromised.

An official of an NGO running a Swadhar home complained that in the last two years, the funds have been coming through the state government and not directly from the central government as they used to; hence there was late release of funds for salaries as well as maintenance. The NGO themselves had to pay their employees and other expenses.

A respondent from an organisation which runs an Ujjawala home disclosed that there were only three staff members to cater to the well-being of about 50 residents. The field researchers noticed the permission for the establishment of the Ujjawala home had been provided by a former bureaucrat. Though the home had handled about 349 cases till date, the documentation and case management was extremely poor; there was no record of case histories of the women. Moreover, the new staff had not been properly oriented or given any form of training in dealing with cases. On enquiry with the DSW, it came to light that the president of the home is on the police radar for corruption.

A matron at a government shelter home observed that some requirements for the proper functioning of any home are:

- 1. Regularised security personnel and cleaners*
- 2. Doctor who would visit once a week and be reachable during an emergency*
- 3. A functional ambulance*
- 4. Nurse on regular duty*
- 5. Additional funds for certain administrative expenses*
- 6. Permanent in-house cook*

Residents' point of view

In the majority of shelter homes, residents complained about the lack of staff in the homes, which led to problems in management and maintenance. Residents also spoke about the lack of basic amenities such as cooking gas, power back-up, means of heating water in winter, etc., as well as the lack of access to doctors, counsellors and legal aid. Several residents mentioned the lack of new options for vocational courses and how shelter homes mostly run conventional skill trainings. Children above a certain age are not allowed to stay at some homes which often becomes a problem. There is also a lack of long-term plans for the residents.

A 36-year-old resident has been living in a Swadhar Greh with her two sons since 2015. Her elder son will be appearing for his matriculation examination next year. Though the shelter home has provided both the sons with tuitions and one room for the three of them to stay so that her sons are not disturbed during their studies, there is no concrete plan chalked out for the children or the woman.

Point of View of Some Key Informants

181 Women's Helpline:

The manager of the 181 Women's Helpline⁶⁸ observed that there are challenges at multiple levels in ensuring smooth functioning of homes and service delivery. There is no fund for the helpline to conduct awareness programmes, even though they have requested the DSW to allocate funds for implementing awareness programmes. As of now they are using social media, i.e. Facebook, to create awareness. From 7 March 2018 to

⁶⁸ 181 Women's Helpline is a scheme to intensify women's security and provide them a dignified means to lodge complaints. It was launched in March 2018 in Assam.

6 July 2018, they received calls relating to 415 cases of violence against women and children from all districts in Assam. The majority of cases are of DV; other cases include cyber crime, child marriage, sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape, trafficking, acid attack, kidnapping, etc. They transfer cases directly to OSCs in five districts of Assam (Kamrup, Nagaon, Cachar, Jorhat, Kokrajhar). The helpline never directly refers a case to a shelter home but are indirectly involved with them while tracking or follow-up of cases to understand the progress/interventions initiated with the survivors by various stakeholders. In certain cases, they make direct interventions by networking with the police, the DSW or NGOs working at the grassroots level.

Protection Officers:

In each district, Protection Officers stationed at the District SWD, report that they are overburdened. They are engaged in multiple duties; they have to work in the capacity of Child Development Project Officer, Dowry Prohibition Officers, District Child Protection Officers and so on. This hampers or delays the swift implementation of certain interventions to be made in severe or critical cases.

Police:

Often, corrupt police officials ask for bribes from survivors while registering a case. A lack of knowledge about laws related to women and children amongst officials has also been observed. The extremely long process of police investigation hampers the case as well as leads to fear and anxiety among the survivors and their families. All police officials except the top officials belong to the local community; hence, in a number of cases, they back out or do not want to get involved (due to fear or indifference, or because they are known to the perpetrator). There is also a major deficit of female officers.

State Government:

Financial support is not provided by the state government on time mainly in cases of salaries of staff and maintenance of office. No advance payment is made in certain cases of emergency. The money is reimbursed later which leads the employees at these homes to pay from their own pocket and then wait for the money to be released.

Summary of Main Concerns

1. All participants have directly or indirectly experienced violence in some form or the other. The major form of violence faced by women is DV in the form of verbal and physical abuse, mostly by the husbands. The other issues highlighted in the course of the FGDs were alcoholism, trafficking, witch-hunting, cheating, dowry and other marital abuse.
2. More than half of the women talked of the insecurity of life and living in vulnerable conditions.
3. Shelter homes are not equally distributed across districts. This is a government mandate and needs immediate attention.
4. It is important to note that just giving women entry to or shelter in such a space does not resolve the issue. There are several other areas to focus on, from counselling and legal aid to skill trainings. Most importantly, women in such homes should be given the space to make their own informed choices and decisions on their own lives.

5. Some critical areas of concern of shelter homes are as follows:
 - Most of the shelter homes do not have a proper grievance redress mechanism.
 - Staff members are not given appropriate training.
 - Most homes do not have a full-time counsellor and many of the part-time counsellors lack the required counselling skills.
 - There is poor case management and follow-up.
 - Scientific documentation of cases and case records is not done.
 - There are no long-term individual intervention plans for the residents.
 - There are no adequate mechanisms for rehabilitation and follow-up of cases.
 - Most of these women do not have a voter card/ration card/Aadhar card or any other proof of identification.
6. There is a gap in the convergence of various service providers and hence, the justice and service delivery often gets delayed.
7. Most importantly there is an immense level of victimisation of the survivors at these homes and they are treated merely as 'residents'. Humanitarian values and a sense of emotional affiliation or compassion are often missing in the treatment given to the female survivors of violence at these homes.
8. The culture of providing a monthly stipend to the residents on the basis of their work allows them to save money. However, a hurdle in this respect is that the residents often do not have any ID proof, so cannot open bank accounts; hence, there is the danger of the money being misused or misappropriated.
9. Some of the migrant construction women living in the city recounted that sometimes when they could not pay the rent on time, they had to vacate the house immediately, making them shelterless overnight.
10. Most of the women in the more vulnerable categories are not aware of any government schemes, provisions of free legal aid as well as procedures to follow while registering such cases with the police.
11. Only a fraction of the residents were aware of shelter homes and the facilities provided by them to women survivors of violence.
12. There is no organised body or a women's collective for workers in the tea gardens, for migrant workers and as such they felt the lack of a support network to raise their issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the study concentrated on bringing out the concerns of some of the most vulnerable women in accessing shelter homes, an attempt was also made to understand the nature of services available to them. Based on the responses from the institutional mechanisms that are indicative of the superficial nature of services provided to women in distress, we provide suggestions and insights to bring about changes in the existing conditions of shelter homes and transform them into the safe spaces they are meant to be.

Access to information:

Access to appropriate information and resources that impact upon women's right to obtain adequate housing is an important factor in order to ensure awareness of the most vulnerable and backward of communities. Having access to appropriate data means being informed about entitlements related to the schemes and policies, the availability of services and access points for information. Across the geographical landscape of the state, the data in this study reveals that the vulnerable individuals and communities have very little or no information about the existence of shelter homes.

Participation:

Effective participation in decision-making is essential to the fulfillment of all rights pertaining to women. In respect to the provision of and right to adequate housing, women must be able to express and share their views without fear and inhibition. They must be consulted at various stages of policy making to be able to contribute substantively to such processes.

Education and empowerment:

Women in shelter homes should have access to technical assistance and other means of training to enable them to improve their living standards and fully realise their economic, cultural and social rights. Governments should endeavour to promote and provide for catalysts, enablers and change makers with adequate mechanisms for progressive changes. These would include efforts to strengthen more options and avenues to hone skills and talent for women and young girls in these homes. A number of shelter homes had adolescent girls who need education immediately along with other skill development and recreational facilities.

Freedom from violence against women:

Efficient redressal mechanisms to prevent all forms of violence against women by any actor to ensure safety, security and well being in all forms should be effectively put to place. This needs to be particularly kept in focus when looked at violence within the shelter homes. Efficient justice delivery services and systems should be stringent and put to place.

Role of the State machineries:

1. Competent monitoring and evaluation of the shelter homes at multiple levels which will include both internal as well as external monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

2. Gender sensitive implementation of services and provisions in shelter homes through transparent systems like social audits, public hearings and media interface.
3. Inter-departmental coordination between various government departments ensuring convergence and better delivery of services.
4. The Central Ministry and State Government should work out a mechanism for the timely distribution of funds to these shelter homes for their smooth functioning. There should also be means to generate probable alternative resource mobilisation plans to run the homes through community and civil society stakeholders.
5. A state action plan must be drawn up for implementation as well as equitable distribution of schemes across the state within the framework of due diligence.
6. Standard training modules for primary caregivers on issues like feminist counselling, gender and sexuality, violence against women, etc. Trainings should be held for the staff and residents on various topics on roles, rights and entitlements.



WAY FORWARD

The current study is one of the very first attempts at action research which tries to look at narratives and give platform to the voices of female survivors of violence who live in shelter homes. It is the legal and moral responsibility of the government to ensure that the human rights of all citizens, especially the most marginalised, of which homeless women constitute an important category, are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Re-Envisioning Safe Shelters

As a feminist research, a primary aim of this effort has been to re-envision shelter homes as what and how could these spaces be feminist progressive spaces that are beyond restricting. We thereby envision a safe shelter for female survivors of violence as:

- A space that incites a positive vibrancy with absolute zero tolerance to victimisation of the survivor and her past.
- A space that is easily accessible to a survivor of violence, that can be accessed through a lesser cumbersome process with the efficient systems in place and authorities that are accountable.
- A space that gives women due respect, dignity, protection of livelihood, health, adequate living conditions, security, and freedom from violence.
- A space that opens avenues for their interests, likes and aspirations, rather than these spaces being only physical constructions that are depressing in the very first place.
- It is also important that women are provided with the right information and they have informed choice and consent on the decisions that they make thereafter.
- These spaces should comply with the international and national laws and policies that ensure women's right to freedom, participation, justice, equality and liberty.

It is time one looks at policies and frameworks vis-à-vis the ground realities across states as far as shelter homes are concerned. In this entire discourse, it is important that the survivor's voices get the forefront or the limelight and latter interventions are done taking the same into consideration.

Shelter homes should be spaces that allow women to exercise their autonomy and choice, not as restricting hostile environments that limits rights and agency. The avenues to channelise skills and groom for various opportunities for empowerment, contemporary education and recreational facilities are almost none in most of these homes. Although there are vocational skill trainings, there is very little scope for residents in terms of the options and avenues to choose from. Reimagining safe shelters for women envisions a more progressive outlook towards women and their own agency, their rights and autonomy to their own bodies, choices and desires. Shelter Homes need not be like prisons, rather they have to be open spaces for women to give a fresh start to their lives with hope, opportunities, skills and dignity.

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ANNEXURES

Annexure I

List of Government Run Homes

Sl. No.	List of Govt. Run Home Name of the Home
1	State Home for Women, Nagaon
2	State Home for Women, Jalukbari
3	Destitute Home, Jalukbari
4	Home for Destitute Women, Boko
5	Destitute Home, Dighalbari, dhubri
6	Central Destitute home, Mehorepur, Silchar
7	P.L. Home, Bamunigaon, Kamrup



15-10-18
Deputy Director
Directorate of Social Welfare
Assam, Guwahati-1

Annexure II

List of Swadhar Greh (NGOs) that have submitted UC&SOEs and Physical Progress for 2016-17 & 2017-18

List of SWADHAR GREH (NGOs/ORGANIZATION) that have submitted UC&SOEs and Physical Progress for the year 2016-17 & 2017-18


Sl. No.	Name of the District	Name & address of the NGO/ Organization along with location address
1	Karimganj	Roghurtook Club & Library, P.O. Ashakandi, Assam- 788723
2	Kamrup(M)	Global Organization and Life Development (GOLD), Pub Sarania, 1st Bye Lane(West), House No.14, Guwahati-781003
3	Nagaon	Gram Vikash Parishad, Rangaloo, P.O. Jumarmur, Vill.- Kathiatoli, Assam- 782427
4	Dhubri	Fulkumari Bapuji Club, Vill. & Post Falimari, Dist-Dhubri
5	Cachar	Wodwichee, P.O. Lakshirbond (Cachar) Assam- 788155
6	Golaghat	Golaghat Nirman Mahila Gut, Bengana Khuwa, Near Railway Gate Law College Road, P.O. PS . Golaghat, Assam-785621
7	Kamrup(M)	North-East Vol. Association of Rural Dev., Life line Clinical Hospital & Rechearch Centre, Dakhingaon, Kahilipara, Ghy.-19, Assam
8	Morigaon	Rural Organization for Agro Dev. Service (ROADS), Vill.+P.O. Laharighat, Assam-7822127
9	Sonitpur	Society of Total Social Educational & Economical Development, PO&Village-Kaliabor, Kuwaritol
10	Sivasagar	Sankalpa, Village Kathpar, P.O. Banmukh, Dist-Sivasagar
11	Dibrugarh	North Eastern Buddhist Cultural Association,P.O. Boiragimath, Dibrugarh
12	Hailakandi	Wodwichee, P.O. Lakshirbond, Assam- 788155
13	Lakhimpur	Sampriti, Ward No. 12, North Kamlabaripath Lakhimpur Town
14	Morigaon	Barchala Gramya Sakharta Samiy, Milonpur, Ward No. 3, C/O Rajab Ali Faruki, Near Morigaon Samibar Bazar
15	Nagaon	Sdou Assam Gramya Puthibharal Sanstha, P.O. Teliapathy Chanmari Road Haibargaon
16	Jorhat	Gram Vikash Parishad , Royal Road , Jorhat
17	Sonitpur	Global Health Immunization & Population Control Organization, Sonitpur
18	Kamrup(M)	Association for Social Health in India, Assam Branch, R.G. Baruah Road, Sundarpur, Guwahati.


 15-10-2018
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 Directorate of Social Welfare
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Annexure III

NGOs Running Ujjwala Homes

Sl. No	Name of NGO	Operating District	Contact no.	E-mail
1	Integrated Dev. Association, P.O. Chamatapathar, P.S. Sonapur, Dist. Kamrup(M), Assam	Goalpara	9435733622	sanjayida@gmail.com
2	Assam Centre for Rural Development 3.A Saroj Enclave, K C Patowary Road, P.O. Ulubari, Guwahati - 781007	Baska (Home running at Mirza, Kamrup)	9899360694	acrd1995@gmail.com
3	Global Organization for Life Development (GOLD), 1st Bye Lane (West), House no. 14, Pub Sarania, Guwahati-781003	Kamrup	0361-2523155 9435042322	rks_ghy@yahoo.com
4	Karpungpuli (KD) Society, Chaboti, Lakhimpur	Dhemaji	9435189392, 8811905317	karpungpuli_society@yahoo.com
5	Golaghat Nirman Mahila Gut, Bengenakhowa Near Railway Gate, Law Cillege Road P.O. Golaghat-785621	Golaghat	8752886767	gnmgutngo@gmail.com
6	Women & Child Development Organization, P.O. Nimaichandapur Dist. Hailakandi.	Cachar	9435909997	wacdo01@rediffmail.com
7	Jaluguli Agragami Mahila Samity, Vill &, P.O. Jaluguli, Dist. Morigaon - 782104	Morigaon	9435599944	rousonjams@gmail.com
8	North East Voluntary Association of Rural Development (NEVARD), Lifeline Clinical Hospital & Research Centre Dakhingaon, Kahilipara, Guwahati-781019	Dhubri	7896473699	nevardassam@gmail.com
9	North East Voluntary Association of Rural Development (NEVARD), Lifeline Clinical Hospital & Research Centre Dakhingaon, Kahilipara, Guwahati-781019	Kokrajhar	7896473699	nevardassam@gmail.com
10	North East Voluntary Association of Rural Development (NEVARD), Lifeline Clinical Hospital & Research Centre Dakhingaon, Kahilipara, Guwahati-781019	Bongaigaon	7896473699	nevardassam@gmail.com
11	Guwahati Youth Society (GYS), Dakhingaon Tiniali, P.O. Kahilipara, Guwahati-781019	Barpeta	9957146553	gyassam@rediffmail.com
12	Guwahati Youth Society (GYS), Dakhingaon Tiniali, P.O. Kahilipara, Guwahati-781019	Udalguri	9957146553	gyassam@rediffmail.com
13	Bohutrook Club & Library, Gandhi Road, Nalambazar, Dist. Karimganj	Karimganj	8812962002	rogurtookclub@gmail.com
14	Eight Brothers Social Welfare Society, P.O. Tezpur, Dist. Sonitpur, Assam	Sonitpur	9859128781	eightbrotherssocial@gmail.com
15	North East Rural Welfare Society, Doboka, Ward no. 10, Hojai, Nagaon - 782440	Nagaon	7002516124	nerws.doboka@gmail.com
16	North East Buddhist Cultural Association, Niz Kadamoni, P.O. Boiragimath, Dibrugarh	Dibrugarh	9435085305	nebca@nebca.info
17	North East Buddhist Cultural Association, Niz Kadamoni, P.O. Boiragimath, Dibrugarh	Tinsukia	9435085306	nebca@nebca.info
18	Gram Vikash Parishad, Aminpatty, R D M Road, Nagaon, Assam - 782001	Sibsagar	9535060538	gramvikasparishad@gmail.com
19	Gram Vikash Parishad, Aminpatty, R D M Road, Nagaon, Assam - 782001	Jorhat	9535060538	gramvikasparishad@gmail.com
20	Dikrong Valley Environment & Rural Society, House no. 1, Barpathar, P.O. Gosaibari, Lakhimpur - 787033	Lakhimpur	7896737965, 9435384909	dikrongvalley11@gmail.com
21	Barak Valley Welfare Development Society (NGO) Ramkrishna Mission Road, Silchar, Dist Cachar - 788007	Cachar	8876309650	barakvalleyngo@gmail.com
22	WODWICHEE, P.O. Lakhshirbond, Dist. Hailakandi - 788155	Hailakandi	9435079461	wodwichee@gmail.com
23	Dhula Regional Physically Handicapped Development Association, P.O. Dhula, District - Darrang	Darrang	7002410772, 9854201492	drphda.alam@gmail.com


 15-10-18
 Deputy Director
 State of Social Welfare
 Assam, Guwahati-1

Director
 Social Welfare, Assam

Annexure IV

Key Informant Interview

Name of the Organisation:

Address:

Contact Details:

Email:

Date of visit:

Name of Respondent:

Designation:

Respondent's professional specialisation and nature of work :

Violence against residents, causes and consequences :

Professional support to the respondent :

Observations :

Date of visit :

Annexure V

In-Depth-Interview

Marital Status:

Education:

Religion:

Native Place:

Caste:

What brought them to the shelter home :

Experiences of early weeks/months at shelter home :

Life at the Shelter Home :

A typical day :

Infrastructure :

Meals and Nutrition Clothing :

Staff and services provided :

Medical Facilities :

Legal Services :

Counselling :

Education/skill development :

Visit by officials and NGO members :

Other Experiences :

Contact with family :

Children :

Miscellaneous :

Observations :

Annexure VI

Focus Group Discussion

FGD Conducted with :

Total Participants Present :

Age Group of Participants :

Educational Qualification of Participants :

Marital Status :

Religion of the Participants :

Caste of Participants :

Type of Employment of Participants :

Participants response on the topic of 'Violence Against Women' :

Participants' knowledge on Shelter Homes for Women Survivors of Violence :

Participants' knowledge of the facilities provided by Shelter Home :

Observations by Field Investigators :

Action Taken Up By Field Researchers, if any :

ACRONYMS

AIDS	Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome
ANM	Auxiliary Nurse Midwife
ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
BTAD	Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District
CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women
CDPO	Child Development Project Officer
CHC	Community Health Centre
DCPO	District Child Protection Officer
DSWO	District Social Welfare Officer
DV	Domestic Violence
FIR	First Information Report
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GHIPCO	Global Health Immunization and Population Control
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GOI	Government of India
GMK	Gramin Mahila Kendra
GP	Gram Panchayat
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
HRLN	Human Rights Law Network
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Scheme
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Right
IGSSS	Indo-Global Social Service Society
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
INR	Indian Rupee
IPC	Indian Penal Code
KII	Key Informant Interview
LBT	Lesbian Bisexual Transgender
LCN	Lam-lynti Chittara Neralu
NCRB	National Crime Records Bureau
NEN	North East Network
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NRC	National Registry of Citizens
NULM	National Urban Livelihood Mission
O&M	Operations & Maintenance
OSCC	One Stop Crisis Centre
POCSO	Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act
PDS	Public Distribution Scheme
PHC	Primary Health Centre
PWDV	Protection of Women from Domestic Violence
SH	Shelter Home
SSH	Short Stay Homes
SUH	Shelter for Urban Homes
SWD	Social Welfare Department
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VAW	Violence against Women

