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Adequate, Affordable, and Secure Rental Housing for Male Migrant Workers

Submitted By: ShelterSquare Foundation



Organization Profile

Organization Name: ShelterSquare Foundation

Organization Type: Civil society

Website: https://sheltersquare.org/

Practice Details

Country(ies): India

City(ies): Surat Metropolitan Area

Start Year: 2023 **Ongoing:** Yes **End Year:** N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Housing Affordability & Financing
- Rental Housing
- Housing & Informality
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion

Relevant SDGs:



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Problem & Context

India has an estimated 250 million circular migrant workers who cyclically move between their villages and work destinations (Deshingkar 2020). They face inadequate housing in urban and industrial areas due to vulnerabilities faced from informal employment, socio-cultural marginalisation, lack of political rights, and policy exclusions. Unable to access even informal ownership in slums, many turn to informal rentals or living inside industries and construction sites, where inadequacies compromise their health and well-being, livelihoods, access to welfare, and resilience to climate hazards. Housing policy and public investments neglect these crucial housing options, focusing solely on building / enabling formal, low-income ownership housing and slum improvement for informal owner residents. India's national rental housing program, launched in 2020, relies on private sector participation, but is floundering due to inadequate incentives for and poor capacities among private entities.

Solution Developed

The housing practice, piloted at Republic Hostel and Mess (RHM) in Sayan, an industrial hub in Surat metropolitan area, addresses the housing challenge for informal, circular migrant workers. RHM provides good quality, safe living facilities and food, innovating around 'efficient, worker-responsive social rental housing management' and 'bundling value-adds with rental housing for integrated community development'. Target beneficiaries are single male migrant workers. The objective is to improve workers' health and well-being, in turn improving their productivity and livelihood; create a sense of belonging; and facilitate access to services and opportunities denied to them at their work destinations. By doing this at the same 'price-point' of current informal and inadequate practices, our objective is to demonstrate what is possible given the right resources and innovative partnerships, and influence the local housing market and impact policy through demonstration, competition and collaboration. Local landlords and factory owners have already visited RHM to understand our approach, and we expect that workers who have experienced living at RHM will demand better facilities elsewhere.

Implementation

Republic Hostel and Mess involves four actors in partnership:

1. ShelterSquuare Foundation (SSF), responsible for planning, design, and driving and overseeing implementation.
2. Aajeevika Bureau, a labour rights NGO, provided a capital outlay of approx. 70,000 USD and gap funding for operations & management for 2-3 years.
3. Private landlord gave the property on formal lease and informally assisted in its conversion to hostel
4. Pravasi Shramik Suraksha Manch, a union of factory workers, assists in outreach among workers, conflict resolution, and worker meetings at RHM.

Implementation Timeline and Actions:

- PHASE 1 (Feb-Oct 2023): Studying the local context of worker housing; Scoping properties for conversion to a workers hostel; Preparing the budget and business model; Executing the property lease; Design and execution of conversion; Outreach about RHM among workers; Other preparations; RHM opened in October 2023.
- PHASE 2 (Nov 2023-Feb 2025): Setting up routine RHM operations and management practices; Understanding and responding to tenants' experiences and expectations; Incremental physical improvements; Outreach among workers
- PHASE 3 (Mar 2025 onwards): Tenant participation in hostel management. Introducing value-adds at RHM such as social security camps, occupational safety trainings, health camps and health education, financial literary sessions, recreational activities and community building.

Enablers & Obstacles

RHM's implementation is driven by SSF's directors and their complementary knowledge, experience, and willingness to experiment, learn and evolve the housing practice. A critical enabler supporting the implementation has been the trust and evolving partnerships between SSF, AB and PSSM. As RHM's tenant population has partly stabilized, another critical enabler is community engagement.

Key obstacles

1. Hostel occupancy was low for more than a year despite better facilities and outreach among workers. SSF did surveys, interviews and discussions with workers to understand the reasons. This learning was critical in evolving RHM as an institutional housing space that fulfils tangible and intangible needs of workers, thus attracting and retaining tenants.
2. Food: Understanding and responding to workers' food expectations has been a challenge, and SSF continues to closely engage on this front.

'Learning and doing' is central to SSF's housing practice including addressing challenges.

Results & Impact

SSF evaluates the results and impacts of its housing practice, piloted at Republic Hostel and Mess (RHM), through several indicators and data points. RHM's occupancy is 74%, a good occupancy level for a hostel for circular migrant workers. 20-25% of tenants are now 'repeat tenants' who have returned to RHM after a village visit, reflecting the longer-term trust and relationship with RHM.

SSF's feedback surveys with RHM tenants in July 2024 provide data on tenants' satisfaction. More than 80% of tenants were satisfied with RHM's sleeping arrangements, storage facilities and cleanliness (see the Impact Infographics).

SSF's surveys between July 2024 to January 2025 explored how tenants compared RHM to their previous housing in Surat. 64-79% of tenants reported RHM to be 'better' than previous housing on the sleeping arrangement, storage facilities, cleanliness of sleeping / living spaces and sanitation facilities.

The above surveys as well as interviews with tenants in December 2024 explored tenants' perceptions about the impact of living at RHM on their lives, particularly their physical and mental health, social and recreational life and work life. 74% reported less mental stress and 40% reported feeling less tired and falling less ill at RHM compared to their previous housing. 89% of the latter reported a positive impact on their work. The interviews also illuminate workers' positive experiences at RHM (see the uploaded Impact Infographics).

Replication & Scale Up

To replicate it in another location/context, key factors include forging partnerships with government and/or property owner to leverage properties that can be converted into worker housing; raising capital for retrofitting and conversion into adequate housing facilities; mobilizing resources for viability gap funding for operations (through public subsidy, philanthropy, etc.); building the capacity of local organisations to undertake social rental housing management along with community development for a vulnerable tenant population; and community engagement with the targeted groups.

Policy integration is crucial for scaling up this housing practice. The national and state-level governments in India prioritise and subsidise ownership-based housing, while the recent national rental housing program has had low uptake due to several barriers. A key priority area for us at SSF is to emphasize social rental housing provision as a key pathway for socio-economic growth, and approach the government and other stakeholders with the demonstrative strength and learnings from our practice to devise a responsive and sustainable social rental housing outlay and program design.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice is a new or innovative practice that is not yet adequately or fully integrated into formal policy frameworks.

The Government of India's rental housing program has low uptake since its launch in 2020 due to several barriers. Project tenders & proposals are mainly evaluated on engineering capacities & return on investment, neglecting housing suitability & developmental outcomes. To embed SSF's initiative in policy, we recommend the government engage various stakeholders, rethink its approach and enable access to rent-free land & buildings for non-profits, who can then raise capital grants for retrofit / construction & resources for social rental housing management, and operate it on a non-profit model.

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Lessons & Takeaways

When RHM opened, it offered good facilities at affordable rent, targeting a specific ethnic group working in powerlooms. But adequate, affordable & secure housing, even for a homogenous community, did not convert migrant workers to a new and institutional housing facility. Through SSF's 'learning by doing' approach we understood less tangible housing needs that are not easily articulated by workers, which we now prioritise in our value-adds. In hindsight, we would introduce these value-adds earlier and do awareness among workers on the health and livelihood benefits of improved housing.