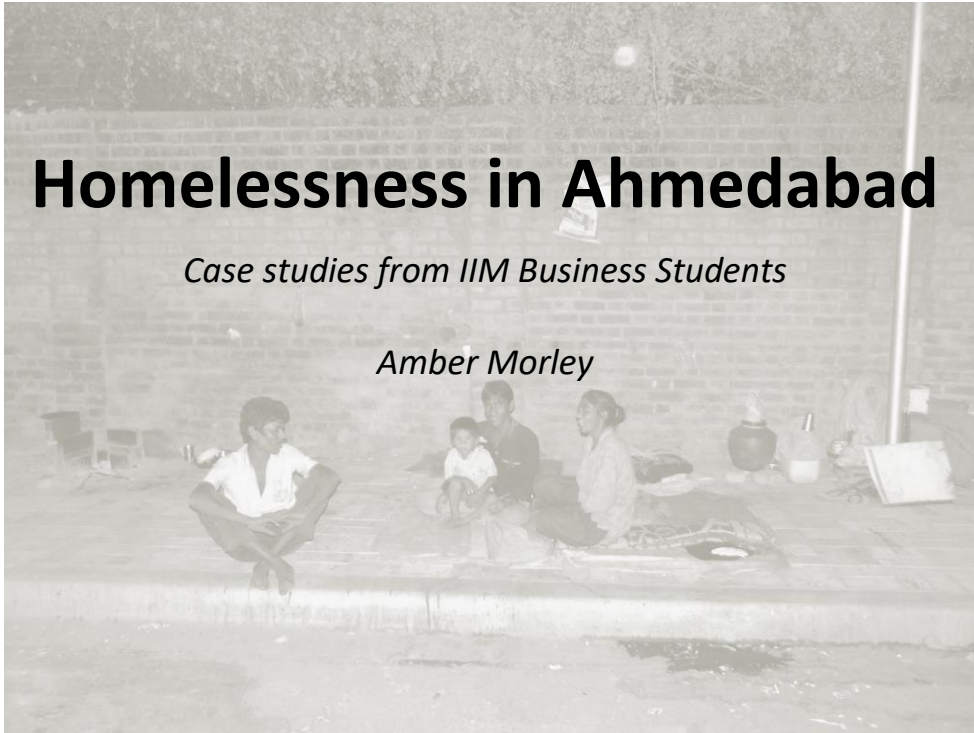


# Homelessness in Ahmedabad

*Case studies from IIM Business Students*

*Amber Morley*



## Introduction

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*“Yashoda is a thirty year old woman. She has been on the pavement outside the IIM in Ahmedabad for three generations. After the death of her father from an undiagnosed illness, her mother took care of her and her brother by herself. Married as a teenager she now has five children - four girls and one boy. Although her husband works at a press, he struggles to support their family of seven with an income of Rs 25 to Rs 40 a day. Yashoda doesn't talk much about her childhood or about her husband. The only topic that she is willing to talk about is her children. Providing food for them and seeing that they don't run into the road is her main occupation. Surviving from day-to-day is Yashoda's lived experience”<sup>1</sup>*

Ahmedabad, Gujarat has an impressive economic profile. In 2010 it was named one of the world's fastest growing cities according to Forbes whilst simultaneously achieving a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$160 billion in the same year<sup>2</sup>. This major industrial and financial hub contributes around 14% of the total investments in all stock exchanges in India and 60% of the total state productivity<sup>3</sup>. These growth figures have captured the attention of many multinationals and now two of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in India are based here. This rapidly growing urban metropolis has developed a reputation as the “Shock City of 21<sup>st</sup> Century India”<sup>4</sup>. The construction of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (IIM-A) is an outcome of this new growth and has now become one of the most prestigious business schools nationally. The image and reputation of Ahmedabad as a “global city” has become a priority within the policy agenda.

As the wealth and reputation of the city increases, more attention is being paid to urban infrastructural issues. The ‘Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission’<sup>5</sup> outlines Ahmedabad's development plan, within which housing is a priority. Similar to Delhi, Mumbai and other “global cities” in India, Ahmedabad has increasingly prioritised the development of slum settlements as a way to reduce urban poverty. The World Bank has recently assessed the feasibility of achieving “slum free Ahmedabad”<sup>6</sup> by laying out plans for public housing production over the next decade.

Although these are important policy changes, the definitions of “development” and the “urban poor” are too narrow, largely focusing on slum settlements. Mumbai and Delhi are particularly famous for their urban renewal programs and in each instance slum regeneration has become an integral part of the “world class city” image<sup>7</sup>. Policy discourse often frames slums as “development projects” which can be reformed and improved. In Ahmedabad, the ‘Urban Renewal Mission’ has implemented successful projects such as the ‘Slum Networking Project’ which aims to provide slums with essential infrastructure. However these development programs fail to address more marginalized communities such as the homeless. Unlike slum dwellers the homeless are defined as “not living in a census house (structure with roof)”<sup>8</sup> and so are, by definition, excluded from mainstream government statistics and policy. This silence surrounding homelessness within urban development policy confirms this population's position as a highly marginalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Extract adapted from “A Walk on the Pavements of IIM Ahmedabad” submitted by Nidhi Dandona and Vidhya Roopa

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2010/10/07/cities-china-chicago-opinions-columnists-joel-kotkin.html>

<sup>3</sup> Bhatt, M. R. The case of Ahmedabad, India, UCL

<sup>4</sup> Spodek, H (2011) *Ahmedabad: Shock City of 21<sup>st</sup> Century India*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<sup>5</sup> Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (2006) Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission: City Development Plan Ahmedabad

<sup>6</sup> Annez et al. (2012) Ahmedabad: More by Different Government for “Slum Free” and Livable Cities, *The World Bank Ahmedabad : More by Different Government for “Slum Free” and Livable Cities, The World Bank*

<sup>7</sup> E.g. McKinsey & Co. (2003) Vision Mumbai

<sup>8</sup> The Census of India (2011)

Within academia, the literature has been equally silent on this issue. Homelessness is by no means a universal experience, but still “life on the street” is analysed as a single phenomenon of exclusion. Recently there has been a call to develop more spatially-specific understandings of homelessness which capture the experience of the “hidden millions”<sup>9</sup> in a more accurate way<sup>10</sup>. In order to broaden the literature away from its US focus, there are increasing attempts to develop more appropriate theorisations for emerging economies such as India<sup>11</sup>. Suzanne Speak has been particularly vocal regarding this issue and provides a new framework for understanding homelessness in different national contexts based on ‘value’<sup>12</sup>. Indeed the “*home* is a very rich concept”<sup>13</sup> and reporting life on the streets within different geographies is a highly complex exercise.

Capturing personal narratives of the homeless is accompanied by important ethical and methodological considerations. The findings of this report are based on over fifty oral histories of the homeless conducted by IIM-A students. Although a range of experiences have been recorded the narratives mainly centre on families and family life within the homeless community in Ahmedabad. These personal narratives represent an important instance of dialogue between two contrasting sections of urban society. This qualitative data not only provides insights into the lived experience of homelessness, but also symbolises the potential for more interaction between the urban middle class and the homeless. Many of the students saw this exercise as a chance to breakdown social stigmas which perpetuate the imagination of urban poverty.

Oral histories are an important form of qualitative research which explore personal memory with the aim of capturing the essential qualities of complex social phenomena. As an outcome, expression is given to the ordinary and marginalised voices within the homeless population of Ahmedabad. These narratives are supplemented by additional reports from NGOs and government departments which focus on other large cities such as Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore. Although by no means a representative study, the aim is to provide a basic understanding of the “urban underbelly” which is often omitted from the story of India’s modernising cities. This report demonstrates how a platform can be constructed for the homeless agenda which is often dismissed in urban politics

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<sup>9</sup> Tipple, G. & Speak, S. (2009) *The Hidden Millions: Homelessness in Developing Countries*

<sup>10</sup> Tipple, G. & Speak, S. (2005) *Definition of homelessness in developing countries*

<sup>11</sup> p. 143, Speak, S. (2013) ‘Values’ as a tool for conceptualising homelessness in the global south, 38, pp.143-149

<sup>12</sup> Speak, S. (2013) ‘Values’ as a tool for conceptualising homelessness in the global south, 38, pp.143-149

<sup>13</sup> Tipple, G. & Speak, S. (2005) *Definition of homelessness in developing countries*

## Homelessness in Ahmedabad

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**Figure 1: Mukesh bhai (centre) with his wife and his son**  
Photo from "Life History of Mukesh bhai"  
Submitted by Prateek Agarwal



**Figure 2: Rajiv and his home**  
Photo from "Life history of a homeless person"  
Submitted by Shalender Singh Birla

### ***Sleeping Location***

Homelessness is by no means a temporary state of existence. For many street families in Ahmedabad the condition of living without shelter is a permanent way of life, often spanning multiple generations. The pavement not only becomes a home but also the foundation of a community, place of work and income generation, recreation and recovery. This is complex space where there is no clear distinction between public and private. The street outside the IIM-A campus is one particular location which has been occupied by families for a long period of time, even before the university was built in the 1990s. Many of the narratives focused on this location within the city.

Rajiv and his family, as seen in figure 2, are part of the community who live on the pavement outside IIM-A. He takes great pride in arranging his belongings meticulously along the footpath, as well as helping his wife to make the space as clean as possible. For Anand Bhai the footpath represents all that he owns; a wooden cart used for collecting scrap, four steel utensils, a couple of jute bags stitched together and a small tent.

*"This very footpath has been my home for the last 20 years"<sup>14</sup>*

The families continually aim to establish a more permanent location to sleep, however, their situation can change very quickly. Families are therefore forced to adopt a precarious existence where their location of sleep is not guaranteed. Being exposed to the elements means that the weather plays a large role in dictating where families can sleep. When it rains the pavements become flooded and families seek shelter under nearby bridges or in construction sites. The municipal authorities pose an additional threat and often force them to move on from their current location without warning often confiscating their belongings simultaneously.

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<sup>14</sup> Quote from "Nabu on the Streets of Ahmedabad", submitted by Arnab Banerjee

*“Of all the things that pained Dalaji, his incapability to provide shelter to his children probably hurt him the most”<sup>15</sup>*

Families living on the streets are extremely vulnerable, and their desperation for shelter can sometimes be taken advantage of by crooks. Some criminals try to scam the homeless by pretending to be middle men who promise them a government house. The hope of temporary or even permanent shelter can therefore become an object of manipulation; Dalaji is one such victim of this scam. He had been giving money to someone for three to four years with no return. He continues to hope that he will be able to move into a permanent shelter one day.

The footpath outside IIM-A has been the main focus of the narratives compiled by the students. Although homelessness exists throughout Ahmedabad, this space is particularly poignant within the discussion of homelessness within the city. The longevity of homelessness in this location is important to consider and raises some difficult questions about who has the right to this urban space. Despite being residents of the city for several generations, the homeless are continually excluded and are unable to access the same rights as the students walking past them to classes. The image of the IIM wall separating the pavement and the campus by a few metres is a striking image of this division.

*“Anand Bhai lives on the footpath that is right next to the new IIM Ahmedabad campus. A mere 100 metres separate the lives of those who wage a battle with hunger each day, and those who wage a battle for securing a high paying job out of the best business school in India”<sup>16</sup>*

## **Occupations**

Searching for work is one of the main reasons why families or individuals end up on the streets. Both individuals and families migrate from rural villages in Gujarat and Rajasthan to Ahmedabad in search of a better life in the city, Ahmedabad. The lack of economic opportunities in rural communities is a main push factor away from these areas, and families and individual migrants are drawn in the city by perceptions of opportunity and hope. Finding stable employment, however, is difficult and many struggle to maintain a consistent income.

*“Abject poverty and the rapidly fading earning ability of petty musicians forced his father to migrate to Ahmedabad from his village Nissa near Mehsana with his three children brothers about 30 years ago”<sup>17</sup>*

A significant proportion of labour in the informal sector is carried out by the homeless. The informal sector is an alternative model of employment based on informal business networks and unorganised labour. Its economic contribution is often undervalued and underestimated despite its productivity. CSTEP, a collection of 29 NGOs, addressed these issues in a report named the “Invisible City Makers”. This Bangalore based report reveals that despite the National Policy on Street Vendors many areas such as Bangalore do not implement it. The policy enables street vendors to claim legal state and are entitled to legitimate public trading zones in the city. The legislation also promotes the organization of street vendors into unions, cooperatives, or associations to facilitate their collective empowerment.

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<sup>15</sup> Extract from “The Other Side of the Wall”, submitted by Koushik Bhattacharyya

<sup>16</sup> Extract from “The Life of Anand Bhai, the rag picker”, submitted by Manish Verma

<sup>17</sup> Extract from “The Life of Anand Bhai, the rag picker”, submitted by Manish Verma

Although work is often unpredictable and it is hard to maintain a reliable income, the informal sector does provide much needed employment. Anand Bhai owns a peddle rickshaw for petty goods transport and he often earns Rs. 50 per day. However sometimes customers are hard to find - at the time his personal narrative was being recorded, he had been without work for 4 days. Although rickshaws are a popular source of income they are sometimes difficult to get on lease as owners are not willing to risk being raided by the police. Some of Rajiv's fellow rickshaw drivers sleep on the rickshaw, either to protect the rickshaw from being stolen or to protect themselves from rodents or other nocturnal animals. Being able to purchase a rickshaw over renting can be a milestone for a homeless family; Rajiv was able to buy one after judiciously saving his earns which is often very difficult without the security of a bank account.

The lack of access to formal saving institutions such as banks is a major problem for the homeless. This stems from not having crucial forms of identification which are often entirely inaccessible to the homeless class of people. The bureaucratic hurdles and general systemic discrimination highly limit their chances of engaging with formal systems of banking. There have been efforts in Delhi to minimise this problem, but they have been on a very small scale. In 2010 just under a hundred homeless individuals opened an account with Corporation Bank as part of a project run by Homeless Citizen's Resource Centre<sup>18</sup>. Although this figure is small compared to the total Delhi homeless population of over 100,000<sup>19</sup>, this scheme could lead to increased financial rights for people living on the streets and applied in other cities such as Ahmedabad.

Rag picking is another major occupation for many homeless families. This is a form of informal sector work undertaken by both adults and children which involves the separation of different materials of value from general waste. All metals, unsoiled paper, plastics, glass and cardboard are readily marketable so therefore these materials are sold to a master rag picker in exchange for money. However workers are often exploited by the masters and can become bonded into this form of labour. The master can charge up to 20 per cent interest per day. Furthermore, this is dangerous work as waste collector's exposure to hazardous material makes them very susceptible to diseases like tuberculosis and cancer. Rag picking is often not the single source of income, but part of a portfolio of small income-informal sector jobs such as construction work and traditional crafts from their ancestral village. Musical instruments such as the Sarangi are often played. The logic behind this irregular pattern of work is to minimise financial risk and income uncertainty.

Begging is a contested activity among the homeless. Many have to rely on this form of income in order to supplement their earnings, while others do not beg as an issue of pride. Anand Bai recounted that his father used to be furious if he found his children begging. Backed by the 'Bombay Prevention of Begging Act', 1959, public perceptions of begging consider it as simply a criminal activity universally associated with homelessness. In reality the picture is more complex and there are many conflicting views within the homeless community. An Action Aid study in 2003 found that only 28 percent of the homeless live on mendicancy<sup>20</sup>.

*"These people don't beg for money, they beg for work"*<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/UID-gives-identity-bank-account-to-27-homeless/articleshow/7007753.cms>

<sup>19</sup> <http://homelesspeople.in/?q=node/345>

<sup>20</sup> Action Aid (2003) Study on Homelessness and Beggary

<sup>21</sup> Extract from "The Crane", submitted by Siddhartha Banerjee

## **Food**

Life for the homeless consists of a series of daily struggles to satisfy the finely balanced equation between income and food. Often all of the daily income for a family, typically around Rs. 100, will be spent on food which provides one or two meals each. Meals are simple and the quantity is unpredictable; Mukesh Bhai's family goes hungry for the last ten days of every month because his salary cannot support the whole of his family. During this period each month they become solely reliant on food handouts. When there is food available it is cooked over a makeshift wood stove made of bricks as kerosene stoves would mean additional possession to look after as well as kerosene being costly.

*"At such times when they don't have any food left, Jayesh's mother just asks them to drink some water and go to sleep. This he says prevents his stomach from burning"<sup>22</sup>*

The desperate situation of nutrition means that food can easily become an object of power and control. The manipulation of food access can reveal the power relations within society. Vaju Raju Bhai explains that their belongings are often confiscated by the municipal force they throw away their food as an act of aggression. More perversely, food has been used to lure women into cars. Eve teasing is big problem for women particularly during night; men travelling on the road during night stop their cars and invite women of the family to come and sit in the car by offering them food. These men are usually between the age of 20 to 25 and take advantage of the women's intensely vulnerable situation.

Food can also be subject to bureaucracy as accessing ration cards is a major problem. An address and BPL cards are needed to apply for this social security making it impossible for the homeless to access. It was reported by the Supreme Court in 2010 that the Delhi government had failed to distribute ration cards for the last three years, and potentially other urban governments have also become complacent<sup>23</sup>. For instance, the local authorities have collected Ramesh's details a number of times in the past few years in order to provide him with a ration card, but his lack of identification remains a major constraint. Identity cards are very difficult to obtain as the individual has to return to his or her ancestral village to get the birth certificates are very expensive. Sanje has forgotten the name of his ancestral village meaning accessing food rations for him is near impossible.

However, often there are opportunities within the city for families and individuals to gain a more stable provision of food. The 'Home for Widows and Children' is an initiative of the Government of Gujarat. It has become a well known safe space for women and children as they are treated properly. It is managed professionally and detailed records are kept regarding who joins the initiative. Every afternoon, food can be collected from this place.

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<sup>22</sup> Extract from "Jayesh – The kid from just opposite IIM-A", submitted by Amit Gajakosh

<sup>23</sup> Supreme Court of India (2010) Court no. 5 Date: 20/10/2010

## Education

Education is widely considered an important right within India; this was confirmed in policy as part of the 'Right to Education Act' in 2009. However, even though India made education a fundamental right for every child between 6 and 14, for many homeless children accessing this right is limited. Reasons range from the school being far away, to work being perceived as more a profitable occupation for children. Often parents simply do not know how the schooling system operates and believe that the only option is to pay for education. For others it is a bureaucratic matter as they do not have required birth certificates for the children to access education.

The largest constraint on sending homeless children to school is the relative importance of work and income. Homeless families are forced into a precarious existence in which every rupee coin and note dictates their survival on a daily basis. For many families schooling is a luxury they cannot afford due to the loss of potential earnings from the child's labour. Some parents have become disillusioned by the education system and cannot see the added value of committing time to schooling. When daily life is dominated by the struggle for food and work, the importance of education is sidelined. For families it is often a crude cost-benefit analysis leading to the conclusion that it is more profitable for children to work in the nearby mills, polish shoes or work as a rag picker. Children also often have to guard the family's place of sleep in case the municipalities arrive to confiscate their belongings; this again limits their attendance at school.

*"My children of a rag picker and will become rag pickers themselves"<sup>24</sup>*

*"My father was a vagabond so am I and I do not see why my son would be different... I survived the world without being educated why I need my son to become educated. Especially when he can study only till class 8<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> in some Government school and then neither he would work as a mason nor would he get a decent job otherwise"<sup>25</sup>*

Even when the family is lucky enough to have choice, issues of gender and perceived female safety can be further constraints. A father and brother's concern about a girl's safety at school can again provide justification for taking her out of education. Caste and religious based discrimination also act as limitations to accessing education. Not only do the homeless face discrimination from the other students, but also by teachers within the institution itself.

*"Rama Peer and the others when asked as to why they didn't send their daughters to school, they came out with various reasons. They said girls are harassed in school... One of the young boys said that in for the poor, their honour was the biggest thing. If anyone ever held one of their sisters' or daughters' hands in school, they would be dishonoured."<sup>26</sup>*

In other family circumstances parents are more optimistic about the education system. Some take advantage of NGO schools which have been set up in the nearby area, while many hope to be able to send their children to school in the future. One man stated he "never deviates from the basic values and principles of life" by aspiring to provide his children with a basic education. Many narratives convey the desperation of the parents to provide their children with schooling and describe

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<sup>24</sup> Quote from "A sordid tale of hopelessness", submitted by Manish Verma

<sup>25</sup> Quote from "Given into helplessness", submitted by Yugal Joshi

<sup>26</sup> Extract from "Ragpicker", submitted by Anurag Dutta & Supriya Punia



education being their “saviour”. Although many are still cynical about government school, for many people schools are perceived as offering a chance for their children to re-integrate into society as well as increasing their choices later in life. One homeless man answered that his biggest frustration was that he was only qualified to do physical labour because of his lack of education.

Within the homeless population, education is a divisive topic and should be approached with sensitivity. There are a range of attitudes which reflect different priorities and values. While some are disillusioned by the government’s promises and prioritise income, others are more hopeful that their children will have the opportunity to attend school. However, the potential benefits from education are still not being realised and many homeless remain illiterate.

“Somehow education is still not leading to empowerment”<sup>27</sup>

## ***Health and Medical Care***

Health burdens and homelessness are inextricably linked as health can be largely determined by social conditions of a particular population or individual. As literature surrounding the ‘social determinants of health’ expands, housing is increasingly being researched as an influencing factor. Substandard housing or a lack of basic shelter can have detrimental effects on health; there is increased exposure to contagious diseases (e.g. TB, respiratory illnesses etc.), violence, malnutrition and harmful weather. Additionally, behavioural health issues such as depression or alcoholism often develop or are made worse in such difficult situations, especially if there is no immediate solution<sup>28</sup>.

As well as the social conditions impacting health, inaccessibility of health care among the homeless population is a universal reality. The main concern often is not necessarily the undignified existence of living on the pavement but the lack of medical care. Falling ill was described as the “thing that they dread the most”. Many families are forced to make highly rationalised choices about who ‘needs’ to see the doctor. Illnesses such as bronchitis and TB are highly prevalent and the treatment is hard to obtain. The family often has to pool financial resources in order to support the members of the family in need. There is an unwillingness to borrow money from the money lenders as they are viewed as crooks. Many children have never been to the doctor even when evidence of jaundice is apparent.

Childbirth is dangerous and is another example where proper medical assistance cannot be accessed. The alternative to a hospital is to pay to use a private room in a house as the hospital is an intimidating and unfamiliar space. A study in Bangalore found that 90 percent of babies to homeless mothers are born in hospital, while 10 percent are delivered in the community with the support of untrained burses<sup>29</sup>. One woman in Ahmedabad was not able to have her child in hospital because she did not have the correct identity papers. Even after birth children cannot be supported and medically monitored; death through post birth complication becomes an everyday reality for many families.

*“His wife worked as long as possible even when she was pregnant. There was virtually no care for her during this period. The delivery took place in a local house with the help of a ‘dai’. He had to pay about Rs 200 for the procedure. He did not even consider visiting the government hospital... he did not have any papers with*

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<sup>27</sup> Extract from “Life History of Mukesh bhai”, submitted by Prateek Agarwal

<sup>28</sup> NHCHC (2011) Homelessness & Health: What’s the connection?

<sup>29</sup> Chaudhry, S. et al. (2011) Homeless women and violence in “The Fear that Stalks: Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces”, New Delhi

*him to prove his identity and he thought getting treatment from government hospitals needed lots of money”<sup>30</sup>*

For homeless women having a child is often not their choice. Contraception is extremely hard to access as the pill is very expensive and getting tubes tied requires recovery and rest post-operation. This is a luxury which most homeless women cannot afford. Condoms are not a popular alternative, as there is a stigma surrounding them amongst men. Women often have multiple children and are often solely their responsibility. Already malnourished and in poor health themselves, the mothers find it extremely difficult to care for their family.

If the families are able to get to hospital they often face further discrimination by the hospital staff. As a result some families put money aside then they use it for their children's treatment. They use a private doctor for minor conditions as the hospital refuses to provide them with treatment for his children. The stigma of homelessness can be oppressive and in some cases it has been reported that doctors are unwilling to treat street children.

### ***The State and Urban Municipality***

*“I heard many sarcastic stories from Umesh on law and order and implementation of rules. He has no trust in the law. According to him, law is only implemented to punish innocent people... [and]is a means to suppress the poor people and prevent them to take active part in the development path of the country”<sup>31</sup>*

For many families the urban authorities of Ahmedabad are a daily threat. Many families and individuals who live on the streets are under a lot of pressure by the police to move on and regularly change locations. Often the police confiscate their belongings and then they have to pay a penalty in order for them to be returned. Fees can be up to Rs. 500 for the return of a pedal rickshaw and Rs. 5 per blanket. The homeless live under constant fear that their possessions are going to be taken away by the government or local authorities. This often concerns them more than food or work.

*“Sanje does not expect much from the municipality. The only contact that he has with them is when they come - 6 to 8 times a year - and take his family's stuff away because as a rule, they have no right to be there”<sup>32</sup>*

Families have devised tactics of 'survival' as they try to avoid the threat of the authorities. Bhavna and her children have to collect their meagre belongings and hide them somewhere quickly for fear of a beating or being taken away from their home. They pretend to pack up and move across the street, but also end up returning. In case of a police raid one family keeps all household items packed together; their bundle of items can be loaded into the paddle rickshaw meaning they can rush away from the state officials when they arrive.

Again, the space of the IIM-A campus becomes relevant for this discussion as a homeless man explains the role of IIM within this conflict with the urban authorities

*“Municipal Corporation trucks regularly raid the pavements and collect all their belongings, which have no way of being reclaimed. Apparently, according to Dileep, some of these raids are a direct result of IIM-A administration complaining about*

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<sup>30</sup> Extract from “Story of Suda”, submitted by Nikhil Bakare

<sup>31</sup> Extract from “Umesh Bhai: A Kabadi Wala”, submitted by Abhijit Roy

<sup>32</sup> Extract from “A real-life story in Ahmedabad”, submitted by Jean-Baptiste Devevey

*them to the Municipal Authorities. Concerning this, he also tried to meet Prof. Dholakia, the previous director of IIM-A, but nobody cared for what he had to say”<sup>33</sup>*

## **Women**

*“Kokila Ben’s day starts early in the morning, filling water from the nearby water source and cleaning up the area of the street where they live. She then goes to the nearby provision store to buy the daily ration. She will also collect dry wood for cooking. After cooking the food, she will clean and set-up the furniture on the street for display. She will wake her daughter up and make her ready for the NGO run Prayas School. During the day, she will go to see her sick daughter who happens to live on the nearby street. She will also look after the shop while her husband is away for the furniture repair work”<sup>34</sup>*

Homelessness is a particular lived experience for women. Although there is no universal female experience, there is a distinct gender dynamic which is important to acknowledge. Within a family the daily chores of water and firewood collection are perceived to be female activities within Indian society. Yaffa Truelove’s investigation into the nature of slum household water collection in Delhi revealed the gendered nature of this activity<sup>35</sup>. These “urban subjectivities”, as Truelove refers to them, can be seen in the lived experience of homelessness in Ahmedabad and is significant as the pressure to provide basic resources falls upon the woman.

Families often prioritise the marriages of the women in the family, but these are financially crippling because of the need to raise a dowry. Even though marriage is, arguably, a search for stability and security, it can sometimes become something restrictive and constraining. Many women become homeless because they run away from their husbands who abuse them or have drinking problems. An IGSSS study on homelessness in Delhi revealed that 29 percent of women left home due to ill treatment and 18 percent were deserted by the husbands. The stability of being married can also collapse if the husband suffers an injury at work. One woman, Fatima, was left alone with four children after her husband died from a construction accident. With no savings left, she took the help of a money-lender to finance her daughter’s education and gain day-to-day financial stability.

A controversial topic which has been left unmentioned within the IIM-A oral histories is sex work. Studies, mainly from the US and the UK, have explored this occupation among the homeless and there are many active debates regarding the nature of this hidden economy<sup>36</sup>. This is a very dangerous occupation where the women can be the victims of violence and abuse. Although limited information is available, more informal research points to its prevalence on the streets. The ‘Homeless Hub, Canada’ recently produced a paper on the lived experience of UK street-based sex workers<sup>37</sup> and ‘Shelter UK’ have investigated, more specifically, drug addiction amongst sex workers<sup>38</sup>. Both reports acknowledge the stigma of this occupation and the problems of researching the “most excluded and marginalised groups of homeless people”<sup>39</sup>. This population can only be

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<sup>33</sup> Extract from “Life History of a Homeless Person”, submitted by Hoonar Janu

<sup>34</sup> Extract from “Compiled stories of people living on the streets”, submitted by Gurjodhpal Singh & Priyambhu Arya

<sup>35</sup> Truelove, Y (2011) Re-conceptualising water inequality in Delhi, Indian through a feminist political ecology framework, *Geoforum*, 42, pp.143-152

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Harding & Hamilton (2009) Working Girls: Abuse or Choice in Street-Level Sex Work? *Br J Soc Work*, 39 (6)

<sup>37</sup> Mellor, R & Lovell, A (2012) The lived experience of UK street based sex workers and the health consequences, *Health Promot Int.*, 27 (3), pp.311-22

<sup>38</sup> Shelter (2004) Off the streets: tackling homelessness among female street-based sex workers

<sup>39</sup> p.4 Shelter (2004) Off the streets: tackling homelessness among female street-based sex workers

explored once close relationships have been formed between researcher and respondent; therefore sex work does not feature in this study because of its limited scope.

Violence against women on the street is another controversial topic area in need of deeper research. Much of the current literature focuses on Delhi, but homeless women in Ahmedabad are likely to be facing many of the same issues. The Indo Global Social Service Society (IGSSS) in 2008 found that women formed 4.7 per cent of the total number of homeless counted, and therefore are a vulnerable minority. A lack of adequate housing and increased vulnerability to violence is a well known link amongst street woman. Many women face verbal and physical abuse and sexual violence, but cannot access shelters to protect themselves. The instances of rape, molestation and women spending sleepless nights guarding their children are a common feature among homeless women<sup>40</sup>. Even in cities such as Lucknow, Varanasi and Allahabad the shelters are just for men, not open 24 hours and not open all year round for all homeless citizens<sup>41</sup>.

## **Community**

*“Unlike living in their villages, here takurs, marwaries and dalits all live in close quarters, their poverty helping them overcome centuries of caste tensions”<sup>42</sup>*

Typically homeless families and individuals live together within an informally established community. Particularly outside IIM-A campus the community is well established and has occupied this plot of land since before the university campus was built. Around fifty families live alongside each other and the pavement is divided into designated areas. Many have a positive view of the community that they live in and rely on other families for support. Other communities cluster according to skills; Anand Bhai belongs to a community of sarangi players who performed at traditional Gujarati weddings and fairs. These informal networks within the city allow the homeless to make their own claim to the city.

*“[Umesh] feels himself an integral part of Ahmedabad”<sup>43</sup>*

However, divisions and prejudices do exist amongst the homeless population. The assumption that their values and outlooks are homogenous is false and in reality many tensions between groups exist. The following example is an instance of this type of behaviour:

*“They consider themselves better than the bhangi (untouchable) family that lives close by. During one of the interactions someone walked up to the community with a packet full of poha. One of the women went to collect it while the others made no move. On asking why, Kanti asserted that he would never have food cooked by a bhangi no matter how hungry he was. If a bhangi becomes a bit rich he says, he only feeds other poor bhangis. Similarly if someone in his caste became rich, he would only feed them. Even among the kids, the two bhangi girls are constantly teased and made fun of by the other kids”<sup>44</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Chaudhry, S. et al. (2011) Homeless women and violence in “The Fear that Stalks: Gender-based Violence in Public Spaces”, New Delhi

<sup>41</sup> *ibid*

<sup>42</sup> Extract from “A walk on the pavements of IIM Ahmedabad”, submitted by Nidhi Dandona and Vidhya Roopa

<sup>43</sup> Extract from “Umesh Bhai – a Kabadi Wala”, submitted by Abhijit Roy

<sup>44</sup> Extract from “Kanti Ram and Rajesh – Pavement Dwellers”, submitted by Megha Jain

## Conclusion

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This report has aimed to illustrate the complex and diverse personal narratives within the experience of homelessness. Using oral histories of over fifty homelessness individuals living in Ahmedabad a picture can start to be constructed of life on the streets. Different themes have been explored including food, employment, conflicts with authority and the negotiation of gender norms. Although this report aims to provide an accurate representative of homelessness, it is important to acknowledge that this research is limited in scope. Many more experiences of marginalized families and individuals exist within the city but they cannot all be recorded. These instances of daily hardships faced by the homeless show the heterogeneous nature of the population who all have individual needs and values. This collection of narratives aims to restore the 'humanity' within the literature and break down perception of this population being non-citizens.

Although there are some tales of optimism and ambition among the narratives of homelessness, the situation that many face continues to be highly precarious. The cycle of poverty is tight and the nature of homelessness in Ahmedabad is strikingly long term. This is not a temporary state which can happen to anyone, but instead it is prolonged and reflects more systemic problems within society. As poignantly put by one student "in such a case, generation after generation of a family like Mukesh bhai's are trapped in a life of living on the streets because they never have the power to break out of the poverty cycle"<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Extract from "Life history of Mukesh bhai", submitted by Prateek Agarwal