

# From Intent to Impact: Reimagining Sakhi Niwas as a Catalyst for Women's Economic Inclusion

## *Learnings from Odisha*

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Over the past decade India has made important strides in expanding job opportunities for women. Between 2017 to 2023, Female Labour Force Participation Rate has increased from 23.3% (2017-18) to 41.7% (2023-24)<sup>1,2</sup>, with significant growth in sectors like manufacturing, healthcare, retail and services. The participation of women in the formal workforce has also seen a marked rise during this period with the number of net new female members increasing from 1.30 million in FY2018-19 to 2.8 million in FY2022-23, according to the EPFO payroll data.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the substantial growth in female employment, the infrastructure needed to support women's participation in the workforce, remains largely absent from mainstream employment or gender conversations. While the Government has developed the safe accommodation scheme for industrial housing for women, women working in the services sector in urban, per-urban areas are currently supported by Sakhi Niwas or private PGs (40-100 bedded facilities). The service sector is the largest source of regular salaried jobs for women in India and constitutes nearly 64% of total women workers in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> Thus, there is an opportunity to upgrade the scheme to meet the changing needs of working women.

Despite national ambitions to boost female labor force participation, policy discourse remains fixated on skills and jobs, while housing continues to be treated as an afterthought. As more women enter India's workforce, a quiet but critical question is therefore gaining urgency: Where do working women live?

## Sakhi Niwas: Intent vs Implementation

A 2022 report by IWWAGE<sup>5</sup> found that improving physical infrastructure is a critical enabler for women's sustained workforce participation. Built on a similar premise –the Sakhi Niwas scheme or Working Women's Hostel– is a gender-inclusive infrastructure intervention, intended to create a supportive ecosystem for women navigating work and mobility. A flagship initiative launched by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, under Mission Shakti, Sakhi Niwas was envisioned to provide safe and subsidized housing for working women, alongside a supportive infrastructure that reduces commute time, enhances safety and allows women to take care of dependents.

Long commutes, limited mobility options and nearby creches are consistently cited as barriers that push women out of work. In this context, housing should not be viewed in isolation but as an ecosystem of transportation and child care. For Sakhi Niwas hostels to support women workers better– it will help if they are located along secure transit corridors, integrated with reliable last mile connectivity and designed to accommodate the needs of women across their life different stages.<sup>6</sup> It is through such infrastructure ecosystems that housing becomes more than shelter but an enabling platform for economic inclusion.





## Learnings from Odisha

To understand the Sakhi Niwas model better, the Udaiti team visited 17 hostels across 11 districts of Odisha. Odisha's Sakhi Niwas hostels – part of the Working Women's Hostel (WWH) scheme – reflect the promise of creating safe and supportive accommodation for women in the workforce. Around 70% of the Sakhi Niwas in Odisha were located at the city centres majorly catering to the needs of women working in the Education, Banking & Insurance, and Healthcare sectors.<sup>7</sup> Almost 78% of the women interviewed reported that their workplaces were less than 5 kms.

The hostels mirror the traditional model of public housing for women – providing security, affordability, and a sense of collective living. Yet, they also show the need for updating these models to better align with the changing aspirations, mobility patterns, and work-life needs of today's women.

### 1. Upgrading Infrastructure

Many women appreciated that Sakhi Niwas hostels provide a safe and affordable space close to their workplaces. At the same time, residents shared issues like the need for better bathroom facilities, timely repairs, and functional kitchens. "Overall conditions are satisfactory, only focus on repair and maintenance work of hostel infrastructure (is needed)," one resident said. Given that Sakhi Niwas was first designed in the 1980s, there is a need to systematically upgrade the existing infrastructure.

### 2. Strengthening Operations and Maintenance

The visits showed that many women were satisfied with hygiene and cleanliness, but others pointed to irregular upkeep, absence of grievance redressal mechanism, and no self-cooking option or mess services. "Better facilities with the same rent would make it preferable," a resident suggested. While the majority of the hostels are being managed by NGOs, one is being managed by an SHG Cluster level Federation, and some by urban local bodies. In one hostel, women's collectives themselves have stepped in to sustain day-to-day operations, showing resilience and ownership. This indicates scope to establish clear O&M guidelines for operating bodies.

### 3. Making Safety a Priority

Safety stood out as both a strength and an area to improve. Several residents felt secure because of the staff presence and the hostel's proximity to workplaces. Others noted the absence of wardens or CCTV. "There should be a caretaker or warden in the hostel. Safety has to be the priority," one resident explained. Assigning permanent wardens and caretakers, along with CCTV and secure entry systems, would reinforce safety. Converging Sakhi Niwas with Nirbhaya Fund can also strengthen safety in the surrounding areas.

In addition to these, integrating childcare, improving last mile connectivity (for locations 5 kms+ away from workplaces), and enabling community building would allow these hostels to evolve from just accommodation into ecosystems that support women's economic participation.

## Rethinking Sakhi Niwas: A Policy Forward Roadmap

There is an opportunity to reimagine the hostel not just as a shelter, but a gender responsive social infrastructure – a place where working women can live with dignity, connectivity and community. If working women's hostels are to become catalysts for economic mobility rather than spaces of last resort, shifts are needed at the national level to rethink the scheme.

### 1. Increasing existing capacity

- **Dedicated State Level Working Women's Hostel Corporation:** A State level WWH Corporation can be created to plan, construct, and maintain hostels across states. It would set minimum service standards ensuring consistency, scaling capacity, and avoiding piecemeal expansion at only a few cities in a State.
- **Integrating private operators to re-think a new model:** Odisha learnings highlight that occupancy is stronger where hostels are well-maintained and professionally run. Drawing from examples like Thozhi hostels in Tamil Nadu, private operators can be engaged in O&M with service level agreements and accountability. A new model could incentivize private operators with capital or rent subsidies either to convert government buildings on minimal leases or to offer affordable per-bed rentals backed by certifications to ensure safety and quality.

### 2. Improving quality

- **Gender Responsive Design:** Hostels must adopt flexible, gender sensitive designs that accommodate privacy, caregiving responsibilities (e.g., childcare spaces), and multiple forms of employment (shift work, gig work, home-based work). Recreation and wellness spaces should also be built in to create a sense of belonging.
- **Safety and Security:** Safety was a recurring theme in Odisha. Women valued hostels close to workplaces but sought stronger on-site safety protocols. Hostels should be mapped to urban transit systems, with safe last-mile options like shuttle services, ride-hailing partnerships, or well-lit pedestrian paths. Security must be standardized across hostels, with CCTVs, and staff trained in gender sensitivity.



The vision must go beyond minimum compliance. Hostels must be reimagined as integrated ecosystems, anchored in safety, affordability, and proximity to employment rather than as standalone welfare interventions. A dedicated institutional architecture, investment in responsive design, and innovative financing models can unlock the true potential of Sakhi Niwas.

## References

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