

“Nowhere to Sleep Safe”: Impact of Sexual Violence on Homeless Women in India

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Homelessness is globally acknowledged as a social evil. However, it is more prevalent and evident in low and low-middle-income countries like Nigeria, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, and so on. More than 150 million (2% of the total population) are homeless globally, with 1.6 billion lacking adequate housing.¹ For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines homeless households as those

...households without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in any other space, on a more or less random basis.²

This definition is primarily an “accommodation-oriented” definition. At par with this definition, the Census of India (2001) defines the homeless as those households “who do not live in buildings or census houses but live in the open on roadside, pavements, in Hume pipes, under flyovers and staircases, or in the open in places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms, etc.”

According to the Census 2011, India has 1.77 million homeless, accounting for 0.15% of the total population,³ which some researchers consider to be under-reporting “due to the lacunae in enumeration.”⁴ The number of homeless people is highest in the metro cities of Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Mumbai, respectively. Women make up 10% of this population.⁵

Why the “Homemakers” Are Out of “Home”?—Causes of Homelessness Among Women in India

Forced Migration

Women form most of the migrant population in India. According to National Sample Service Office, 80% of the total internal migrants are female (70.7% as per Census

2001). Earlier research has consistently highlighted women’s migration as dependents or associational migrants.⁶ Marriage remains the predominant factor for women to migrate. According to the Census (2001), 65% of women’s migratory movements are because of marriage.⁶ However, other socio-economic reasons are also gaining importance. Like men, forced migration happens within the female population due to natural disasters, land acquisitions for industrialization, and agricultural crises. Ninety percent of these migrant women labors are employed in the informal sector—“in agriculture and allied activities, construction, transport, mining, domestic work, manufacturing, small and medium enterprises—as contractual labour.”⁷ According to a Unesco-Unicef report, *Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India, 2013*, women migrant laborers remain highly exploited, sexually and socio-economically with discrimination in pay, health care, housing, and so on, in comparison to their male counterparts.⁷

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence increase women’s vulnerability to homelessness. In a multicountry study on women’s health and domestic violence against women, WHO conceptualized that

domestic violence is not simply an argument. It is a pattern of coercive controls that one person exercises over another. Abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, emotional insults and economic deprivation as a way to dominate their victims and get their way.⁸

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The perpetrators can be parents, siblings, husbands, children, and in-laws. The culture of silencing domestic violence nurtures and protects the practice within India's patriarchal power process. Despite laws against domestic violence (for example, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005), instead of standing up against it, many women are forced to live with the perpetrators or flight from the situation.⁸ Without adequate social support, economic empowerment, and accessibility to affordable housing, many women end up homeless.

Mental Illness

Homelessness and mental illness are unquestionably linked, becoming an antecedent to the other.⁹ It becomes difficult for one to break the cycle once they enter it. For women, the challenge is excruciatingly more complex. In India, where mental health is stigmatized, women's mental health is mainly overlooked. Ignorance, apathy, and stigma around the same make it difficult for women within the patriarchal system to opt for timely mental health intervention.

Consequently, women with mental distress, diagnosed or not, often end up on the streets homeless. If they wander off the home as a symptom of their poor mental health, restitutions become a challenge for service providers. As Moorkath et al¹⁰ pointed out,

In a country like India, it is not acceptable as a social norm for women to wander around the streets. Hence, the homeless women are invisible, and in case of those who with mental illness had wandered for a period, the family rarely accept them back to the home... (p. 477).

Being Hunted Sexually: Life on City Streets

Life on the streets is meant to be harsh. Apart from suffering from a lack of shelter, food, clothing, health care, and jobs, all the necessary amenities of life, the homeless population survive extreme forms of dehumanization and humiliation. Homeless people are particularly vulnerable to being physically assaulted by community members, police, and goons.⁵ Inaccessibility to structural reforms, policies, and laws, the homeless individuals are failed at the systemic level. Lack of adequate information, knowledge, identity proof, and means often make them not eligible to access the schemes introduced by the government for their aid. However, among all these forms of violence that the homeless population are victims of, homeless women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence.

Violence against women helps society to maintain unequal power distribution. Sexual violence against women is a crime of control, colored by male entitlement, shaped by the patriarchal power processes. Women, within the home, are property to the father or the husband.¹¹ In its absence, she is none's property, not to be protected by any, not

safeguarding any family "honor" and therefore an easy and accessible target for sexual predators. A survey conducted in 2018 among global experts about the factors that make a country unsafe found India the most dangerous country for women based on sexual violence.¹² It is no surprise that the country, its nooks and corners, and the city streets are equally, if not more dangerous, for homeless women.

Types of violence experienced by the homeless women on the streets range from being sexually harassed to being molested, raped by strangers or fellow homeless men, to gang rape. In Delhi, in November 2018, a 2-year-old homeless girl child was kidnapped from the side of her sleeping mother, raped, and then left on the railway tracks to die.¹³ A 20-year-old homeless woman was found in a disheveled condition, wandering at a park in South Delhi in September 2019. When approached by the locals, the girl confided that she had been gang-raped by 2 vagabonds.¹⁴ In August 2020, while the whole nation was struggling with the first wave of the pandemic, a homeless woman in Karnataka was murdered by a man who later raped her dead body. The incident was captured on CCTV.¹⁵ Abandoned by her husband, a 32-year-old woman was forced out of her home to live on the streets of Mumbai. She was raped and brutally murdered by a 45-year-old homeless man.¹⁶ In November 2021, a 16-year-old homeless girl reported to the police that she had been raped and gang-raped by numerous men. While it was challenging to identify the exact number, the girl identified at least 25 of them.¹⁷

Case Study I

Ms N, originally from Bangladesh, was orphaned at 3. She was growing up at her grandparents' house. She was repeatedly raped there by her uncle. She did not know who to ask for help. So to escape that, she ran away from home at 13. Though she left home hoping to live life according to her terms, living on the streets was far from what she could hardly imagine. On her very first night on the railway platform of Dhaka, a stranger approached her to go to a hotel with him. However, when the man found patrolling police officers coming toward them, he left the place. That was just the beginning of the life that was lying ahead, shaped by multiple sexual abuses and pregnancy as a result of that. After delivering her child in a missionary hospital, she gave her away for adoption. Still homeless, she became the victim of human trafficking and found herself in prostitution on the other side of the border in New Delhi. Mere luck paved her way from there to Kolkata, where she was rescued from the streets by an NGO in 2019.

Now, these are not sporadic incidents. It is just a few of the incidents that received some stray media attention, were published by the press, and got some legal solicitation. Whether living alone or with family, daytime or night, every

moment is fraught with danger for homeless women. The victims can be of all ages. Homeless girl children, and homeless women with mental illnesses are particularly vulnerable.

Case Study 2

Mrs S got diagnosed with Schizophrenia in her teenage. She was taken to a faith healer because she was still afraid of “ghosts harming her” as a primary treatment course. But her distress intensified and was beyond the control of her caregivers. She started wandering away from home; treatment from a general physician was sought. He referred them to a psychiatrist. With treatment, she started faring well. However, she would relapse at times. Marriage is widely considered a solution to many problems, including mental distress within the sociocultural framework of Indian patriarchal practices. She, too, got married off. However, her in-laws were adequately aware of Mrs S’s medical condition, and treatment continued after her marriage. Seeking the faith healer’s help continued alongside. After 1 year of marriage, Mrs S gave birth to a girl child. She continued relapsing episodically. It was during this time her treatment was discontinued. She started coming out of the house in an unkempt manner often. Initially, the husband would get her back home, but eventually, he stopped. She started living on the streets, sleeping under a flyover or on the local railway platform. While she began learning the strategies for surviving a life of homelessness, she was helpless when the protectors became perpetrators. Her mental health condition made her more vulnerable on the streets. On multiple occasions, she was raped on the streets by the police.

Being Creative: Strategies to Survive the City Streets

Homeless women adopt various strategies to keep themselves safe from being sexually assaulted. Gandhi¹⁸ identified that

As a strategy to protect themselves, many of these women, who had left their husbands’ homes and arrived in the old part of the city to find work, got into relationships with men who offered to marry and “protect” them from the streets. This was an acceptable and convenient arrangement for both, as they found a partner to take care of and be cared for while in a difficult situation (p. 152).

The women starts living with a fellow homeless man not because they are in love or want to create a new life afresh. Instead, they choose between being repeatedly abused by the same person or a different person every day.¹⁹

Staying awake most of the night or not using the public toilets at night are some basic rules to be followed. Staying in a crowded place like railway platforms or marketplaces often makes them feel safer. For some homeless women, not maintaining hygiene and staying in ragged clothes is often a strategy to keep themselves safe from falling prey to repeated sexual assaults in the streets.

The Way Forward: Is There Any Way Out?

The homeless population are one of the most vulnerable, stereotyped against, and systematically marginalized populations in society. Being a homeless woman increases that struggle exuberantly in a patriarchal society. Even with societal representation, victims of sexual violence face multiple obstacles in getting their voices heard. Fear of being maligned, victim-blaming, lack of familial support, and apathy at a systemic level are just a few of the fundamental barriers one faces. Without any social support, financial empowerment, or accessibility to information and resources, these barriers intensify manifold for homeless women.

At a structural level, India does not have a mechanism to support homeless women, proactively keeping them safe. One waits for a crime to happen, and then on infrequent occasions, if it gets attended to by the stakeholders, a discourse initiates around it. But, in most of these cases, it is all futile. Even if a report could be lodged against the crime, the course of justice is something they hardly can trade alone. With difficulties in accessing support services, including victim compensation and witness protection, and legal representation, it becomes an impossible battle for them even to start to fight, let alone win.

Policies are already in place for providing systemic and structural support to homeless women. According to the Supreme Court guidelines, “cities with a population of more than 5 lakh should have homeless shelters for 100 persons and one shelter per one lakh population.”¹⁹ Unfortunately, functional shelter-houses with safe provisions for homeless women are hard to find even in metro cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, or Kolkata. The stakeholders need to realize that making policies is not the goal. Bringing those policies into action needs to be done. Affordable housing is a fundamental need, not a luxury.

The rape laws of the country have seen significant changes following the Delhi rape case of 2012.²⁰ But the situation has not improved for homeless women in the last decade. While these laws are to seek justice following a crime is done against a woman, our focus should be more on preventing the crime from happening. India is a patriarchal society. It has been so for centuries, and we cannot change that overnight. However, we can make the community a safer place for its residents. The streets are not residential. We cannot make it crime-proof. But we can make provisions for accessible shelters, financial empowerment, and legal provisions so that women do not end up on the streets. After all, prevention is still better than cure!

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