

Analysing ‘Emergency Response’: A Basic Assessment of Helplines in India

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This commentary has been written to disseminate the findings published in Swabhimaan’s latest edition. Click [here](#) to access the edition. Swabhimaan, as a Centre for New Economics Studies initiative, is based on exploring the intersectionality of gender across the discourse of development studies, social policy, and entrepreneurship. The team engage with narratives of individuals who are bridging gaps in societal expectations of gendered identities, highlighting their value creation process, as an expression of their creativity, with an objective to highlight hitherto under-represented voices in the mainstream discourse. Click [here](#) to review its work.

Helplines, established through different state initiatives, have through the years expanded their reach to implement a speedy assistance mechanism for swift emergency redressal. They play a diverse role in assisting women and gendered minorities through the provision of counselling, emotional assistance, information, guidance and referrals.

Still, in a nation packed with a rich kaleidoscopic base of cultural and ethnic diversity, establishing an efficient helpline tests the skills and policy frameworks designed by the state. What one often finds is a large volume or stack of data in files at the office of a ministry, holding the hopes of those looking for emergency assistance.

Helplines, while designed as an emergency-based redressal mechanism, may subsequently remain even less accessible to those who need it the most.

As with other public emergencies and disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in gender-based violence. Domestic violence had significantly increased worldwide as more women were being coerced into living with their offenders. Even

though a disaster does not 'select' who would be worst affected, certain individuals are more vulnerable than others due to the fragile socio-ecological systems and social stratification.

As a result, during times of lockdown, the need for domestic violence helplines increased significantly, making them an increasingly important source of assistance for survivors. Virtual support offered by DA helplines (including call, text, webchat and email services) became an increasingly important avenue for victim support in the context of lockdown and the ensuing effects on the economy, the working environment and social arrangements, in the absence of access to previously available face-to-face or community-based support services.

Systemic violations

According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, there are currently more than 52 helplines active throughout the nation. To accept reports of domestic violence during the lockdown, the National Commission of Women (NCW) has started using the WhatsApp number 7217735372. This complements already-existing emails, online forms and communication via Facebook and Twitter.

There are helpline numbers accessible for 24/7 counselling services, rescue efforts and shelter homes. Many successful interventions have taken place, and thousands of women have used these services to ask for assistance. These procedures, however, might not be adequate given the obstacles to reporting that have led to blatant underreporting. Primary constraints include a lack of money and technology, as well as tight limitations on mobility.

After the lockdown, Oxfam India's lead specialist for gender justice Amita Pitre explained that the organisation's first action was to compile a list of all of the helplines and counsellors' contact information nationwide as well as the locations where Oxfam India operates. They then verified each entry twice to make sure it was operational.

In the absence of a single national helpline number, Pitre talked about the challenges of promoting helplines and creating awareness. It becomes increasingly apparent that civil society organisations carried out micro-level awareness-raising for helplines as opposed to doing so through mainstream media campaigns on television, radio and newspapers, which had its own limitations in terms of resource constraints and bureaucratic censorship.

A mental health crisis was another catastrophe that developed concurrently with domestic violence.

After disregarding hundreds of cases, the Modi government finally acknowledged the necessity for a reliable, round-the-clock helpline for suicide prevention and introduced KIRAN, a hotline for mental health rehabilitation that is available in 13 different languages.

Even more distressing is the fact that only Rs 5 crore of the allocated funds were actually used in the fiscal years 2018 and 2019 – representing a reduction of Rs 10 crore from the prior year’s allocation of just Rs 40 crore for mental health. In order to put this into perspective, a research published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry, projected that it would cost Rs 94,073 crore to execute the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017.

Another issue is related to the lack of internal capacity development among those answering calls from survivors. Most therapists were trained for in-person sessions rather than online counseling. Some therapists were obliged to urge women to visit them once the lockdown was over due to a lack of available services; more challenging problems, such as educating them about their rights and where to find resources, proved to be more challenging.

This is since many of these organisations have a small staff, with only a couple of employees handling calls from across the nation. Most helplines also lack professional therapists. Young, college-bound volunteers and psychology students typically take on the task of running the helplines after completing a brief training, and they may lack experience and knowledge when dealing with customers in extremely traumatic situations. Employees with inadequate training may come out as condescending.

A lot needs to be still done in improving and decentralising emergency response infrastructure in/across India. States also need support from the Centre for financing needs.

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