

## Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Women Help Desks

Violent crimes against women have emerged as a major challenge for law enforcement agencies in India. There is a perception that a significant proportion of the crimes against women remain unreported, primarily due to ignorance of law, or what is perhaps even more disturbing – self-restraint, exercised by the victims and their families, for fear of social stigma. There is clearly an urgent need to augment mechanisms available to women-victims for redressal of their grievances.

2. Police is often the first responder to crimes. The demeanor and response of police personnel towards the victims, particularly women and children, is critical in eliminating secondary victimization of those who have already been wronged once. The first interface of the victims with members of law enforcement agencies would also be crucial in enlisting their long term support to the cause of prosecuting the perpetrators.

3. Currently, the redressal mechanism available to a woman victim of crime is grossly inadequate. There is clear and urgent need to conceptualize and create a ‘one-stop support centre’ for women at all the police stations in the country. To facilitate the creation of these centres of support, in the form of **‘Women Help Desks’ (WHDs)**, it is imperative to devise an SOP for their functioning. This would also help provide seamless assistance to women in distress.

4. The SOP for WHDs seeks to ensure their smooth functioning by focusing on **four critical components** viz., Infrastructure, Training, HRD Policy and Response Mechanism.

- **Role and functions of Women Help Desk:**
  - WHDs would be the single point of contact for all issues relating to crimes against women.
  - The help desk would provide regular updates to the aggrieved women on the status of their case.
  - Help desks would facilitate counselling, compensation and other support provided to women victims. They would also be responsible for providing to the complainant, information about the laws, existing schemes and government programmes in respect of women victims of crime.
  - WHDs would facilitate conduct of awareness programmes and community liaison meetings within the jurisdiction of their respective police station.
- **Composition and Supervision of Women Help Desks:**
  - A woman police officer of the rank of Sub-Inspector should be designated as the **Women Desk Help Officer (WHDO)** in all the police stations. Under her, each WHD team would comprise at least two Woman Head Constables/senior Woman Constables. The help desk would be adequately staffed to run round the clock.
  - The WHD shall function under the overall control and supervision of the officer in-charge of the police station.
  - At the **Commissionerate/District level**, a woman officer of or above the rank of Dy. SP, would be nominated as the **Nodal Officer**. She would function as the single point contact for all WHDs at the Commissionerates/Districts.
  - At the **State/UT level**, an IG level officer, dealing with issues pertaining to women, would be designated as **Nodal Officer for WHDs** in the entire State/UT.

- **Infrastructure:**

- WHD should be located adjacent to the reception area of the police station. Care should be taken to ensure that the location is such as to enable minimum interface of the women victims with the other staff of the police station (States may refer to the '**New Police Stations Building Norms, 2016**', circulated by the BPR&D, for more details).
- The room designated for WHD should be adequately equipped with drinking water, toilet, first aid box, adequate lighting, pleasant ambience, office furniture, computers with internet, facilities for child care and adequate CCTV coverage/video recording. The room should have curtains or view cutters for the sake of privacy.
- WHDs should be provided with a direct landline phone connection as well as a committed mobile phone, manned round the clock. The room should have a display-board, flagging important telephone numbers, including those of senior police functionaries. There should also be visible space to highlight information pertaining to women issues, including details of shelter homes in the neighbourhood and NGOs working for women's cause.
- WHDs should have access to contingency fund for recurring expenses, including regular maintenance and for topping up amenities.

- **Training:**

- All police personnel, especially those posted to WHDs, should be mandatorily provided soft-skills training. In order to incentivize the giving as well as the receiving of soft-skills training, both the trainers and the trainees need to be adequately compensated. All personnel, regularly designated in establishments that provide the training, should be entitled to a training allowance at the highest rate

permissible in the Government of India (@ 24%). Similarly, all those who have successfully completed soft skills training and are posted to WHDs, should be given a **Women Safety Allowance** of 20% of their basic salary for as long as they are posted in WHDs.

- BPR&D should conceive, design, standardize and roll out soft-skills and gender sensitization training for police personnel of different ranks, including subordinates as well as senior functionaries.
- All police personnel working on WHDs, should be trained on state-specific provisions relating to women victims, so that they can help and guide them in seeking compensation.
- Simplified versions of women specific laws/regulations and simple DOs/DONTs should be compiled and kept at WHDs in English, Hindi and the local language. Copies of these may be given to the complainants to read, or even, take away. BPR&D may take the lead in preparing these compilations.

- **HRD Policy:**

- It is imperative to incentivize the creation and functioning of WHDs at the police stations. This SOP recommends a **Women Safety Allowance** (at the rate of 20% of basic pay) to all personnel posted at the WHDs on completion of soft skills training by/under the BPR&D. The allowance would be admissible for as long as the personnel are posted at the WHDs.
- All the training providers engaged in training the personnel for WHDs are recommended to be given a training allowance at the highest rate permissible (24%) in the Government of India.
- Ideally, the tenure at the WHDs should be for a period of at least 3 years. This could be extended further, depending on the performance of and feedback on the incumbent. Personnel deployed at WHDs should work in shifts, with a weekly off.

- Special care should be taken by the Superintendent of Police/DCP of the concerned district to ensure that appropriately talented people are posted to the WHDs and that it does not become a refuge for the unwilling and the unwanted.

- **Response Mechanism:**

- A quick and emergent mechanism needs to be devised to ensure immediate response to complaints from women victims. This should include forming **Quick Reaction Teams (QRTs)**, either at the police station itself, or by drawing on resources from elsewhere in the district. QRTs moving to rescue women in distress should be accorded the top most priority. Effort should be made to include some women in the QRTs going to rescue women in distress.
- An appropriate **feedback mechanism** for the working of the WHDs should be in place. This should include performance feedback about the personnel deployed at the desk as also the nature and quantum of assistance rendered to women victims. The SP/DCP of the district should be able to independently reach out to the women victims through separate channels to ascertain the quality of services rendered.
- No woman under distress should be denied service on account of jurisdictional issues. It shall be the sole responsibility of whichever police entity a woman under distress reaches out to, to ensure redressal. Even if the jurisdiction belongs to another police station, the WHD, first contacted by the woman in distress, shall ensure that appropriate action is immediately taken by informing and pursuing with all concerned.

- **Miscellaneous:**

- WHDs should be adequately equipped and their staff trained to provide emergent first aid to women victims.
- WHDs should have access to a panel of professionals for providing psychological counselling to mitigate the impact of trauma for women victims. Similarly, the help desks should be able to put the victims in contact with platforms that specialize in providing legal aid.
- WHDs should work for linking victims of domestic violence and matrimonial discords with family and other relevant courts, besides the counselling centres.
- WHDs must maintain a list of NGOs for providing long term rehabilitation, education, employment opportunities and re-integration of women victims into the society and family.
- The help desks should function as a platform to help the women victims reach out to other relevant departments, including district hospitals, probation officers, shelter homes, and other outreach facilities.

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