

DISTRICT WOMEN HELPLINES IN BIHAR

Some lessons from an outcome assessment

FEBRUARY 2016



OBJECTIVES

Bihar has one of the highest rates of Violence Against Women (VAW) in the country. According to the National Family Health Survey III (2005-06), 61% of ever married women and 23% of never married women experience physical and sexual violence in the state. The main perpetrators of this violence are intimate partners, parents and in-laws. Interviews with women survivors show that issues of emotional and sexual relations, dowry, females going out of homes, girls pursuing education, and household work are often the reasons for the violence.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2006 (PWDVA) increased Bihar's response to VAW. Two key features of the response were the appointment of District Protection Officers and the establishment of District Women Helplines.

Helplines were introduced in Patna in 1998 to provide emergency relief, legal aid and counselling services to female survivors of violence. They achieved good results and have been gradually extended to other district headquarters by the Women Development Corporation (WDC). In 2015, 35 out of Bihar's 38 districts had Helplines managed by the District Protection Officer (DPO).

In some districts, these are run by NGOs. Helplines provide counselling services to victims of violence and file Domestic Incident Reports (DIR). They also facilitate women's access to other domestic violence services including (a) reporting of crimes (FIR) in Police Stations, (b) free legal aid, (c) temporary shelter at Short Stay Homes (SSH) and other organisations, and (d) medical assistance. As part of the Government's Sector Wide Approach

to Strengthening Health Programme (SWASTH), the Bihar Technical Assistance and Support Team (BTAST) has provided support to Helplines to enable them to perform their roles and responsibilities. An assessment of the Helplines was undertaken in 2012 to guide BTAST. This summary presents the findings from a second assessment undertaken in 2015 to determine the Helplines' functionality, effectiveness and efficiency, and the outcomes they have achieved for women victims of violence, and areas for further improvement.

The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2006

PWDVA is a civil law which offers protection to women from male members of the family. It covers actual abuse or the threat of abuse, whether physical, verbal, sexual, emotional or economic. The law can be used in conjunction with other laws. The Act recognises domestic violence as a human rights issue, and enshrines women's right to live free of violence, right to reside in the shared family accommodation even during the dispute, right to emergency relief from the husband, and right to seek services. The law sets out a very clear response to be implemented by government. The duties of protection officers, the court, police, medical facilities, legal services, shelter homes are clearly set out. This, for example, includes the number of days within which the Notice has to be served to offending parties from the time the Domestic Incident Report has been filed (3 days,) and the number of days in which cases need to be disposed of by the court (60 days).



METHODOLOGY

Out of the 35 districts where women's Helplines are functional, nine districts were selected for the outcome assessment, including those run by the District Administration (seven) and by NGOs (two). These included Helplines where a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) has been piloted by WDC and where model Helplines are to be launched.

Methods used to assess the Helplines in each district included:

- In-depth interviews with Helpline staff including the Protection Officer, counsellors, panel advocates, and the Helpline nodal officer; other domestic violence service providers: in-charges of the Short Stay Home, health providers, police, advocates and judges; and survivors and their close family members.
- Analysis of secondary data on VAW cases at the sample Helplines.
- Observation of the infrastructure, facilities and the behaviour of the Helpline staff.
- Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with the community to gather their perspective on VAW and the functioning of Helplines.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of this assessment are framed around (i) Helpline functionality, (ii) the effectiveness and efficiency of Helpline services, and (iii) the outcomes achieved for women and girls who are victims of violence.

Functionality of Helplines

Functionality of the Helplines was assessed in terms of the extent to which critical inputs and processes are available and working.

Human resources

There are two types of Helplines in Bihar: Patna has a Grade A facility and the rest are Grade B. During the study period many of the Helplines visited had vacant positions. After the functional assessment of 2013, all the Helplines were provisioned to appoint one data entry operator but the position is vacant in all Helplines except Patna.

All the staff interviewed reported that they have the capacity to perform their duties but their major

concern is the shortage of time to engage with clients, to provide counselling and support services. This is primarily due to the administrative responsibilities that they have to discharge, high case load in some facilities, and the non-Helpline duties that are assigned to them by the District Magistrate.

Space and infrastructure

Most Helplines are located in the Collectorate (office of the District Magistrate). Staff reported that this enhances their sense of confidence and security when dealing with respondents who have been implicated for violence. The space was found to be highly inadequate, and either comprised 2-3 rooms or an open office space sometimes separated by cupboards or tables. Lack of privacy is a major issue. Exclusive toilets for staff and survivors are not provided and in some places women's access to toilets is a major issue.

The furniture available for family members of survivors and other visitors is inadequate. Computers are available only in Patna and the NGO-run Helplines. Space and toilet facilities were found to be better in NGO-run Helplines.

Public communication and outreach

To raise public awareness about the Helpline, various IEC activities like advertisements in print media, hoardings, wall writings, stalls in local fairs and exhibitions, distribution of leaflets and pamphlets, and radio broadcast are undertaken. Helplines lack a comprehensive IEC strategy or guideline, and given the high case load, staff gives minimal time to such activities.

Most Helpline clients come from the district headquarters and nearby areas, and awareness of the service is limited in remote parts of the district. Most clients reported to have learned about the Helpline through word-of-mouth.

Information management

The Helpline creates a file for every complaint received from each survivor. Other than in Patna, all files are paper-based. The NGO in Bhojpur is maintaining both physical and electronic copies of files. Migration to a computer-based system is expected in the near future.

Monitoring and reporting

The District Magistrate, the District Nodal Officer, and senior officers from WDC are responsible for monitoring the Helplines. Monitoring is not regular, systematic or based on a monitoring framework. Monitoring reports are not prepared, but the staff admit that monitoring visits have identified gaps and led to remedial measures.

Financial management

A common complaint from the Helpline management and staff was that the budget was insufficient, especially for salaries and travel expenses. Following the 2013 functional assessment, the salary of the Protection Officer and Counsellors was increased but the contractual nature of employment and continuing low salaries mean the department is at risk of losing trained staff. Since 2013, travel expenses and court expenses have been increased but the travel budget is still inadequate. A cumbersome fund flow arrangement adds to the problem. Funds to procure computer systems, for example, have been lying idle for months.

Linkages with other services and providers

There is generally good coordination between the Helplines, hospitals, short stay homes and police. Cooperation from the police was found to differ from place to place, the main challenge being inadequate police human resources and/or vehicles. Good coordination was reported with women police cells across the districts. Better coordination was observed with the police stations nearer to the district headquarters than distant ones in rural areas.

Effectiveness and efficiency of services

In this section key factors that impact the effectiveness and efficiency of Helplines are reviewed, and triangulated with the perspectives of survivors that have used Helpline services.

Case load

Over the past four years the total case load at a Helpline has ranged from a low of 365 in Bhojpur to a high of 2,044 in Gaya. There has been a steady increase in cases from year to year, corresponding to the increasing knowledge and popularity of the Helpline.

Figure 2: Annual resolution rate in selected Helplines

District Name	Resolution in a year (%)
Aurangabad	80
Begusarai	47
Bhojpur	93
Gaya	47
Kishanganj	94

In any single year, the largest number of cases was 568 in Gaya and the lowest was 58 in Bhojpur. Given that a case may require inputs from the Helpline over many months, the cumulative workload is considerable.

At the current staffing level, the busier Helplines such as Gaya and Kishanganj are overstretched and the quality of the services provided is compromised. In the less busy sites too, workload is much lighter. On an average a counsellor has to deal with 15-20 cases per day, which includes new visitors as well as visitors returning for counselling. This ranges from 30 clients per day in Gaya to 10 in Jehanabad. Standard staffing norms regardless of case load are inefficient and undermine the delivery of effective services.

Case resolution: The annual rate of case resolution varies from 94% in Kishanganj to 47% in Gaya and Begusarai. Poor record keeping and the lack of a computer-based system means that the resolution rate could not be calculated in all Helplines.

The poor resolution rate in Gaya and Begusarai hides the large case loads these sites have and the fact that this translates into 320 and over 200 cases resolved in one year at each Helpline, respectively. Kishanganj also resolved over 200 cases in one year.

While the Helpline is able to handle most cases of domestic violence effectively, it is less effective in dealing with cases that involve a severe rift with the marital family or involve major property disputes. Criminal cases related to trafficking and rape also fall outside of the Helpline's standard case resolution approaches and goals.

Capacity of staff and Helpline resources to deliver counselling and support to VAW survivors

Placing the Helpline under the District Magistrate and locating it in the premises of the district administration makes the Protection Officer vulnerable to being used for non-technical duties and compromises her time and attention for her role as Protection Officer. The target of 60 days set for solving a domestic violence case is regularly breached. Due to lack of time, counsellors are mostly engaged in obtaining and documenting case details from survivors and perpetrators.

Training provided to Helpline staff has been well received, but capacity gaps remain. Staff reported the need for more training on the functionality and procedures of the PWDVA, counseling methods, and gender and patriarchy. Training needs of judges (gender roles and VAW), short stay home in charges (counseling skills and handling mentally disturbed patients) and police officers (PWDVA and how to deal with cases concerning women) were also identified.

Survivors' satisfaction with Helpline services

Overall, survivors consider the Helplines to have been a source of rescue and strength, helping to restore women's dignity and self-esteem. Most (70/81) of the survivors interviewed felt that the outcome-with the Helpline's intervention-has been acceptable, The behaviour of the Helpline staff was reported to be comforting and the fact that resolutions were reached through consensus as opposed to being driven by the staff was highly valued. In contrast, some survivors reported that the police and the judiciary failed them.

It was generally reported that Helplines are unable to assure women's safety once a resolution has been reached and she returns home. Helplines also find it difficult to follow up cases beyond their jurisdiction (outside the district). Survivors shared the importance of home visits being made after a resolution is reached and how this boosted their self-esteem.

Broader outcomes for survivors of violence

Helplines support women and girls at a distressing and particularly vulnerable time in their lives and contribute to their broader well-being, empowerment and social status.

Family reaction

Survivor's experienced mixed reactions and responses from their families and marital families after they publicly reported violence against them, and received support from a Helpline. Some respondents (15 out of 81) stated that after approaching the Helpline their recognition in the family increased due to apprehension that she might take further action if violence continued. These cases were typically where the perpetrators were not the husband but another marital family member. Acceptance in the family was, however, mixed. In many cases, survivors reported that the family felt her taking the case to the Helpline lowered their dignity, and some women continued to face hostility.

While the Helplines played an important part in enabling most families to reunite and resolve conflict, there was little change in the situation for some survivors. Where women were subjected to extreme forms of violence, the survivor and her parents, especially mothers, reported that they were dissatisfied with the resolution reached by the Helpline.

Survivor's self-esteem and self-confidence

Survivors reported that the hand holding, financial compensation and information about rights provided by Helplines boosted their self-esteem and self-

confidence. Many stated that in case of recurrence of domestic violence, they would not approach the police or the court but would deal with it by themselves or with the support of the Helpline. Through their visits to the Helpline, women slowly learned to deal with the situation in a positive way and the recognition and support they received at the Helpline increased their self-esteem.

Many women learned about their rights for the first time, and some developed a strong sense of justice for all women and directed women victims of violence to the Helpline.

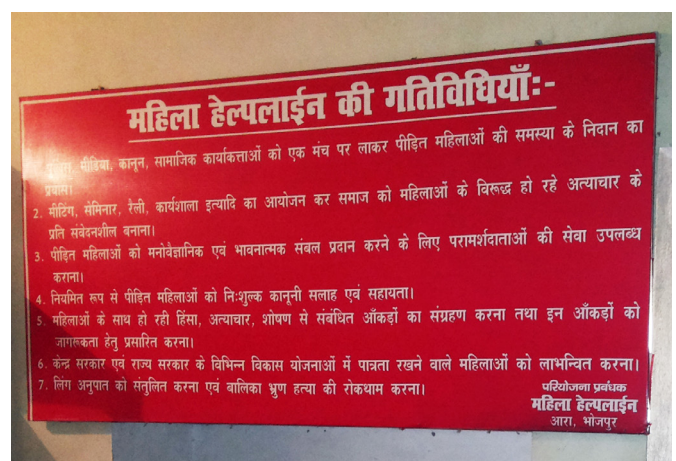
Mobility and autonomy

Most women had little mobility or autonomy during the period of domestic violence, and these factors were often themselves perceived by perpetrators to be a threat and reason for violent behaviour. In cases that were resolved positively, many women reported increased mobility and the opportunity to work outside the home, although this was by no means universal.

Gender attitudes

In Bihar, women are generally expected to look after the household and children and lead a restricted life with limited or no autonomy. The prominent view among the various groups of stakeholders consulted for this study is that women are easy targets of violence due to their weak economic and social positions, and the lack of repercussions for perpetrators. While husbands are the primary perpetrators of domestic violence, female members of the family support the violence through silence, sarcasm and rejection of the vulnerable woman.

Girls' and women's education and employment were emphasized as key ways to overcome the problem of domestic violence. An educated woman is more likely to get a job and earn money, and the income earned can improve the family's poor living standards that are often the cause of conflict.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are for improving the functionality, effectiveness and efficiency of the Helplines.

Human resources

- Enhance human resources in Helplines, which have larger case loads.
- Enhance the compensation levels of both the Protection Officer and the Counsellor.
- Divest the Protection Officer of project management responsibility to enable her to give more time to cases.
- Consider maintaining a panel of counsellors (like the panel of advocates) with a degree in psychology or counselling to provide services on a demand basis rather than having staff counsellors who are vulnerable to being used for routine administrative purposes of the Helpline and also non-Helpline purposes by the district administration.
- Employ a Project Manager and Officer (besides the Protection Officer and the panel of Counsellors) to take care of routine matters such as writing down applications, case documentation, and maintaining case files.
- Provide capacity building to Helpline staff in key areas such as counselling, the procedures of the PWDVA, and gender.

Space and infrastructure

- Larger, more functional infrastructure be provided to allow the Helplines to perform their duties.
- Helplines be moved out of the district administration and into the judicial court premises.

Public communication and outreach

- An IEC strategy or guideline for Helplines be developed by WDC.
- Increased budget allocation for IEC activities.
- Helplines partner with local civil society organisations to spread awareness in remote rural areas and to target students in schools and colleges.

Information management

- Funds allocated to purchase computers and employ data operators need to be leveraged.

- WDC needs to drive the shift to a computerised data management system.

Monitoring and reporting

- WDC to develop a monitoring framework with agreed monitoring indicators for the Helplines and regularly lead review of their achievement.
- WDC to introduce monitoring reports that document gaps and remedial measures at each Helpline.
- WDC to commission external third party monitoring from time to time.

Financial management

- Increase the salary of the Protection Officer and Counsellor to competitive market rates.
- Enhance the travel funds for the Helpline staff.
- Provide the Protection Officer with drawing and disbursing powers and decision making powers for undertaking procurement and authorising expenses.

Linkages with other services and providers

- Short stay homes need more staff, budget and security personnel to guard the establishment.
- Timely decisions and case disposal is called for to provide highly needed financial relief to survivors.
- Considering the high demand for police services, it is recommended to orientate the police about the Helpline, and to depute a police officer of the rank of Sub-Inspector to the Helpline.

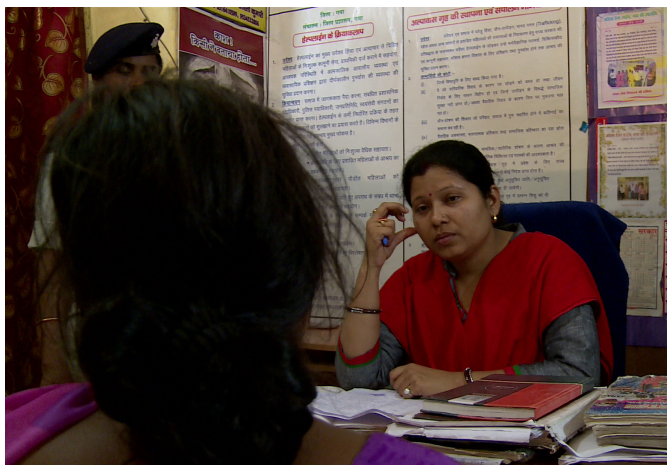
Achieving resolution standards

- More active monitoring of standards and achievements at each Helpline and funding of remedial action to enable the Helplines to meet the 60-day standard set out in the PWDVA.

Post-resolution follow-up

Follow-up home visits need to be included as a standard practice at all Helplines. During such visits the survivor and family are to be met by the Helpline staff.

- For survivors who have undergone the trauma of extreme violence, there is a need for extended psychological counselling to support survivors recover and rebuild their lives.





SECTOR WIDE APPROACH TO STRENGTHENING HEALTH (SWASTH)

Government of Bihar Initiative Supported by DFID, UK

The SWASTH programme aims to improve the health and nutritional status of people of Bihar by increasing access to better quality health, nutrition, and water and sanitation services, particularly for the underserved groups. The focus of this programme is to strengthen the systems through better planning, organisational strengthening & human resource management, decentralisation and convergence among key departments. The programme also uses community level processes to manage, demand and monitor services.

The outcome assessment was done by Sutra Consulting Pvt Ltd. with inputs from the BTAST Gender Expert and the MLE team. This summary is based on report submitted by Sutra Consulting Pvt. Ltd.

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