

An Evaluative Study of the Nari Niketan (Short Stay Home for Women) at Chandigarh

Abstract

This paper attempts to carry out evaluation of the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh. It struggles to identify the reasons which made the women take shelter in the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh. It further evaluates the objectives as stated by the Ministry of Women and Child Development; in terms of: facilities/provisions made available to inmates, vocational skills provided to the inmates and efforts towards their rehabilitation by the Nari Niketan.

Keywords: Nari Niketan, Swadhar, Mentally Challenged, Sexually Exploited.

Introduction

Shelter is the basic component of government's objective towards catering to the needs of destitute women. At times when families fail to respond to the needs of women in difficult circumstances due to reasons ranging from economic instability of the family, institutions like Nari Niketans become significant. Covered under 'Swadhar' scheme, they are established to cater to the requirement of various types of women in distress in diverse situations under different conditions. The scheme purports to address the specific vulnerability of each of group of women in difficult circumstances through a Home-based holistic and integrated approach. The implementing agencies can be the Social Welfare/Women and Child Welfare Department of State Government, Women's Development Corporations, Urban Local Bodies, reputed Public/Private Trust or Voluntary Organizations who are willing to take up the responsibility of rehabilitating such women.

The objectives of the 'Swadhar' (Nari Niketan) scheme¹ are: To provide primary need of shelter, food, clothing and care to the marginalized women/girls living in difficult circumstances who are without any social and economic support; to provide emotional support and counseling to such women; to rehabilitate them socially and economically through education, awareness, skill up gradation and personality development through behavioral training etc.; to arrange for specific clinical, legal and other support for women/girls in need of those intervention by linking and networking with other organizations in both governmental and non-governmental sector on case to case basis; to provide for help line or other facilities to such women in distress; and to provide such other services as will be required for the support and rehabilitation to such women in distress.

This study has focused upon an evaluation of Nari Niketan situated at Chandigarh with respect to its effectiveness from the perspectives of beneficiaries and officials at the Nari Niketan. The overall objective of the study is to critically evaluate the reasons which make women take shelter in Nari Niketan. It further evaluates the implementation of the Scheme in terms of: facilities made available to inmates; vocational and other skills provided to the inmates; and efforts towards their rehabilitation.

In order to meet the aforesaid objectives of the present study, information on a number of parameters relating to planning and implementation of the Scheme, functioning of the Nari Niketan, the quality of delivery of services, and experiences of beneficiaries were collected. The primary data were obtained with the help of personal interviews with the functionaries, beneficiaries, NGOs and other representatives. Before proceeding further, it is significant to know the status of Nari Niketan at Chandigarh.

Nari Niketan at Chandigarh

The Nari Niketan at Chandigarh is run by Women and Child Welfare Department, Chandigarh. It has been set up to provide shelter and



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protection to destitute women in difficult circumstances for motivation of better life by way of earning income. The Nari Niketan has a double story building which includes office of the Superintendent and within campus residential accommodation. There are two dormitories for inmates, each having a provision of eight beds. The inmates whose mental condition is normal stay at the ground floor, whereas the mentally challenged inmates stay on the first floor. First floor has a completely separate locking system and many a times the mentally challenged inmates are not allowed to come down. The first floor also has a pooja room, craft room and dining hall. The premise is well maintained and looks pleasant. However, the pleasant surroundings, notwithstanding, the grills and bars on windows and the doors remind one of a jail.

There was a provision for 25-30 inmates who can be accommodated easily. Presently there were ten inmates at the Home. Attempts have been made by the Nari Niketan to provide the inmates with the basic inputs necessary to ensure their empowerment. Education facility was also provided to the children of the inmates. The Nari Niketan is regularly visited by the doctors from sector sixteen and thirty two General Hospitals and PGI, Chandigarh. With the result doctors keep on changing frequently. Besides this, a mobile medical van from General Hospital Sector sixteen also comes once in a month. Medical checkup of the inmates is done either in the television room or dormitory. It was told by the doctor that free tonics and vitamins are given to the inmates. However, there was no provision of outings for the inmates. There was also no provision of special food for children. Many of the staff members are not regular and appointed on ad-hoc basis. This leads to unorganized work as sometimes a single person ends up doing many works haphazardly. Chandigarh had women population of 474,787 according to Census 2011 with the city having 98.58 rate of crime against women with 456 total incidences reported in 2013. However, there is only one Nari Niketan in the district.

Socio-Economic Profile of the Inmates

The socio-economic profile of the inmates is significant as it enables reader to understand the background and circumstances which drives women to take shelter in Nari Niketans. It is also crucial to interpret data in a more generalized manner.

In total, ten inmates were found to be residing at the Nari Niketan in Chandigarh during the time of survey. Out of ten, seven of them were mentally challenged. Out of ten, two inmates were below 18 years of age. Three of them were between 18-25 years and the rest five were between 26-40 years of age. The above mentioned figures clearly show that the women are more prone to difficult circumstances, which willingly or un-willingly force them to leave their households and take shelter at Nari Niketans. Besides this, all ten inmates at Chandigarh Nari Niketan belonged to Hindu religion as per records as well as informed by the inmates and the officials. Out of ten, three inmates belonged to General Category, while two belonged to SC Category and the rest five did not know about their caste.

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Women inequality persists in the rural and urban societies. In Chandigarh Nari Niketan, among ten inmates, one inmate belonged to urban while two had rural background. Seven inmates had no idea about their rural-urban background. While discussing marital status of the inmates, it was found that, Out of ten, two inmates were never married; six were deserted by their families while two had no idea of their marital status due to their disturbed mental condition.

We often presume that joint family structure is the most suitable element of Indian society. But these days joint family systems are collapsing due to independent way of life. Out of ten, three inmates lived in a nuclear family, five lived in a joint family and two lived in an extended family. It was observed that if the women are mentally retarded, it really doesn't matter to which family structure they belong to. Life becomes difficult for inmates living with children. In Chandigarh Nari Niketan, two inmates had one child each and one inmate had two children. All these children were staying with their mothers at the Nari Niketan.

We generally argue that women who are illiterate and unaware of their rights are more prone to atrocities, especially within a family structure. We may also link it to the fact that once destitute, educated/qualified women stand more chance to earn their livelihood, even if a meager amount, to sustain. On the other hand women who are illiterate or less educated remain with no other option but to search for a support. In Chandigarh Nari Niketan, six inmates were illiterate; one each was semi literate, below matriculate and matriculate; while one had completed her graduation. If we see the economic status of the inmates, nine out of ten inmates belonged to poor economic strata while one belonged to the lower middle strata. It is important to study the socio-economic background of the inmates to analyse the circumstances of the inmates.

Analysis of the Circumstances

Circumstances play an important role towards violence against women. Out of ten, eight inmates were found abandoned by police and later sent to Nari Niketan either by the Court or DC orders. The rest two were deserted by their families. Seven inmates were mentally challenged and so it may be argued that they might have been abandoned as mentally challenged women are considered as additional liability by their families, especially by those who are economically not so sound. One of the inmates with stable state of mind refused to tell anything about her family to the Nari Niketan officials as she feared that if they come to know about them, they will certainly send her back. When asked why she did not disclose it, she informed that she was sexually exploited at her own home and so she doesn't want to live the same life again. She also told that she was happy staying here. She was lodged there since one year. Five out of ten inmates were interviewed. The details of the interviewed inmates is given below. In order to keep the privacy of inmates their names have been changed.

Poonam was sixteen and a half years old. She was married and belonged to Pipliwala Mohalla in

Mani Majra. She came from a nuclear family and had completed her matriculation. Her father was an auto-rickshaw driver and mother a house-wife. Her brother was elder to her and was studying in college. She was lodged at the Nari Niketan for one and a half years. She wanted to convey a message to all her friends that they must listen to their parents as they have experience of life and are always right while taking decisions. Leela was from Nepal. She belonged to a joint family structure. She was thirty one years old and found abandoned by the police. She was found carrying two children, about one year old son and a newly born daughter. She was mentally challenged, neither she understood anything nor could she respond. Niana was another mentally challenged inmate and not much was known about her. She did not remember her caste and other family details. She was illiterate. She must have been around twenty-five years of age when she came to the Nari Niketan. She would often talk and call people by different names but was not clear. So, it was ascertained by the staff of the Nari Niketan that she belonged to an extended family. Superintendent informed that before coming here, she was lodged in Mother Teresa Home at Sector- 23 Chandigarh. She was found abandoned by police who dropped her at Mother Teresa Home. She stayed there for two or three days before police produced her to the Sub-Divisional Magistrate's Court. She was referred to the Nari Niketan by the Sub Divisional Magistrate (South). She came to the Nari Niketan on December 6th, 2010. Neeta was an eighteen year old inmate. She belonged to an upper caste Hindu family. When asked, she told that her parents had died many years ago. She lived in a nuclear family at her village. She was never married. She had studied up to 8th standard and after death of her parents she could not pursue her studies further. Deepa was twenty eight years old. She was a graduate in Psychology and also possessed a diploma in computers. She was from the capital city of Patna, Bihar and belonged to a SC Hindu nuclear family. She was married in Haridwar and her husband was working in Baddi. Superintendent of the Nari Niketan informed that she was abandoned by her husband. She was a victim of domestic violence at home. She neither complained to police nor informed her parents.

Apart from interviewing inmates, functionaries were also interviewed to get the complete information about the working of Nari Niketan.

Opinions of the Functionaries

Mrs. Naval was Honorary Director of Nari Niketan. She told that there were no fixed timings of her visit but she makes sure to spend at least two hours with the inmates and listen to their problems. She believed that music and meditation could de-stress the inmates. She further informed that they celebrated birthdays of all the inmates. She also told that there was no executive committee at the Nari Niketan. According to her, craft, music and beauty culture training were taught at the Home. She was awarded with the 'Stree Shakti Award' in 2011. Ms. Deepika was Superintendent of the Nari Niketan. She told that there were eighteen inmates lodged at the

Nari Niketan, however, the researcher could count only ten. She told that she meets the inmates even after the office hours to discuss their problems. She further mentioned that there are always some inmates who do not adhere to the guidelines. Ms. Anu was Counselor at the Nari Niketan. She told that she comes twice a week to the Nari Niketan or according to her suitability. She told that all the inmates are heard and helped as and when required. Ms. Vimla was Case Worker at the Nari Niketan. She told that they called her Rehabilitation Officer. She said that she visited Nari Niketan daily. Ms. Binny was the Vocational Teacher at Nari Niketan. She taught beauty culture course to the inmates. She narrated that the inmates were serious to learn the course but there was lack of proper infrastructure to teach them. Dr. Savita was Doctor. She worked at Government Hospital Sector-16 and visited Nari Niketan after every fifteen days. She told that few of the inmates had gynae problems and most of them had problems related to menstruation cycle. Ms. Neeta was Cook at the Nari Niketan. She told that there were three cooks at Nari Niketan and further said that the Honorary Director herself visits and checks the quality of food every day. Ms. Vimlesh was Office Attendant at the Nari Niketan. She told that mentally challenged cases were still fine but inmates who suffer from fits or do not eat food were actually difficult to handle. She told that earlier they had a big trouble dealing with the mentally challenged inmates especially when they used washrooms. Ms. Ritu was Peon at the Nari Niketan. She complained that many a times she had paid from her pocket for official expenses but never gets reimbursement. Ms. Rani was the Constable deputed at the Nari Niketan. She suggested that only experienced constables should be posted at Nari Niketans who have experience dealing with inmates and at the same time understand their circumstances. Mr. Ram was the Gatekeeper at Nari Niketan. He told that his duty was to ensure register everyone whosoever comes in and goes out. He further reported that there was a male worker in the canteen who is allowed to enter the premises anytime he wanted to without signing the entry and exit register. After interviewing the functionaries, the same information was gathered from the inmates.

Facilities provided to the inmates

Despite having association with the Department and receiving grants from the respective Ministry, the institution has not succeeded to the fullest to spread awareness about the Nari Niketan. This should have been done in synergy with the local bodies. Among those who were aware, two of them were informed by their friends and one came to know about the Nari Niketan through an NGO. Only one inmate was aware about the existence of Nari Niketan before coming here. Two of them told that they did not have any idea about existence of any such institution. Seven of them were unable to respond. Besides this, six inmates were found to be staying at the Nari Niketan for more than three years.

Further, three inmates told that the Nari Niketan provided facilities like Clothes, TV, Music and library facilities to the inmates. When asked whether special food was served to the sick inmates, three of

them told that they do. However, seven of them could not respond. When asked if they assist in kitchen, inmates responded that none of them was allowed to enter the kitchen or assistance is expected from them. None of them gave any suggestion to improve the condition of health and nutrition in Nari Niketan.

Medical checkup of every resident is mandatory, within three days of her admission. This can be done by the part-time doctor and a proper report should be kept on record while the cases needing urgent medical attention should be referred to hospitals. When inquired, all the inmates told that the doctors regularly visited Nari Niketan. Three of them further told that the inmates get medicines from the nearest government hospital. However, three of them also informed that no Gynaecologist is available for the medical check up of the inmates. They also told that the Nari Niketan has provision of a separate room for medical check-up. They further informed that none of them were aware about provision for health facilities in the Scheme. When asked if they wanted to give any suggestion to improve the condition of medical facilities at the Nari Niketan, no suggestion was received from them. The inmates further informed that all the toiletries were provided by Nari Niketan only. Three of them also told that they are issued required toiletries as and when required and that there was no fixed day or week for it. Similarly, Nari Niketan also took care of clothing of the inmates. When asked whether they were aware about the provision for sanitation facilities at Nari Niketan, three of them did not know any such provision while seven of them were unable to respond. They did not give any suggestion to improve the sanitation facilities at the Nari Niketan.

Three inmates told that counseling services were available at the Nari Niketan. However, none of them had ever undergone any counseling session before. When asked how many times the counselor visits Nari Niketan, three of them told the Counselor came once in a week. They however told that there was no provision of a separate room for counseling. Three of them said 'yes' when asked if they found counseling useful. None of them were aware about the provision for counseling facility in the Scheme. Consequently, none of them gave any suggestion to improve the same.

Learning of vocational skills are very important for the inmates as they make them financially independent. Inmates told that Nari Niketan had provision of vocational training for the inmates. However, only three of them were learning one or the other vocational skill. The rest seven of them were not learning any skill due to their mental status. However, none of them were earning through the vocational skills. Those who were learning the skills told that vocational skills were very useful. However, none of them were aware about the provision for vocational skills in the Scheme. They did not give any suggestion to improve the condition of vocational skills at the Nari Niketan.

Recreation is an essential part of human life and finds many different forms which are shaped by individual interests and also by the surrounding social situation. A few examples of such modes of recreation

include reading, playing or listening to music, watching movies or TV, gardening, hunting, hobbies, sports and travel. All the inmates mentioned provision of television and recital of religious rhymes as the only means of recreation available to them. Three of them told that all major festivals and important events were celebrated at the Nari Niketan. No suggestion was given by the inmates to improve the condition of recreation at Nari Niketan. Inmates told that there was no provision of outings for them. They further informed that neither local nor outstation leave was given to them to visit their families. None of them gave any suggestion to improve the condition of outings. One inmate told that her family members/relatives do visit her while two of them said no one visits them. Seven inmates could not respond.

Inmates told that the Superintendent was available whenever they wanted. They also told that they do share complaints with her. They further told that they all were satisfied with the Superintendent's working. None of the inmate was facing court trial. They also informed that the Nari Niketan had no provision of a Case Worker. The inmates told that NGO members do visit them at regular intervals. Overall, it was noticed that none of the inmates was aware about the provisions regarding various facilities. A large number of them did not give any suggestions as they believed that nothing was going to change. It was observed that a lot still needs to be done to improve the living conditions and functioning of the Nari Niketan.

Critical Analysis of the Scheme

The span of stay of the inmates is fixed for a period of not more than three years. However, Nari Niketan at Chandigarh did not fulfil this criteria. The staff opined that the inmates who have crossed the prescribed time limit have no place to go and that they just can't throw them on road. Nari Niketan at Chandigarh was not adhering to this mandate. It had no provision for job placement also. During the fieldwork it was found that the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh was putting up efforts for reconciliation for the inmates. Counseling does not yield results instantly, but with time, it makes the victim determined and strong enough to deal with socio-economic challenges. Nari Niketan at Chandigarh had a Counselor. The Scheme strictly prescribes maintenance of register whereas Chandigarh Nari Niketan did not maintained complete case history of the inmates. There was no registration of some of the inmates in the register. It was observed during the fieldwork that mandatory medical checkup of every new inmate at the time of their admission at Nari Niketan was not adhered by the Chandigarh Nari Niketan. The Scheme mentions that the Nari Niketan should take custody of all the valuables owned by the inmate and issue a receipt in return bearing proper signatures and date. The above said provision was partially followed by Chandigarh Nari Niketan. No receipt was issued but the deposited valuables were noted down in a register. The Scheme states that each Nari Niketan should have an average of 30 residents at a time. The Nari Niketan at Chandigarh was suitably prepared to accommodate the desired number of inmates. The Scheme also states that,

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women facing Court proceedings are to be provided help. A Case Worker should escort them to the Court and help them with their cases. Their conveyance and other essential charges such as Court fee, stamp duty and other incidental charges like typing charge etc., are to be met by the Nari Niketan. Apart from financial assistance, police protection is to be arranged if necessary during their way to the Court and back. During the fieldwork it was found that there was no provision of a Case Worker in the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh. The desired environment suitable for the inmates was not available at the Chandigarh Nari Niketan. According to the Scheme nutritious food supplemented by other nutrients should be provided to the inmates. However, it was observed that Chandigarh Nari Niketan was partially fulfilling the above mentioned criteria. Chandigarh Nari Niketan had provision of cooks who cooked food for the inmates. The Scheme prescribes a provision of free medical facility to regain physical and mental health of the inmates. The Nari Niketan at Chandigarh provided free medical facility to the inmates. However, it did not provide supplements and vitamins to the inmates. Nari Niketan had provision of vocational skills but majority of inmates were mentally challenged and so the skills which were being taught were hardly of any use to them. It is mentioned in the mandate that each inmate must have a bank or post office account where she can deposit her earnings. No inmate had a bank account at Chandigarh Nari Niketan. The office of the Superintendent and her residence was located in the same building. The provisions of a male security guard to ensure security and sufficient number of and clean toilets were fulfilled by the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh. However, it had no facility of either indoor or outdoor games, grossly violating the Scheme and objectives behind it.

Recommendations

The Nari Niketan had most of the facilities for inmates. However, vocational skills should be matching inmates needs as many of them were mentally challenged. At the same time, the skills must be in demand in the contemporary market. It should also employ a Case Worker. The Department should also ensure that every inmate has a bank/post office account in order to enable them to have some funds of their own when they are discharged after completing their due span of stay. The Nari Niketan must come forward to ask for help and should liaison with existing community resources like training centres, public resources, employment exchanges, recreation clubs, civil hospitals and dispensaries, free legal aid cells etc to ensure maximum utilization of public resources rather than depending on the State. Outings should be promoted as it freshens up the mind. It was observed that the Nari Niketan at Chandigarh was partially adhering to the mandate of the Scheme.

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