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4 THE CITY

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Mumbai's homeless women need more than just a roof

Amid social stigma, vulnerability to violence and exploitation, lack of access to clean, safe toilets and the struggle to care for their children, the problems faced by homeless women in Mumbai are varied and complex

ZEESHAN SHAIKH
MUMBAI, MARCH 8

FOR THE past two weeks, Tina Bhosale, 37, has been living in the open beneath the sprawling overhang of a massive flyover in Seawoods, just steps away from one of Navi Mumbai's most upscale malls. She has been searching for work to support her two children back home in Wardha district's Sarwadi village. Forced to leave the village after her husband took his life in 2022 due to farm distress, Tina moved to Mumbai in search of a better future. She is one of the thousands of migrants who come to the city daily, hoping to escape hardship and build a brighter life.

For many residents of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, Tina's presence — a stark reminder of poverty — sparks frustration and reinforces stereotypes that associate those living on the streets with crime, solidifying the belief that homelessness is a result of personal failure. However, urban homeless like Tina are often victims of systemic issues such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, and mental health challenges, with single women like her being particularly vulnerable.

As the world celebrates International Women's Day on March 8, acknowledging the progress made in women's rights and gender equality, countless homeless women like her continue to face challenges every day. Among the most vulnerable, their hardships are compounded by their gender. From lack of safety and basic sanitation to being vulnerable to violence and exploitation, these women face systemic barriers that make their survival a daily battle.

"Living as a homeless person is a deeply humiliating experience. It strips away my dignity every single day. I have no other choice. All I can do is hope that I find a job soon, preferably as a housekeeper, so I can secure a better future for my two children back home," she says.

Who are the homeless?

Globally, an estimated 1 billion people are homeless. The United Nations (UN) defines homelessness not only as living on the streets or in shelters, but also as lacking adequate housing that meets basic health and social development standards.

In India, the Census defines homeless households as those that do not reside in buildings or Census-designated homes, but instead live in the open, on road-



This flyover in Seawoods serves as a 'home' for the homeless. Amit Chakravarty

sides, pavements, underflyovers, in-hume-pipes, staircases, or public spaces like places of worship, mandaps, and railway platforms.

There is a common misconception that everyone living on the streets is destitute. However, this is far from the reality. While some may resort to begging to survive, most homeless individuals are there due to a range of socio-economic factors, including lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, family breakdown, and migration from rural areas in search of better opportunities.

Many, including women, children and the elderly, work in informal sectors like street vending, daily-wage labour, or as domestic workers. Studies, however, show that unlike popular perception there is considerable contribution of the homeless population in economic activities. Government data shows that the work participation rate among the homeless population is about 52 per cent, which is higher than the national average.

The 2011 Census of India recorded 57,416 individuals as homeless in Mumbai, with just 2,275 identified as beggars, constituting less than 4 per cent of the total homeless population. However, activists argue that these figures are significantly underreported, and the true number of homeless individuals on the streets is far higher than the statistics suggest.

These figures, however, do not capture the full extent of women living on the streets. While the number of women is substan-

tially lower than men, many women end up on the streets for a variety of reasons. Some are part of families who migrate to Mumbai from rural Maharashtra and beyond in search of better job prospects, only to be forced into homelessness.

Another large group of women living on the streets is those suffering from mental health issues or substance abuse, which further marginalise them. These conditions make it even more difficult for them to find stable work or housing.

Sasarkala Kale's situation is one such example. Driven by poverty and economic hardship, she resorts to begging on the streets of Mumbai. Sasarkala, in her 50s, travels to Mumbai regularly to earn money to care for her son, who suffers from a serious stomach ailment, back home in Akola. "I have no one left other than my son, who suffers from a stomach ailment. I frequently come to Mumbai and beg to make some money," she says.

Problems faced by homeless women

Urban homeless individuals, in general, face a range of multifaceted challenges that are often compounded by their gender. The most pressing concern is the lack of safe spaces and vulnerability to violence. Homeless women in Mumbai are at a higher risk of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, assault, and exploitation. The absence of secure shelters or safe spaces for women increases their vulnera-

bility, especially at night or in secluded areas.

Another major concern is the lack of privacy and the constant fear of being assaulted, particularly in public spaces like railway stations or parks. Access to clean, safe bathrooms is a significant issue for homeless women. Public toilets remain unsafe, especially at night, and many women avoid using them due to the fear of harassment or assault.

"There is no access to toilets or bathrooms. Most of the women relieve themselves on the railway tracks. It is very humiliating to do this, including bathing in the open, knowing that eyes are gazing at you," says Seema Pawar, a 23-year-old from Wardha. She stays on the streets with her husband who works in a catering firm in Mumbai.

Another major problem is the challenge of women struggling to care for their children while managing their own survival needs. The threat of child trafficking, abuse, and neglect is higher in homeless situations, as children are more vulnerable to exploitation and violence in urban spaces.

The biggest fear, however, is sexual exploitation. Homeless women, especially young women, are at heightened risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and forced prostitution due to their lack of protection and resources.

How does the state address the issue of urban homelessness?

Addressing urban homeless-

ness in Mumbai requires a multifaceted approach, given the city's size, complexity, and the diverse needs of homeless individuals. As per a Supreme Court directive, the Indian state is responsible for providing shelter equipped with essential services to the urban homeless. In the megacity with a population of over 1.25 crore, the state claims there are only 57,416 homeless citizens in the city. The BMC, on paper, claims to fund 23 shelter homes across Mumbai, which can accommodate no more than 740 people.

Need for policy change: activists' demands

While building shelter homes and creating affordable housing networks are seen as ways to address the issue of homelessness, activists claim the structural causes of homelessness need to be addressed first. Additionally, programmes offering training and skill development to homeless individuals are needed to enable them to access stable employment.

Maharashtra, as of now, does not have government-run support initiatives for the destitute. However, states like Bihar have successfully managed to run social welfare schemes like the Mukhya Mantri Bhikshavriti Nivaran Yojna (MBNY), with the primary aim of rehabilitating destitutes and providing them with alternative livelihoods.

The scheme provides financial assistance of Rs 10,000 to individuals to help them start their own businesses. Unlike other states, Bihar also runs a Kitchen Basera initiative, where destitute families are offered shelter for a limited time.

The absence of such social welfare schemes in Maharashtra means that the plight of the homeless continues in the state. While government schemes designed to address the needs of destitutes are underfunded, inadequately implemented, and do not properly address the root causes of homelessness. The problem is further compounded for homeless women, who face unique barriers to accessing government schemes that primarily focus on general homelessness without considering gender-specific needs. Activists and advocates argue for a gender-sensitive approach to addressing homelessness, with policies and services designed to meet the specific challenges faced by homeless women.

The fact that they do not constitute an influential lobby group means that women like Tina Pawar find themselves left out of the government support network that is intended to aid the homeless population.

Interestingly, even though a large number of the homeless are families, there are no shelter options for entire families. Families

'Targeted initiatives needed to break cycle of invisibility, neglect faced by homeless women'

HOMELESS WOMEN are often left out of critical social welfare programmes, says **MOHAMMED TARIQUE**, founder of Koshish Trust, which works for the protection and promotion of the rights and dignity of homeless and destitute citizens. In an interview with **ZEESHAN SHAIKH**, Tarique — who is also a member of the Supreme Court Monitoring Committee on Shelters for Urban Homeless — sheds light on the grave issues faced by homeless women and the lack of government policies that address their specific concerns.



Mohammed Tarique

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has termed homelessness a global human rights violation. Based on your extensive work, how would you describe the status of homeless women?

Homeless women face greater marginalisation even within marginalised homeless communities. They live under the constant threat of violence and exploitation, yet they remain largely invisible in public discourse. Their suffering rarely enters the mainstream conversation unless a tragic event draws temporary attention. Unfortunately, this invisibility is short-lived, and they soon fade from public consciousness again. This cycle of being forgotten is part of the tragedy they face daily.

Women's issues in general are underrepresented, and they are more so for homeless women. They have fewer opportunities to access crucial services, whether legal, healthcare, or social support. This invisibility means they are deprived of opportunities for safety, recovery, and empowerment.

How do the challenges of homelessness differ for women compared to men?

The issues faced by homeless women are distinct and significantly more complex than those faced by men. A major concern is the lack of women-centered services. Homeless women frequently deal with mental health conditions which are often the result of constant abuse and hostility they face for being homeless. Their vulnerability to violence — whether they live alone or with their family — is much higher.

Women's financial dependence and unsafe living conditions often place them in manipulative and abusive situations. They are also forced to confront social stigma, which only adds to their marginalisation. Homeless women face exploitation in ways that their male counterparts of-

ten do not, making their situation particularly dire.

How has the state addressed the concerns of homeless women?

Homeless women are largely absent from public policy discussions. Their needs are only acknowledged when something tragic happens, and even then, the response is typically tokenistic. For example, when the government discusses women's safety or empowerment, homeless women are almost never included in these initiatives. Programmes intended for pregnant women, lactating mothers, or young girls often overlook homeless women, leaving them excluded from essential support systems.

Take the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programmes, for example. These schemes do not account for homeless women, which means they are entirely left out of critical social welfare programmes. This exclusion perpetuates the cycle of invisibility and neglect.

What steps should the government and society take to address the unique challenges faced by homeless women?

First and foremost, we need a comprehensive, gender-sensitive legal framework. The laws that are currently in place should be non-judgmental and free from any stigma toward women who are homeless.

Additionally, there needs to be a fundamental shift in how society views homelessness — especially its root causes, such as gender-based violence, financial dependency, and systemic inequality. Public awareness and societal sensitisation are critical in this regard.

We must also push for the establishment of more accessible shelters and support services tailored specifically to the needs of homeless women, ensuring they are provided with the necessary safety, dignity, and care to begin rebuilding their lives. We need to see them as human beings.