

Built to Enable: Tamil Nadu Model of Worker Women Housing for urban centers enabling mobility

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As India debates how to raise women's workforce participation, the focus is often on education, skilling, and job creation. However, a missing piece holds women back: safe, affordable housing for those who migrate for work. Without it, women either drop out, commute long distances at personal risk, or are stopped by families from taking up opportunities. Thozhi Working Women Hostels in Tamil Nadu (TN) are a powerful case study in how safe, affordable, and well-designed housing can unlock women's participation in the formal economy.

Currently, there are 523 Sakhi Niwas (Working Women Hostels) functional in India, supported under the Mission Shakti scheme of the Ministry of Women & Child Development.¹ While Kerala (138) and Maharashtra (74) have the highest number of Sakhi Niwas in the country, TN's Thozhi hostel model, run by Tamil Nadu Working Women Corporation (TNWWHC) stands out with consistent demand, making it a benchmark for women's housing in India. With occupancy rates exceeding 90% at locations such as Tambaram and Guduvanchery,² women here don't just stay because of the absence of options—they choose it over others. In addition to dorm-style, single and double occupancy rooms are available, furnished with almirahs and study tables. Kitchens are run by local SHGs. Crèche services and regular community events foster trust and belonging. Cleanliness is actively maintained by housekeeping staff, complaints are resolved within 48 hours, and the atmosphere is one of dignity, not dormancy.

Substantial transport connectivity is a major attraction with 72% of the hostels located at a distance to the transport hub less than 1km, and 33% are in fact less than 1km from the industry hub itself.

Thozhi hostels are present in 13 districts

0.9 1.3 1.7 2.1
 Avg. distance of Thozhi hostels from transportation hub (in kms)

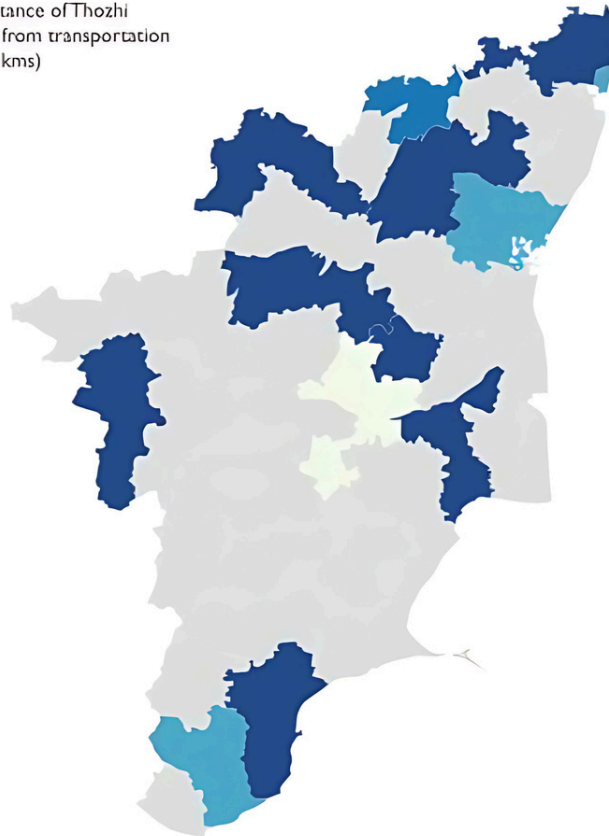


Figure highlighting districts that have a Thozhi hostel and its proximity to the transportation hubs



"We Feel Seen Here"

Aathira (name changed), a young woman from Erode, TN, moved into the hostel after working abroad in the Maldives. She discovered it on YouTube and hasn't looked back. "It's clean, safe, and quiet. Unlike private PGs where 3-4 girls are crammed in a room with no cupboards or ACs or proper ventilation, here there's space to breathe." Her story is far from unique—but it is made possible by infrastructure that supports women as workers and migrants, not just as tenants.

Women Migrate When Housing Works

Across states like TN, Delhi, Maharashtra, women are moving for jobs to work in large urban locations. They take jobs in both small industries or service sectors. While the SIPCOT model caters to the needs of women working in large industrial hubs, the Thozhi hostel model is able to address the accommodation needs of migrating women in urban and peri-urban locations. Whether they can take up those jobs often depends on the availability of safe housing and access to transport nearby.

The uniqueness of Thozhi hostel is that they have built hostels with under 100 bed count, spread in multiple locations in a city, safe, suitably located and well maintained. At certain locations, they have engaged in corporate partnerships to ensure anchor tenants. For eg., Tambaram's Thozhi hostel did a corporate tie-up with TVS Motors to provide accommodation for migrating from Andhra Pradesh. This kind of integrated planning—linking job opportunities with housing—is what makes migration truly feasible.



When Housing Fails, Aspirations Stall

In contrast, the situation is not uniform across states. Women continue to face significant challenges in finding safe and reliable places to stay, even after securing employment. In our interactions, one in three ITI-trained women reported declining job opportunities outside their home district due to the lack of suitable housing. Many explained that they had to forgo formal jobs in their preferred trades because they had no relatives in the areas where work was available, and families were unwilling to allow them to stay in unfamiliar or unverified accommodations. This is not a matter of personal preference, it is about safety, affordability, and dignity. Without dependable housing, women's labour mobility, and consequently, their economic agency, remains severely constrained.



Building Foundation for Women Workforce: Learnings from Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu's Thozhi model – where they have housed all the hostels in a co-operation, and manage each hostel as an independent profit and loss entity, is not just well-designed—it's financially smart. With the presence of a State-level Corporation, hostels occupancy, facilities, locations are operated as an individual P&L, ensuring choice of locations is demand driven. The rooms in these hostels are both shared and single, giving a flexibility to the use as well as support economics of the hostel as they map the demand and are cross subsidised, to ensure that each hostel is operated profitably. Construction is supported by a Shelter Fund, and partnerships with employers/corporations ensure sustainability.

It looks at women's housing not just as welfare but an essential economic good activity —on par with transport and education. A good hostel isn't just a place to sleep, but an enabler of women's economic empowerment. Location, access to transport, safety, with flexible rules, enable women to work extra hours and night shifts. At its core, Thozhi offers trust—because a working woman doesn't just need a job or a wage. She needs the right to live where opportunity takes her.

References

1. Ministry of Women and Child Development Dashboard
 2. Based on Udaiti field visits and stakeholder consultations
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