The communal fury that engulfed the Punjab at the time of partition in August 1947, produced a human tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions. Starting with armed attacks on villages in the Multan and Rawalpindi districts in March, the violence escalated into an orgy of violence and plunder. This resulted in a massive upheaval and evacuation of populations in August and September, 1947. Communal passions swept the whole Punjab community clean of all decency, morality and sense of human values. Embittered relations between the new Dominions of India and Pakistan brought about a virtual collapse of governments. Communal frenzy deranged the minds of the people who witnessed it. All sections of Punjabi society could count among their kinsmen those who were uprooted, plundered, assaulted and murdered. It was the women, however, who were frequently singled out for humiliating treatment at the hands of men of the rival community: Molestation, rape mutilation, abduction, forcible conversion, marriage and death loomed large. The women were sometimes done to death by their own men folk in order to save their ‘honour’.1 Jawaharlal Nehru candidly observed to an Indian women’s conference in December 1947, ‘The last few months have been terrible happenings in northern India and women have perhaps been the Chief sufferers’.2

Systematic communal outrages on women began in March 1947 in Rawalpindi district. A number of Sikh villages were attacked over an eight-day period and in addition to large-scale murder and looting, many cases of rape and abduction were reported.3 In the village of Theo Khalsa, some ninety women committed suicide by throwing themselves into a well, while at another

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place thirty-two women were put to the sword by their own men when their capture by Muslim attackers was seen to be imminent.4

(Apart from abductions that took place in the course of a mob attack on a village, there was also the kidnapping of women on a planned basis. Particularly, in situations where large numbers of refugees – disorientated and inadequately protected – were assembled or on the move.) Since time immemorial, rape has been a prominent seemingly inevitable feature of war, a conscious process of maximizing intimidation in a conquered people. And in situations of civil war, where nearly every man is a soldier fighting for his homeland, women can come to be seen as ‘territory’ to be ‘occupied’. In such a context revenge can become a powerful motive (or excuse) for abuse of women.5 However, some men risked their lives to rescue women who were in danger of being violated or killed. Anis Kidwai, who was a social worker in the refugee camps in Delhi at the time, recalls an old Hindu Jat rescuing a Muslim girl in the face of hostility from his fellow villagers.6

Infact, peasants were not the only or the worst offenders for men from all social classes were involved in rape and abduction. Men of influence, like deputy commissioners and police officials, often worked hard to prevent abductions and tried to rescue the victims. But, equally, such men often abused their authority to connive at, or participate in, the crimes.7 Leonard Mosley, summarizing the collective costs of the partition writes of “100,000 young girls kidnapped by both sides forcibly converted or sold on the auction block”.8 Infact, many people converted to Islam in order to save their lives and honour

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
of their females.9 The abduction of women and children was a part of a programme for planned retaliation.

The circumstances of abduction and reasons for it varied. Some women had been separated from their families while escaping or strayed and were picked up. Some were left behind as hostages for the safe passage of their families; still others were given interim protection and then incorporated into the host family. There was hardly a family which did not have some near or distant women relatives abducted. Some women had put up fierce resistance against men who had tried to molest and rape them. In my interviews, I encountered a case with similar experience. Harjit Kaur (name change as per her own wishes) was raped and shot in the leg and left for dead but was saved by a young boy and brought to Jullundur and she had three young children. Harjit Kaur’s husband and son were killed in front of her own eyes and she had survived the ordeal with her two daughters whom she raised in Gandhi Vanita Ashram at Jullundur and then married them off. But Harjit Kaur had spent all her life in the ‘Ashram’ only.10 Fear of abduction or of falling into the hands of the enemy compelled many to commit suicide. Instances of women jumping into wells and rivers in order to escape abduction and the loss of their chastity are well recorded. In Theo Khalsa a village in West Punjab, some ninety women jumped into a well. Infact, the well became so full that more women could not jump in. In village Hanoli in Mianwala district, hundreds of women jumped into wells to escape being molested.11 Fathers killed their own daughters. There were many incidents of family and community violence. The tales of the women’s sacrifice occupy a prominent place in the stories of partition. It is they who are seen to have upheld, by offering themselves up for death, and more particularly ‘heroic’ death, for the ‘honour’ of the community. As recounted by her Bahadur, “In Gulab Singh’s haveli twenty-six girls had

10 Oral Transcriptions.
been put aside. First of all my father, Sant Raja Singh, when he brought his
daughter, he brought her into the courtyard to kill her, first of all he prayed (he
did ardaas) saying (sacche padshah), we have not allowed your Sikhi to get
stained and in order to save it we are going to sacrifice our daughters, make
them martyrs please forgive us.... He killed two and third was my sister Maan
Kaur... my sister came, and sat in front of my father, and I stood there, right
next to my father clutching on to his kurta as children do, I was clinging to
him... but when my father swung his kirpan (vaar kita) perhaps some doubt or
fear came into his mind, or perhaps the kirpan got stuck in her dupatta... it was
such a frightening, such a fearful scene. Then my sister, with her own hands
moved her dupatta aside and then he swung the kirpan and her head and neck
rolled off and fell... far away. I crept downstairs, weeping, sobbing and all the
while I could hear the regular swing and hit of the kirpans... twenty-five girls
were killed, they were cut. One girl, my taya’s (uncle’s) daughter-in-law, who
was pregnant... somehow didn’t get killed and later my taya’s son shot her
with a pistol... but she was saved. She told us, kill me, I will not survive... I
have a child in my womb. She was wounded in the stomach, there was a large
hole from which blood was flowing. Then my mother and uncle sat together
and Harnam Kaur – her name was Harnam Kaur – she said give me some
affim, opium. We arranged for affim... in a ladle we mixed opium with
saliva... She said the japji saab path (prayers)... just as the japji path bhog
(culmination) took place. She did her bhog completely as if she was prepared
for death... few people can do that... she had death in her control and it was
only when she wanted it that death took her. For nearly half an hour she did the
path... half an hour and then as she spoke her last shlook (hymn), she also
ended.”

The abduction and rape of women, the physical mutilation of their
bodies, the tattooing of their sexual organs with symbols of the other religion –

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12 Bir Bahadur Singh, personal interview in Urvashi Butalia’s article “Community, State and
Gender (on Women’s Agency during partition) in Economic and Political Weekly, April 1993,
WS, p. 15.
these acts had been universally condemned. But mention of this kind of violence had never been made by anyone, neither the families, nor the state. And yet, its scale was not small. Virtually, every village had similar stories. Gurmeet Singh, a survivor from village Jhamali described their plight: “On the night of the 12th of March, we left at 4 a.m., in the early hours of the morning. Our won family, all the people we collected them in the gurudwara and got some men to guard them. We gave them orders to kill all the young girls, and as for the gurudwara, to pour oil on it and set it on fire.

We decided this among ourselves. We felt totally helpless – so many people had collected, we were completely surrounded. If you looked around, all you could see was a sea of people in all four directions wherever the eye could reach, there were men. After all, you get frightened... people collected together to comfort each other. But then we found we were helpless... we had no weapons, whatever little we had they had taken. Then they took a decision in the gurudwara that all the young girls and women – two or three persons were assigned the task of finishing them off. Those in the gurudwara were asked to set it on fire with those inside... first, we killed all the young girls with our own hands; kerosene was poured over them inside the gurudwara and the place was set on fire ... women and children, where could they go?”

There were number of such incidents of both men and women offering themselves up for death or killed in an attempt to protect the ‘purity’ and ‘sanctity’ of religion. Women jumped into burning houses and carried packets of poison to be swallowed in case they were captured. The women in Punjab during the riots were victims of miseries and violence untold. Abduction, rape, killing and suicide were rampant. In Duberan 70 women were abducted, in Kahuta this figure was as high as 500, in Harial 40, in Jainch 30, in Bamali

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Even worse and inhumane was the way the abducted women were sold from hand to hand and were ill used by their captors. Anis Kidwai records, “we have considerable evidence before us to show that 75 per cent of the girls still (probably in 1949) being sold from one man to another. These girls of tender years have not been able to settle down anywhere, nor will they be able to settle down for many years. Their youth is being sold for a few thousand, and lustful men, having satisfied their lust for a while, begin to think of the monetary benefit that could come from their sale” Anis Kidwai’s husband, Shafi Ahmed Kidwai, was killed during the partition riots in Mursoori where he was working and Anis turned to social work with Muslim refugees. She describes the pitiful plight of these women. “In all of this sometimes a girl would be killed or she would be wounded. The “good stuff” would be shared among the police and army, the “second rate stuff” would go to everyone else. And then these girls would go from one hand to another and then another and after several would turn up in hotels to grace their décor, or they would also be handed over to police officers at some place so as to please them.

And every single of these girls, for they had been tricked would begin to look upon her ‘rescuer’ as an angel of mercy who had in this time of loot and killing, rescued her and fought for her and saved her. And when this man would cover her naked body with his own loincloth or banyan, at that moment she would forget her mother’s slit throat, her father’s bloody body, her husband’s trembling corpse. She would forget all this and instead, thank the man who had saved her. And why should she not do this? Rescuing her from the horror, this good man has brought her to his home. He is giving her respect he offers her marriage. How can she not become his slave for life?

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And it is only much later that she realizes that this man could not be as innocent as he projected himself to be... But by the time this realization dawned on the woman, it was too late. Now there was nowhere for her to go as by this time she is about to become a mother, or she has passed through several hands. After seeing so many men’s faces, this daughter of Hindustan, how will she ever look at the faces of her parents, her husband.”

There was the unforgettable train incident of 24. September 1947, involving refugees going from Tehsil Pind Dadan Khan, District Jhelum, towards East Punjab. About 3,000 male passengers were massacred and young girls were distributed amongst the police force, the national guards and the local ‘goondas’. The victims were collected in an open space and a free hand was given to the mob. After the massacre was over the girls were distributed like sweets.” Those who were old were discarded and abandoned. There were hundreds of cases where families ran for their lives and the women and children were left behind and lost in the confusion.

The women during partition suffered cruelty and humiliation. For an abducted woman, there was nobody she could turn to for help. She had to live with a person who may have killed her husband, brother or father, her children or other members of the family. She was in a kind of prison house from which there was no escape. Her abductor believed that people of her community had killed members of his community and abducted their women. Hence, he had no sense of guilt, infact he took pride in having taken revenge by abducting her. Abduction as a retaliatory measure was not only assertion of identity but it was also humiliation of the other community through the abduction of women. Deep down, women were treated as property. That was why such a fun was made of ‘our’ women and ‘their’ women.

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There were a large number of Hindu and Sikh women who were abducted and under duress married to Muslims and were forcibly converted to Islam. The problem of their recovery was beset with many difficulties. It was complicated by religious and emotional scruples and that sentiment of orthodoxy which is hard to overcome.\textsuperscript{18} The Indian official view shared by a large number of people was that abducted women must be restored. Abduction and forced marriages were carried out systematically in West Punjab, the North-West Frontier Province and occupied Kashmir. Later on, in the disturbed areas in India, similar atrocities were perpetrated by way of retaliation.

The Governments of both the countries realized the urgency of handling this matter jointly. The Prime Ministers of India and Pakistan, after one of their joint tours of the affected areas of both the countries on 3 September, 1947, declared that forced marriages and conversions would not be recognized. The decision was endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi who exhorted the Governments to “stake their all on the rescue of these women... for the task was so big that none but the Governments could tackle it.”\textsuperscript{19} Special arrangements were made with regard to abducted women. “First and foremost, the need was to have an organization which would cut through routine administrative red-tape and would keep itself away from the possibility of being affected by Indo-Pakistan misunderstandings on other matters. It was felt from the very beginning that this was purely a humanitarian task above controversy and above politics...”\textsuperscript{20} It was agreed by both the governments that the work should be given an emergency character. It was decided that a camp for non-Muslim recovered women should be set up at Lahore. Similarly, a base camp for Muslim recovered women was set up at Jullundur.

The Governments of India and Pakistan had the first inter-Dominion conference to discuss the problem at Lahore on December 6. It was attended by

\begin{footnotesize}

\textsuperscript{19} Facts About Recovery of Abducted Persons in India and Pakistan. Govt. of India Publication, New Delhi, p. 6.
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the Refugee Minister of India and Pakistan as well as by a large number of prominent social workers on either side. Shrimati Rameshwari Nehru, Shrimati Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya and Kumari Mridula Sarabhai were among those representing India. It was decided at this conference that all women abducted or forcibly married after March 1, 1947, should be restored and that a joint organization of the two dominions should be set up to carry out rescue work. A sub-committee consisting of the Commander of the Military Evacuee Organisation (M.E.O.s) of India and Pakistan, the Inspectors General of Police of East and West Punjab and the Refugee Commissions of the two provinces was appointed to work out details. The sub-committee was enjoined upon to meet immediately after the conference and submit its report in two or three days. Women social workers were to be associated with the operations at all levels.

Other important points of agreement reached at the conference were:

(i) Collection of statistics showing particulars of abducted girls.

(ii) Broadcasting of joint appeals for recovery by representatives of the two countries attending the conference, prominent women workers, ministers and members of legislature.

(iii) Organization of transit camps in every district for housing recovered women, pending their transfer to a central camp to be set up in each Dominion.

(iv) Exchange of weekly statements regarding the number of recovered women.

(v) An undertaking by the Inspector General of Police of N.W.F.P. to carry out recovery operations on the same lines as in West Punjab.

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20 Ibid.
A joint recovery appeal was issued soon after the conference over the signatures of distinguished representatives of both Dominions, including Lady Mountbatten and Miss Fatima Jinnah. This was further reinforced, later, by the observance of a “Restore the Women and Children Week” in East and West Punjab and in Delhi from February 16 to 22 (1948). Public meetings were held during the week at which appeals were made by political and religious leaders for the restoration and reception of abducted women.\footnote{Rao, U. Bhaskar. 1967. *The Story of Rehabilitation*. Delhi, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, p. 31.}

To speed up recovery operations, the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation opened search bureaus at Jullundur, Amritsar, Kurukshetra and Delhi. Lists compiled on the basis of information supplied by relatives, (admittedly) not complete, placed the number of women and girls abducted in Pakistan at around 33,000. Adding the corresponding figure for Kashmir, the total was reckoned to be in the neighbourhood of 50,000.\footnote{Rao, U. Bhaskar. 1967. *The Story of Rehabilitation*. Delhi, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, p. 31.}

Apart from evacuating the refugees, the units of the Military Evacuation Organisation (M.E.O.) were doing splendid work in rescuing abducted women and children. In one newspaper report, the work of the M.E.O.s was lauded, “About 1,000 abducted women from village Jandiala Kalsi in the Shekhpura district have been rescued by the military evacuation organisation.” Almost from the beginning the recovery operation was fraught with difficulty and tension. In the early stages, Pakistan protested at the involvement of the Military Evacuation Organization and suggested that its duties should be confined only to guarding transit camps and the actual work of rescue should be given to the police. The Indian government was reluctant because they claimed that in many instances the police themselves were the abductors of women. Abduction by people in positions of authority happened on both sides. In Montogomery, a tehsildar of Dipalpur, while participating enthusiastically in broadcasting appeals for information about abducted women, was said to have kept an abducted woman with him for eight months. In another instance, two
assistant sub-inspectors of police went to recover an abducted woman, and themselves raped her.\textsuperscript{23}

For several years after the initial treaty was signed, the fate of abducted women was of considerable concern to the two governments. Legislative Assembly records as well as newspapers and periodicals of the time, showed an ongoing concern and debate about various issues regarding the unequal pace of recovery in the two countries, the number of women who had been recovered, where the largest number of recoveries had taken place, why the Indian government was allowing Pakistani social workers free access to the agreed upon areas when Pakistan had arbitrarily decided to close off certain areas, why was it that fewer Hindu and Sikh women had been recovered from Pakistan and more Muslim women from India, why did the Indian government not slow down the pace of recoveries of Muslim women until more Hindu and Sikh women were found and so on.

Many speakers in the Constituent Assembly agreed that recovery effort should have been mounted, that it was ‘humanitarian’ in its objective. However, the debate in the Constituent Assembly also provided Indian political leaders to use the question of the recovery of abducted women to pronounce on the character of Pakistan. Speaker after speaker in the Assembly emphasized what they saw as Pakistan’s recalcitrance in keeping to terms of the joint agreement. They said that such behaviour was not what one would expect from a civilized government.\textsuperscript{24} At the same time, the fact that the Indian State was unable to press Pakistan to return as many women as India was recovering was seen as a sign of weakness on its part, an inability to draw the other country in line. Professor Shibban Lal Saxena (UP General) said he was deeply dissatisfied at the “failure of our government to be able to infuse a proper spirit

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{24} India: Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates. 1949.
in the other Dominion to restore our sisters to us.” He suggested India retaliate and do something commensurate with the gravity of the situation, not only because that was the right thing to do “by our sisters” but also because India had a ‘tradition’... Even now the Ramayana and Mahabharata were revered. For the sake of one woman who was taken away by Ravana the whole nation took up arms and went to war. And here there are thousands and the way they have been treated...... Our sisters from Kashmir were actually sold in the bazaars and what not was done to them.”

The feeling that Pakistan needed to be brought in line was echoed by others who felt, to use the words of Pandit Hriday Nath Kunzru, “the restoration of Muslim women to their rightful home (i.e. Pakistan) was a great moral duty. We cannot refuse to fulfil our obligations because others decline to fulfil theirs.” He was of the view that Pakistan ought to be made to feel that it was not an act of merit but of degradation to keep unwilling persons within its own territory and to “compel them to give up their own religion and to embrace Islam”.28

The Government’s representative, however, turned down these suggestions for retaliatory action. In response to Pandit Thakur Das Bhargav’s statement that “he saw no reason why a country is not justified in keeping these (Muslim) girls as hostages for some time”, Gopalswamy Ayyangar, speaking on behalf of the Indian government held that “such behaviour did not behove a civilized government. Rather it was India’s responsibility, given its modern, secular, rational outlook, to persuade the other country to behave in a manner that would be consistent with its claim to be a civilized government.” He reminded his colleagues that abductions had taken place on both sides, “we are not the monopolists of virtue and the people in the other dominion are not the monopolists of vice – we are as guilty as they have been.” Shrimati Ammu Swaminadhan from Madras said, “I am very sorry that some of the members

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25 Ibid., p. 522.
26 Ibid., p. 539.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 1467.
said that there should be retaliation. I think that is a most inhuman thing to do because after all, if two Governments are not agreeing with each other, that is not the fault of these innocent girls who have been victims of cruel circumstances. We should not think in terms of retaliation at all..."\(^{30}\)

Another major problem was what should be done if women resisted being recovered. These women presented a problem for the State as the law did not permit them to exercise the choice of deciding where and with whom to live. Both countries had agreed that after a certain date, neither forced conversions or marriages would be recognized. The tribunals that had been set up to decide disputed cases were made up of police officers from the two countries. Were they, people asked, competent to decide on the truth or otherwise of woman’s claim? Faced with this difficult question Gopalaswamy Ayyangar said, “women or abducted persons are rescued from surroundings which prima facie, do not give them the liberty to make a free choice as regards their own lives. The object of this legislation is to put them in an environment which will make them feel free to make this choice.”\(^{31}\) The Minister’s views found support among other members, but there was also opposition. Renuka Ray (West Bengal) said that “even if there was one case among a hundred in which there was a woman who did not wish to go back, the government needed to pay attention to it. After all in some cases legalized marriages do take place and we have to be very cautious to see that such women who do not wish to cancel such a marriage after so much time has elapsed are not due to our overzealousness also sent back.”\(^{32}\)

Adding his voice to the concern for the double trauma women would have to face, Shri Mahavir Tyagi said, “these girls had already been the victims of violence. Would it not be another act of violence if they were again uprooted and taken away to the proposed camps against their wishes?”\(^{33}\)

\(^{30}\) Ibid., p. 1483.
^{31}\) Ibid., p. 34
^{32}\) Ibid., p. 38.
^{33}\) Ibid., p. 31
Ayyangar, however, was firm. He claimed that “there had not been any case where, after these women were put in touch with their original fathers, mothers, brothers or husbands, anyone of them has said she wanted to go back to her abductor – a very natural state of feeling in the mind of a person who was, by exercise of coercion, abducted in the just place and put into a wrong environment. The idea is that in the environment that she is in at the moment, she is not a free agent, she has not got the liberty of the mind to say whether she wants to leave that environment and go back to her original environment or whether she should stay here.”

The Constituent Assembly was not the only place where the fate of women was discussed. The various journals and newspapers at the time raised their voices about the question of ‘National Honour’. The Organiser, the mouthpiece of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) took on the issue with gusto. On December 29, 1949 the front page of the Organiser carried a story entitled ‘Pakistan the Sinner: 25,000 Abducted, Thousands Sold’. The story ran as follows: ‘For the honour of Sita, Sri Rama warred against and destroyed Ravana, when filthy Khilji besieged Chittor its thousands of women headed by Rani Padmini all clad in gerua (Saffron) saris, mounted the funeral pyre smiling, ere the mleccha (impure) could pollute a drop of the noble Hindu blood. Today, when tens of hundreds of Hindu women are spending sorrowful days and unthinkable nights in Pakistan, the free government of the Union of India Sovereign Democratic Republic has nothing but a whimper for them.’

The rape and abduction of Hindu and Sikh women by Muslim men formed the backdrop against which accusations were levelled at Pakistan for being barbaric, uncivilized, lustful. The very formation of the nation of Pakistan out of the territory of Bharat (or, the body of Bharatmata) became a metaphor for the violation of the body of the pure Hindu woman. The Indian State was

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34 Ibid.
regularly assailed for its failure to protect its women and to respond to Pakistan, the aggressor State, in the language that it deserved.\textsuperscript{35}

For many writers in the Organiser the rape and abduction of women was shameful, but predictable, event for what else could be expected of Pakistan, a nation “built on the predatory desire for Hindu property and Hindu women took practically no steps to checkmate the lust and avarice of its champions.”\textsuperscript{36} Muslim women had also been abducted by Hindu and Sikh men. Hindu men were seen by and large as being harmless, even weak and certainly not lustful. “The Hindu mind is broad enough to do justice to others but not bold enough to demand justice.”\textsuperscript{37}

During this period, it became important for many writers of the Organiser to establish the purity of Mother India which was home to Hindu religion. The country was imaged in feminine terms, as the mother, and Partition was seen as a violation of its body. One issue of the Organiser had a front-page illustration of Mother India, the map of the country, with a woman lying on it, one limb cut off and severed with Nehru holding the bloody knife responsible for doing the severing.\textsuperscript{38} “National honour, the honour that was staked on the body of mother India, and therefore, by extension, on the bodies of all Hindu and Sikh women, mothers and would be mothers. The loss of these women, to men of the ‘other’ religion, was also a loss to their original’ families. These, and not the new families which the women may now be in, were the legitimate families, and it was to these that the women needed to be restored. If this meant disrupting the relationships that they may now be in, that they had ‘accepted’ for whatever reason, this had to be done… These were the families which were held up as legitimate; women therefore had to be removed from those ‘other’ non-acceptable families and relocated into the ‘real’ ones.

\textsuperscript{36} Organiser, December 14, 1949.
\textsuperscript{37} Organiser, December 14, 1949.
\textsuperscript{38} Organiser, August 14, 1947 (Urvashi).
This, for the State, was the honourable thing to do. The partition provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation’s honour.

This dispute about the connivance of the police in abduction was taken up at the next inter-Dominion Conference in New Delhi from December 18 to 20, 1947. It was pointed out that India had always stressed upon the association of the M.E.O. with the police in rescue operations. The Pakistani delegates countered with the question whether their troops would be allowed to function in the States in East Punjab. After consultations with these states India answered in the affirmative. The Pakistani representative conveyed the impression that their country would comply with the provisions of the agreement. Unfortunately, however, the pledge was not honoured. Even at the next conference at Lahore on January 8, 1949 Pakistan insisted on unilateral alteration of the arrangements, whereby the responsibility for the operations was placed exclusively in the hands of the police.

Transit camps were set up in the districts and central camps at Lahore in West Punjab and Jullundur in East Punjab. The camps in Pakistan were under the control of India and were guarded by the Indian troops. Those in India were controlled by Pakistan and were under the protection of its armed forces. The army also provided transport and escort from one country to the other. Women social workers were responsible for the supervision of the recovered women and children in the transit and Central camps. But the provision of accommodation, food and other facilities was the responsibility of the country in which the camps were located.

The Government of India appointed four Regional Organisers and nearly 40 social workers. Kumari Bhag Mehta was Provincial organiser in West Punjab. Eleven camps were opened for the reception and interim relief of recovered women, one in each district of West Punjab. Kumari Mridula Sarabhai was appointed representative of the women’s section of the

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Rehabilitation Ministry for all work in West Punjab. To ensure perfect co-
ordination, she was also entrusted with overall supervision of the work in East 
Punjab, under the Provincial organiser, Kumari Premvati Thapar. Homes for 
rescued women were established at Jullundur and Amritsar. The one at 
Jullundur, called the Gandhi Vanita Ashram, provided shelter for about 2,000 
women. The Amritsar home was a transit camp to which women from Lahore 
were conveyed en route to Jullundur. Pakistani violations of the agreement of 
December 6 went beyond the unilateral decision not to allow military personnel 
to join the rescue parities. The authorities suddenly closed five districts of West 
Punjab to the Indian Police and social workers on the pretext that these areas 
were close to the theatre of operations in Kashmir. It was soon announced that 
the N.W.F.P. was not agreeable to setting up any rescue organisation. It was a 
deliberate move to obstruct recovery work. It was well known that large 
numbers of abducted women had been transferred to the N.W.F.P. and the five 
closed districts of West Punjab. On the other hand, rescue operations in East 
Punjab proceeded without a hitch, in accordance with the Lahore pact. Transit 
camps were set up in all districts with the exception of Simla and Kangra. 
Social workers from Pakistan assisted the Indian police and recovered Muslim 
women, who were then sent back under Pakistani military escort.

The figures for recovery were revealing. By the end of March 1948, they 
were for West Punjab 3,648, the N.W.F.P. 340, Bahawarpur State – 419 – a 
total of 4,407. In another five months, by August, 998 were recovered from 
West Punjab, 34 from the N.W.F.P., five from Sindh, one from Baluchistan and 
157 from Bhawalpur had been recovered. The overall figure was thus 5,602. 
On the Indian side, women recovered from East Punjab, Pepsu, Delhi, Alwar 
and other provinces numbered 4,702 by the end of March 1948 and 9,723 by 
the end of August.40

40 Recovery and Restoration of Abducted Persons in India, Government of India Publication, 
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 18.
After August 1948, responsibility for the recovery operations was transferred first to the Minister without Portfolio and then to the External Affairs Ministry. Upto December 11, 1954, India handed over to Pakistan more than 20,000 recovered Muslim women. Another 2,000 or so were restored to relatives in India. Pakistan’s performance for the same period were just 8,817 of whom the bulk (5,602) had been restored before September, 1948.  

There were many hurdles which the social workers had to face during the recovery work. Social workers on both sides had to resort to all kinds of subterfuges to find abducted women. Often, the local police, meant to be accompanying and helping in the tracking down of women, would send ahead a warning and the women would be hidden away. Imaginative social workers countered this in a variety of ways by adopting disguises, they also used false names, acted secretly and on their own, or just stormed their way into homes where they suspected abducted women were being held. One such account is of Damyanti Sehgal’s (Social worker in recovery operation) interviewed by Urvashi Butalia.

“In the mornings we used to go to find girls from the rural area. In the evenings we used to come to the head office, to the camp and those women who had been rounded up from the area, they used to be brought to the camp where we would receive them. Then they used to be changed inter-dominion (i.e. between the two countries). The only difference was those workers were daring – they would go and find out women... 

We would go selling eggs. We would go into the villages and ask people for lassi, saying amma, amma, we have come from very far, please give us some lassi. Then we would tell stories, we would say we have come from Hindustan and you know, my younger brother, these bastard Sikhs have taken his young wife away, they’ve abducted her. He is bereft, and lonely. Do you know of any daughter of Kafirs in this area – if there is any such girl do tell us,
may be we can buy her and the poor man, at least he can set up home again. And the old women would know and they would often tell us there’s a girl in such and such place... Or amma, I am hungry, give me something, and we would try to win their confidence and then we would ask them, or tell them we wanted to buy a girl... and we would ask whether the people who had the girl would part with her, and then gently ask for the address... that was our way of getting information."

Most of the abducted women were under 35 years of age and from villages. The moment a police vehicle would enter a village, the abductors would come to know of it and would run away and hide in a nearby field or forest area with the abducted women. As the police raids on these houses proved abortive, the police decided that the best time to search a house could be around sunset when all the family members were likely to be at home. The recovery police staff used to leave their vehicle and driver at the outskirts of the village lest the abductors got a signal about the police raid. There was always the fear that if a girl was rescued from a village, the rest of the abducted girls may be sold or killed. To avoid detection, they walked down in twilight in separate groups of two or three each. Often the police party and the women social workers had to walk more than five kilometres. Generally, an ‘informer’ accompanied the police squad to lead them to the house of the abductor. The task was not easy as the abductor usually denied that the woman was abducted. Often he offered stiff resistance and had to be physically overpowered by the police. Similarly, the abducted women had to be persuaded by the women social workers to accompany them to the government camps in a government vehicle as some of them were unwilling and others extremely frightened.

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After recovery the women were admitted to the Recovered Women’s Camp which was guarded by the police. The condition of the camps were awful, worse than cattle sheds. They were overcrowded and because of lack of sanitary facilities, there were frequent outbreaks of epidemics and deaths. Within the limited budget, it was not possible to provide for more than two meals a day and a pair of clothes. In Lal Qila Camp, Anees Kidwai asked a female in tattered clothes with two young daughters whose head was uncovered, “why don’t you go out and do some job?” She with tear filled eyes replied, “How can I go out, can’t you see? We don’t even have a cloth to cover our head. My ‘kurta’ is tattered as I had been wearing this for a month. If we could get some clothes from somewhere, we would go out.”

The abductors seldom sat quiet. They tried all ways and means of getting back the women by going to the officers of the Recovery Organization and also to the camps where the recovered women were lodged, till they were informed that the women had revealed their true identity and it was fruitless for them to continue pursuing their case. One woman social worker was attached to each police recovery squad in every district of East Punjab. The women social workers had to be extremely courageous and were recruited after an interview on the sole recommendations of Mridula Sarabhai. Many of these social workers were also political workers associated with the Congress, the Communist Party, the Kisan Sabha or the Congress Socialist Party.

A joint meeting of India and Pakistan was held at Jullundur on 22 January 1948. The Home Minister of East Punjab, Sardar Swaran Singh chaired the meeting which discussed, among other things, the recovery of abducted women. Mridula suggested that the police force sent by one province to the other should be increased and transport should be placed at the disposal of the special police staff by each province, to enable them to move out as soon

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44 Ibid., p. 127.
as information was received.47 The time factor was important as there was little doubt that abducted women were being moved farther into the interior of both provinces.48 These suggestions were accepted. In addition to the transit camp at Amritsar, there were camps in Gurdaspur, Ferozpur, Ambala, Delhi, Jammu, Patiala and a few other places to lodge the recovered Muslim women and girls. The base camp at Jullundur was supervised by Pakistani social workers under the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan at Jullundur. On a similar pattern, a base camp for recovered Hindu and Sikh girls was set up at Lahore in Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, which was supervised by Kamlaben Patel and Smt. Bhag Mehta, a Congress social worker. Transit camps for the recovered Hindu and Sikh women were also opened in the districts of Sheikhupura, Multan, Montgomery, Lyallpur and Sargodha. In each camp there were two Indian women social workers and a few Indian policemen. The social workers were recruited in Delhi by the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation. Many of them were fresh graduates from the Delhi School of Social Work and had no field experience. The recovered women were brought from the district camps to Lahore and kept in the Gangaram Hospital till there was a lorry full of them to send to Jullundur.

The cases of recovered women fell under two categories. Some of them who did not object to being evacuated were included in what was called the “indisputable” group. They were helped to cross the border without any particular administrative difficulty. On the other hand, there were some sane disputed cases which had to be referred to the Tribunal consisting of two members, one from each Dominion, before they could be evacuated.49 These were the cases where women either refused to be evacuated because of one reason or the other or where the abductors refused to surrender them or where the disposal of children was involved, were presented to the Tribunal for decision. The Government of the Punjab appointed Shri S.S. Madan as the

47 Ibid., p. 129.
48 Ibid., p. 130.
Legal Advisor to the East Punjab Liaison Agency at Lahore to argue the disputed cases of abducted women before the Tribunal. Besides, the Government of India appointed a steering committee with Shri K.L. Punjabi, and representatives from Liaison Agency, M.E.O. and Chief Social Worker and Provincial Organizer for recovery of abducted women, to review the work and make plans for evacuation. It also helped to co-ordinate the activities between different organizations engaged in recovery and evacuation work. In cases of difference of opinion between the members of the Tribunal, the matter was referred to the High Powered Officers of India and Pakistan for the recovery of women. The decision of these officers which was preceded by thorough investigations in the details of the cases was usually considered final.

In order to prepare a list of the abducted women and converts, the Central Recovery Office on either side compiled the claims of relatives who crossed the border and these lists were then sent to India by Pakistan and vice versa. For the compilation of these details Search Service Bureau was organized as a part of the Central Recovery Office. But due to the prevalent conditions it was humanly impossible to prepare a reliable list. The evacuation of abducted women and children presented the greatest difficulty and the recovery of abducted women was a gigantic task in view of the situation and difficulties faced by the Liaison Agency were that the abducted women had been frequently changing hands from one man to another, therefore, the information recorded by the Special Staff could not be up-to-date. A number of abducted women were sent to the “Azad Kashmir” territory which was considered an independent territory and where the West Punjab Government disclaimed jurisdiction. Many times it was discovered that abducted women had been sent over to tribal areas or closed districts which were banned for Indian officers. Many of the girls were reported as

having been killed during the riots, while they were alive. Most of the relatives were not accurate in reporting whether the woman was actually abducted or had been left behind in the village at the time of evacuation. There were some relatives who did not register the names of their missing women with the Search Service Bureau but continued their private search and if successful, did not bother to inform the Central Recovery Office. The magnitude of the problem can be realized from the fact that sometimes the District Liaison Officer had to make 5 or 6 raids to recover one girl. The problem did not come to an end here. Those women were also a prey to the lust of non-Muslim officers in charge of the camp.\textsuperscript{54} The problem of rescuing abducted women was quite complex and was further complicated by psychological and social factors. Quite a number of these women had got married, and after the initial turmoil had got adjusted to that life. Many of them were pregnant at the time of evacuation. The customs of Hindu society made them feel that there was no place for them in their old homes. So, when they were forcibly evacuated by the police and brought to the transit camps a number of them escaped. The social workers in charge of the camps argued that such cases occurred because of “clever manoeuvring” on part of the abductors.\textsuperscript{55}

Many women protested and refused to go back as they formed relationships with their abductors or who had bought them for a price. These women came up with question like ‘why are you particular to take me to India? What is left in me now of religion or chastity?’\textsuperscript{56} Another abducted said: “I have lost my husband and now gone in for another. You want me to go to India where I have got nobody and of course, you do not expect me to change husbands everyday.”\textsuperscript{57} There were some women who had been born into poor homes and now they had fallen into the hands of men who bought them silk salwars and net dupattas… who took them to the cinema. Why should they

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. File No. VI/11/52-VI, p. 18.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. File No.VI/7, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{55} Facts About Recovery of Abducted Persons in India and Pakistan, Government of India Publication, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{56} Butalia, Urvashi. 1998. \textit{The Other Side of Silence}. New Delhi, Penguin Books Ltd.
\textsuperscript{57}
leave such men and go back to covering their bodies with rags and slaving in the hot sun in the fields?... And so they are happy to forget the frightening past, or the equally uncertain and fearful future, and live only for the present.\textsuperscript{58}

They also had another fear. The people who wanted to take them away, whether they were friend or foe, how did they know that they would not sell them to others. After all, she had been sold many times, how many more times would it happen?... The stigma did not go away until she was dragged away and made to live with her relatives for a few days... The new man with whom she is like God. Let everyone talk, she will never leave this man who has filled her world with colour.\textsuperscript{59}

The abducted girls were brainwashed and they were told that those girls who would leave would not be accepted by Hindus and Sikhs as they had lived with Muslims. They were also frightened by telling them that their relatives would kill them at the border. They told them that things were so bad in India that one had to pay one rupee even to get a glass of water and those who had gone to India were starving. These girls were fed false information so that they did not leave their abductors.

Several women, who were rescued or who were forcibly recovered had to face another trauma. Their families, who had earlier filed reports and urged the government to recover their women, were no longer willing to take them back. Such was the reluctance of families to take these women back, that Gandhi and Nehru had to issue repeated appeals to people assuring them that abducted women still remained ‘pure’. Gandhi said, “I hear that women have this objection that the Hindus are not willing to accept back the recovered women because they say that they have become impure. I feel that this is a matter of great shame. These women are as pure as the girls who are sitting by my side. And if any one of those recovered women should come to me, then I

\textsuperscript{58} Kidwai, Anis. 1990. \textit{Azadi ki Chaon Mein (Hindi)}. Delhi, National Book Trust, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
will give them as much respect and honour as I accord to these young maidens." In early 1948, Nehru made an appeal to the public. He said, "I am told that there is an unwillingness on the part of their relatives to accept those girls and women back in their homes. This is a most objectionable and wrong attitude to take and any social custom that supports this attitude must be condemned. These girls and women require our tender and loving care and their relatives should be proud to take them back and give them every help."  

A number of pamphlets were published which used the story of Sita's abduction by Ravana, showing how she remained pure despite her time away from her husband. The 'purity' of the woman was of much more importance within India among the Hindus and Sikhs than the Muslims in Pakistan as abducted Muslim women were more easily accepted back into their families. In Pakistan, the All Pakistan Women's Association and other organizations, worked hard at arranging marriages for many women who were recovered and returned. Hindustan Times, Delhi. January 17, 1948.

Damyanti Sehgal, a social worker confirmed "In the Jalandhar camp, in Gandhi Vanita, there were a lot of marriages because most of the girls who came there were unattached. Young girls used to come there, and they were given training, and because people knew there were young girls, there, we

63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
would get a number of marriage proposals... where there were girls who were
carrying children from Musalmaan men, their families were very reluctant to
take them back. For the woman, once the child is in her womb it is very
difficult to leave it... but many women were forced to leave their children...
That child would have had no future. Most of the women were recovered
within a year or so, and families did take women back. But women who were
pregnant, you know this Dr Kapur's clinic, they used to get abortions done
d there, and others would give birth and then hand their children over to the
home in Allahabad."65

Ashrams were set up in north Indian cities to house abducted women: in
Jalandhar, Amritsar, Karnal, Delhi. Some of these were meant to hold women
in transit until their families took them back. Often the families did not
welcome them back in their fold as they felt these women were now soiled and
were impure. The families had adopted new life-styles and had made their
adjustments to their absence and they were now not ready to readjust, make
new space and take in a person who had become 'polluted'. Thus, the ashrams
became permanent homes for the women. They lived their entire lives in these
homes alone within memories, some unspeakable and some which they could
share with the women who had faced similar situations. And many of them
died there alone and away from their families, these helpless women had
suffered a double dislocation as a result of partition. Till today, there are
women in the Gandhi Vanita Ashram in Jalandhar. Many are there whose
histories remain hidden forever and there are some who do not even know their
own histories. In Jalandhar, there is a woman who was brought into the Ashram
when she was only a few months old. No one had any idea to which
community she belonged and who her parents were. A child of history, without
a history.66 These ashrams were started for women to rebuild their lives but
these women only know the true trauma of being uprooted, raped and

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64 Ibid.
65 Damyanti Sehgal's interview in Urvashi Butalia's 'The Other Side of Silence', p. 122.
66 Urvashi Butalia's 'The Other Side of Silence', p. 123.
manhandled and then being rejected by their families. The kind of lives that
were rebuilt is something that no one would ever know.

The recovery operation for abducted women came to a grinding halt
towards the end of 1953, though the Abducted Persons (Recovery and
Restoration) Act continued to be renewed every year upto 1957. It was
estimated that by 1954 in all, some 40,000 were recovered, about 22,000
Muslim women from India and about 17,000 Hindu and Sikh women from
Pakistan. By then, the abducted women began to show increasing reluctance to
go to the other country, leaving their children behind. By the Indo-Pakistan
government decision of 1954, they could not be forced to go against their
wishes. Moreover, the most serious consideration which prevented the
Government of India from renewing the Abducted Persons (Recovery and
Restoration) Act of 1949 was problem of post-abduction children. The
Government of India had passed an ordinance that women whose babies were
born in Pakistan after partition would have to leave them behind since it was
felt that in Hindu society, a child born to a Hindu mother by a Muslim father
would not be accepted. Pakistan also had a similar rule. Many social workers
opposed such a callous solution to the problem which forcibly separated infants
from their mothers. Kamlaben could not agree with Mridula Sarabhai's
'practical' and 'unemotional' approach. Between 1st January 1954 and 30th
September 1957, no fewer than 860 children were left behind by Muslim
women who went away to Pakistan whereas 410 children were taken by them. The
children left had to be taken care of by the government and they were put
in orphanages. The administration gradually wound up the Recovery
organization district by district.

The future of the children of the abducted women was a matter of great
concern. In the Constituent Assembly, many members who had held that

67 Basu, Aparna. 1996. Mridula Sarabhai: A Rebel with a Cause. Delhi, Oxford University
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., p. 139.
abduction was a shameful and immoral act, were in favour of women leaving their children behind with their abductors. Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava said, “You must realise that all those children born in India are citizens of India. Supposing a Hindu man and a Muslim woman have married. Who should be the guardian of the offspring? When a Muslim woman is restored, she would go to Pakistan. Once there, she might change the religion of the child. But the child would continue to be treated as illegitimate and would be ‘maltreated and perhaps killed. Between the father and mother, who is entitled to guardianship?”70 While Assembly members might have been able to be unemotional, the mothers could clearly not. A child in whom the blood of two religions was mixed in equal quantities was not easily accepted.

There were hundreds of abandoned, destituted, lost children – some had been left behind by their families, others had been abducted, some had lost all relatives. Savitri Makhijani, a record collector with the United Council of Relief and Welfare, the parent organisation set up under the leadership of Edwina Mountbatten to co-ordinate relief and rehabilitation work among non-government organisations, described a time when a large camp was closed down in Lahore. At the time, a few months after Partition, she was with the school of social work in Delhi... received information that there were some dozen children who had been left behind, who seemed to belong to no one. What was to be done with them? The children were sent to Delhi, and housed in a home by Mridula Sarabhai. Social workers from the School of Social Work then put advertisements on All India Radio, asking for offers of adoption. A large number of post cards began to pour in – but here too, as in everyday life, everyone wanted a boy.... While young boys were preferred for legitimate adoption, young girls were much in demand for ‘other services’.71

Partition children were joined by another category ‘post-abduction children’. From January 01, 1954 to September 30, 1957, some 860 children...

70 India: Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates, 1949, p. 633.
71 Butalia, Urvashi. 1998. The Other Side of Silence. New Delhi, Penguin Books Ltd., p. 188.
were left behind by Muslim women who were ‘rescued’ and ‘restored’ to Pakistan, and 410 children were taken with them. On the other side, a 1952 figure of children born to Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan and brought back along with them stands at 102. Thus, there were two kinds of post-abduction children; those born to Muslim women who had been abducted in India and then recovered, and those born to Hindu and Sikh women who had been abducted in Pakistan and then recovered. In both cases the children were of mixed blood. So the major question was where did they belong? A debate raged in the Constituent Assembly on the issue like to whom did the child belong, the mother or the father? And accordingly, where should he/she be sent – to the land of the mother or the father? Gopalswamy Ayyangar, Minister of Transport and Railway, said, “I do not know the law of guardianship. It all depends on how you treat the child, whether it is a legitimate child or an illegitimate child and with regard to a child so long as it is a baby, I think the mother should have the first preference as regards the custody, and when she cannot have the custody, her wishes must have the greatest possible consideration.”

Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava stressed, “all those children born in India are citizens of India. Suppose a Hindu man and a Muslim woman had married, who would be the guardian of their children? If a Muslim woman was to take a child born of a Hindu father to Pakistan, ‘the child will be considered illegitimated and is liable to be maltreated or killed.’ Shri Brajeshwar Prasad (Bihar) felt that “there was little point in keeping the children in India for Hindu society was different from Muslim society and had no place for these children, illegitimate in the eyes of the law. Were they to remain in India, such children would remain ‘as dogs’.” The Abducted Persons Restoration and Recovery Act defined an abducted person as a male child under the age of sixteen years or a female of whatever age.

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72 Ibid., pp. 102-103.
73 Ibid. India: Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates, 1949, p. 662.
74 Ibid.
The post-abduction children posed the important problem of legitimacy and illegitimacy, the children of women widowed as a result of Partition could more easily benefit from the welfare policies of the State. These children and their mothers became permanent liabilities of the State. Orphanages and homes were run by the government, as well as by voluntary organizations. A special section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation was devoted to the rehabilitation of displaced unattached women and children. The Government of India accepted the responsibility for the care and maintenance of unattached, destitute displaced woman and children. State governments were authorized to pay a monthly cash allowance of fifteen rupees for one woman and seven or eight rupees for each of her dependent children.

In 1954, a former general of the Indian National Army, J.K. Bhonsle, at that time the Deputy Minister for Rehabilitation launched a scheme to start a training programme which could 'restore the morale of displaced students and import to them a sense of inflexible discipline joined to physical fitness and perfect allegiance to moral and spiritual values'. In keeping with this, the scheme laid stress on "India’s cultural heritage and traditions, on the life of our heroes and heroines, and on citizenship and patriotism..." The National Discipline Scheme was tried out with a small group of orphans and children of widows at the Kasturba Niketan School in Lajpat Nagar in Delhi. It was then extended to other refugee schools covering more than 100,000 children, both displaced and otherwise. A number of relief measures, such as setting up homes and infirmaries, giving educational subsidies were put into operation. But these could only be availed of by children who were already in homes, and for whom the government took responsibility. For those who had no home, who were out on the streets, there was no such recourse. Several charitable institutions joined the relief effort. These included the Save the Children

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75 Ibid., p. 671.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
Committee, the Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust, the Trust for Sindhi Women and Children and the Arya Pradeshi Pratinidhi Sabha. They worked in collaboration with the Central Advisory Board.

Most of the children abandoned at camps were girls. Many young girls ended up as domestic workers or as prostitutes. Homes and educational institutions were set up for both girls and boys but when time came to leave and make an independent life, it was the young men who were able to do that more easily than the young women. Some were married off by the ashram authorities and were able to make lives of their own. But for many, Partition completely changed the shape of their lives. In 1957, the recovery programme for abducted women was officially closed and with it the search for their children by their parents.

The uprooted women and children presented special problems, which required urgent attention, and to solve them, women’s organisations formed into groups of active workers. In particular, the All India Women’s Conference, the Y.W.C.A. and various other local organisations of men and women, contributed substantially towards meeting the special needs of these bewildered women and children who had been thrown out of their homes without any warning of their impending doom. Arising out of greatly felt need for the closer association of women in the plans for relief and rehabilitation of refugees from Pakistan, particularly for unattached and destitute women and children, the women’s Section of Rehabilitation Ministry was formed on 24th November, 1947 with Shrimati Rameshwari Nehru as Honorary Director and Shrimati Hannah Sen as Honorary Secretary. It was realised by the workers in this section, that the best way of bringing these afflicted women to normal life was through work and occupation. The task of rehabilitation, therefore, was carried on simultaneously with that of relief. The section was entrusted with the following functions:
a) To organise relief to women and children, particularly unattached women and children.

b) To help in the recovery of abducted women and their subsequent training and rehabilitation.

c) To help in the rehabilitation of all unattended women and children. 79

When the Women's Section commenced work, it took over from the Ministry such departments bearing on the problem of women and children, namely those relating to the provision of foster homes for unattached children and the scheme for the training and housing of refugee women in the ex-service Women's Training centre and Hostel in Curzon Road, New Delhi, under the control of the Ministry of Labour. Four centres had been opened, in Karol Bagh, Subzi Mandi, Paharganj and the Babur Road Colony. The needs of the local refugee women and children were investigated and met. Industrial classes for women, where training for the untrained and employment for the trained were provided, and primary schools for children formed the main feature of these centres. Altogether 1312 women and 400 children made use of them and the sum of Rs. 1000 was paid to them in wages each month. 80

(1) Homes for Destitute Women and Children: The Delhi home for women and children was located in Shamshad Manzil, Roshanara Road, Subzi Mandi under the direction of Shrimati Jai Kishori Handoo. It had developed very satisfactorily. 97 women and 222 children had benefited from the industrial classes and schooling provided there. The Home had succeeded in placing several girls and boys in the local schools. It was also maintaining a Marriage Bureau. Several Hundreds of application had been registered and arrangements for a few marriages had been done well. The Home encouraged corporate community life and entrusted most the household work to the inmates themselves. A home for women and children was being maintained at


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the Kurukshetra camp, where they received vocational training in a handicraft centre and general education through a nursery and a primary school. 225 women, 251 boys and 153 girls had been restored to their families or given employment through the agency of this home.\footnote{Ibid., p. 8.} A third home was opened in Mehrauli, under the supervision of Shrimati Lilavati, for infirm and disabled women.

**HOMES**

*(From the Rehabilitation Review Jan-Feb '49 ')*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name &amp; Location</th>
<th>No. of Women</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Sat Narain Home, Subzimandi</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Lahore Sheds Home</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>248</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Rambagh Home</td>
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<td>227</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aged Women's Home, Mehrauli</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Mehrauli Residential School for Girls</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Balniketan &amp; Gram Sevika Shiksha Kendra</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>223</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>385</strong></td>
<td><strong>786</strong></td>
<td><strong>1173</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(2) **Employment Exchange**: The Women’s Section’s Employment Exchange, under the direction of Shrimati Raksha Saran, worked in close collaboration with the Regional Employment Exchange at 14 Daryaganj, Delhi and succeeded in giving employment to 103 women. A register of unemployed women was kept in the office and particulars about them were forwarded periodically to Regional Employment Exchange on the recognised forms. Efforts were made to persuade employers to create new openings for women and to persuade women to venture out on new fields of work.

\footnote{Ibid.}
(3) **Training Schemes:** The first training scheme to be adopted by the Women’s Section was the one submitted by the Ministry of Labour in connection with the Ex-Service Women’s Training Centre and Hostel Curzon Road, New Delhi. The work of scrutinizing the scheme and finalising the arrangements in regard to both training and housing the women was entrusted to Shrimati Achamma Matthai. Provision for training and housing 115 women was made available early in January 1948.$^{83}$ Application from several hundred of students on regular forms supplied by the section had been received, registered and tabulated. The subjects catered for at this centre included typing, stenography, commercial and clerical training, tailoring, embroidery, spinning, weaving, calico printing, fancy leather work and soft toy making.

The Women’s Section had under consideration a more elaborate scheme of training, with a sales depot attached to it, prepared by Shrimati Jamila Sirajuddin. The sales depot or shop offered its service to the produce of all industrial homes and centres and worked on a co-operation basis. Shrimati Shobha Nehru was in charge of the arrangements.

Applications from women desiring to be trained as hospital nurses were also dealt with. The Lady Hardinge hospital had admitted three probationists and attempts were made to send the other applicants for similar training in hospital located elsewhere. Number of girls sent for training in nursing were 10.$^{84}$

**Work-Cum-Training Centres**

*(From Women’s Section Report 15.2.49 & 30.3.49)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the Centre</th>
<th>No. of Wage Earners</th>
<th>No. of Trainees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Karolbagh</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Subzimandi</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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$^{83}$ Report of the Women’s Section, Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation, Dewan Chaman Lal Papers, F. No. 149, N.M.M.L., New Delhi, p. 9.

Wages earned by women in the Work Centres were:

Rs. 12,742/- through Private Orders.

Rs. 29,074/- through Government Orders.

Rs. 31,000/- through Refugee Handicrafts.86

(4) **Sales Depot (Refugee Handicrafts):** Early in 1948, a Sales Depot known as the “Refugee Handicrafts” was opened by the women’s Section in New Delhi. It helped to create a market for the articles produced by displaced women and within a period of less than a year, from 2.4.1948 – 28.2.49, besides the wages that were paid to women, an amount of Rs. 58,000/- was credited to the Government against the total expenditure of Rs. 81,000/- and an assessment of raw materials and stock was expected to show a net profit in the shop.87

(5) **Education:** 8 Primary and Middle schools with the strength of about 3000 children were started and later were handed over to a Special Board of Education. For the education of boys between 12 and 18 years of age, a vocational-cum-cultural training scheme was prepared, but as the Ministry of Rehabilitation did not adopt it, the Ministry of Education undertook to implement it with some alterations.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Pahargunj</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Lodi Road</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>8, Central Lane</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Connaught Circus</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Mehrauli</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Humayun Tomb</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Bola Road</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2,154</td>
<td>1,27585</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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85 Ibid., p. 23.

164
Schools for girls were opened. One middle school of girls to cater for two hundred scholars had been started at Mehrauli. It was meant to give residential accommodation to 50 destitute girls. The other 150 were day scholars. No. of girls sent for training in Basic education were 25.

Scholarships upto Rs. 25/- were given to children selected for study in the following institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the Institution</th>
<th>No. of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Harijan Udyogshala, Kingsway, Delhi</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Kasturba Balika Ashram, Delhi</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Birla High School for Boys, Pilani</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Birla High School for Girls, Pilani</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Mahila Shiksha Sadan, Hatundi (Ajmer)</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Banasthali Vidyapeeth</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>St. Anthony’s High School, Paharganj, Delhi</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Children studying in local schools and receiving scholarship.</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>23788</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(6) Women’s Settlement: A scheme for women’s settlement was prepared by this section in August 1948, and as a result of this about 60 acres of land had been reserved for this purpose in the new township at Nilokheri. The Delhi Women’s Section was in charge of this work.

Propaganda to counteract the tendency to ostracise rescued women was initiated and has proved very effective. Radio talks, wide distribution of leaflets, publicised messages from prominent leaders and the display of slides at cinema houses were some of the means used to help in the restoration and rehabilitation of such women.

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86  Ibid.
87  Ibid.
88  Ibid., p. 24.
(7) **Inspection of Camps:** The Women’s Section had found it necessary to make periodical inspection of the refugee camps with particular reference to the needs of women and children. Shrimati Thappai, Shrimati Kitty Shiva Rao and Shrimati Raksha Saran had been deputed to visit the camps in the East Punjab, Delhi and Kurukshetra respectively. The reports, coupled with their suggestion led to considerable improvement, especially in the camps in the East Punjab.

(8) **Marriage Bureau:** A Marriage Bureau had also been founded with the intention of introducing uprooted refugee women and men to each other for the purpose of marriage. Every care was taken to safeguard the parties concerned from making unwise marriages. A number of marriages had been performed under the auspices of the Women’s Section and several other marriages had been arranged through process of Financial aid upto Rs 25/- and gifts of clothes were given to some needy cases.

(9) **Fruit and Vegetable Preservation Course:** It was decided to send refugee students through the Women’s Section, for short term courses in fruit and vegetable preservation, held under the auspices of the Ministry of Agriculture. The courses comprised lectures and practical demonstrations in the preparation of jellies, jams, pickles and squashes. A batch of 27 was sent for the cause that commenced in February 1948. Another lot of students had joined the course that commenced in March 1948. It was proposed to send about 20 students every month for this course.

(10) **Distribution of Sewing Machines:** By the end of March 1949, 251 Sewing Machines were given to destitute refugee women and associations at various concessional rates. 154 Machines were given at Government concession rates of Rs. 275/-. The price of the remaining machines ranged from Rs. 100 to Rs. 250/-. The deficiency in price was made up from the Prime Ministers Fund.

154 Machines at Rs. 275/- at Special Concession Rates.
1 Machine at Rs. 250/- at Special Concession Rates.
9 Machines at Rs. 225/- at Special Concession Rates.
23 Machines at Rs. 200/- at Special Concession Rates.
6 Machines at Rs. 175/- at Special Concession Rates.
13 Machines at Rs. 150/- at Special Concession Rates.
1 Machine at Rs. 100/- at Special Concession Rates.
5 were donated free of charge.
32 were given on loan and
7 on instalment basis.

Total 251 machines.89

The responsibility of the Women’s Section extended to the whole country, but with the headquarters being in Delhi, most of the time and attention was taken up by Delhi, and due attention could not be paid to outside work. Nevertheless, three women regional organisers were appointed in Bombay, Ahemdabad, Saurashtra and Rajputana to organise work in these areas. They started homes and a few work and training centres for women in these regions. But this system did not prove very satisfactory, and as schemes of rehabilitation extended over the whole country it began to be increasingly felt that work in the States should be handed over to the State authorities. Accordingly, at a Conference of the Provincial Ministers held in Delhi in July 1998, it was decided that in the States where the number of displaced people was large, Women’s Section should be set up specifically to deal with the problem of women and children.

Under this revised policy of bifurcation, it became imperative to divide the functions of the Central Women’s Section, and in March 1949 after 16 months of its inception, the new system started working. Smt. Rameshwari Nehru and Mrs. Hannah Sen came over to the centre as Honorary Advisor and

89 Ibid., p. 25.
Honorary Joint Advisor, and Mrs. John Matthai became the Honorary Director of the Delhi Women's Section, which was placed under the Chief Commissioner. The Women's Advisory Section was now an integral part of the Ministry of Rehabilitation and shared its responsibilities with the Ministry. Its main functions were:

(a) Examined all schemes concerning displaced women and children and advised Government on them.

(b) Supervised all work throughout India for displaced women and children done by the Government as well as by private agencies to which grants were paid by the Government.

(c) Helped in the proper establishment of Women's Section in the States and the Union.

(d) Ensured that there was an equitable distribution of supplies and gifts among the Women's Sections of the States and the Unions.

(e) Ensured that primary education was provided to all displaced children.

(f) Helped in the promotion of all schemes of Secondary, Technical, Vocational and University education for displaced women and children.

As was the case in Delhi, all work including that of women in States was handed over to the local authorities. The States had to contribute their share in the expenses incurred on general rehabilitation, but the entire cost on the rehabilitation of women and children was borne by the centre. The responsibility of the Women's Advisory Section was, therefore, great; it was required to scrutinize the expenditure of this money and to supervise and direct the work of the State Women's Sections. Another distinguishing feature of its work was the long term responsibility of women's rehabilitation. Government had accepted life responsibility for the aged and the infirm, and the responsibility for unattached women and children was to last till they were
enabled to earn sufficient to maintain themselves. This was the chief difference between the rehabilitation of men and women; for men, settlement was easier and quicker as they took to the avocations which they had followed earlier but women had no such avocation and had to be trained afresh for new professions. Therefore, to make the burden on Government lighter, voluntary organizations were encouraged to share this responsibility and it was expected that a large part of this Section’s work would continue even after other work of rehabilitation would have come to an end.

In addition to the work done under the State Governments, the Government of India was directly running a few camps and work-centres in the country. In all such places, houses and centres for women were administered under the direction of the Women’s Advisory Section. Selection of candidates and the award of scholarships on behalf of the Ministry in various educational and training institutions in the country was done directly by this Section and much immediate relief work for women and children was also carried on simultaneously.

Since April 1948, when the Central Advisory Section was started, work for women and children had grown in dimensions in all States. But a uniform administrative pattern could not be maintained in all regions. Local conditions differed from place to place and the reactions of local Governments in respect of this work were not the same with the result that Women’s Sections in States assumed different forms. In Delhi, the executive authority was vested in the Honorary Director, who was free to develop her work as she chose. In Bombay, the work was entrusted to a women’s committee of honorary members who had executive powers and worked under the Rehabilitation Department of the State Govt. Similarly, in U.P., a Central Advisory Committee was formed which functioned through the Rehabilitation Department. In East Punjab, the Director of the Women’s Section was a regular salaried official of the State and functioned in close cooperation with other departments. In West Bengal, again
A Women’s Advisory Committee was formed and work was carried on by the Rehabilitation Department through the paid Secretary.

Besides the work done by the Women’s Sections and the Rehabilitation Departments of the different States, much help to the displaced people had been rendered by the Central Ministry of Labour and the State Departments of Industries and Supplies. The Central Relief Committee and a number of private women’s organisations also served the displaced women and children.

A Brief Financial Statement of Expenditure of the Women’s Section of Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation during 1948-49.90

(1) **3 Homes and 3 Residential Schools:**

(a) Average No. of inmates in six institutions: 1100

(b) Average expenditure per individual per month on food etc.: Rs. 14/7/-

(c) Average expenditure on all other contingencies (including equipment etc.): Rs. 6/7/-

(d) Average expenditure on Establishment (including technical and teaching staff: Rs. 4/9/-

(e) Average of total expenditure per individual per month: Rs. 25/7/-

Against the sanctioned budget for food and other contingencies of these institutions, there had been a saving of about 2 and quarter lacs due to strict Economy Drive.

(2) **9 Work and Relief Centres:**

(a) Average No. of trainees: 1100

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(b) Average expenditure per trainee per month (including establishment): Rs. 3/8/-

(c) Average expenditure on capital goods (Sewing Machines and Spinning Wheels) per trainee per month: Rs. 2/5/-

Against the sanctioned budget for Work and Relief Centres, there has been a saving of about Rs. 35,000/- as a result of strict Economy Drive.

(3) **Refugee Handicrafts:** Against the total expenditure of about Rs. 81,000/- on this Depot, a sum of about Rs. 58,000/- had been credited to the Government and there was substantial stock of Raw material, finished goods and equipment which was being valued to assess the net profit.

(4) **Scholarships:** About 125 destitute refugee children had been admitted in residential educational institutions outside Delhi on a gross monthly expenditure of Rs. 25/- per individual.

43 refugee children studying in local schools were granted scholarships from Rs. 5/- to Rs. 25/- per month on merits.

Total expenditure incurred on scholarships during 1948-49 was about Rs. 26,000/-.

(5) **Day Schools:** Seven Day Schools up to Middle Classes were started and handed over to local administration with effect from 1.11.48. Only about Rs. 32,000/- were spent on their running for six months under Women’s Section.

(6) **Organisation for Recovery of Muslim Women:** This work was done by Women’s Section up to 31.10.48 and a sum of about Rs. 33,000/- was spent. From 1.11.48 this had been transferred to the Ministry of External Affairs and Commonwealth Relations.

(7) **Marriage Information Bureau:** About Rs. 2,000/- was spent on this branch. Total expenditure incurred by Women’s Section (including recovery
work, schools and Miscellaneous Relief and Rehabilitation activities) during 1948-49 less income credited to Government was Rs. 4.5 lacs only.

Expenditure on the Women's Section Headquarters had been about Rs. 76,000/- in all. This was the real expenditure on all the schemes. Its ratio to the total expenditure was about 8.5% only. This had been possible because of the senior officers being honorary and because of the sincerity and devotion of the paid workers.

There was another problem, which the Government was facing at that time and it was the problem of 'increasing traffic in women and children'. Infact, existence of Regular Gang in Delhi was suspected. There was a full-fledged report in the Statesman, "There has been disquieting increase in recent months in traffic in women and children in Delhi. While it is difficult to give the exact number of brothels in the capital, a conservative estimate puts the figure at about 5,000... Social Workers and philanthropic Institutions interested in the problems suspect a regular gang of traffickers operating in Delhi... They are fully exploiting the fact that there are at present a large number destitute women with nobody to look after them... Quite a large number of women in these brothels are refugees... A few are abducted women who after having been kept by their abductors for sometime, have been made over to habitual brothel keepers. Contested with these abducted women are the "rescued" women whose families refused to take them back... Social workers and others think that the problem, though difficult, can be solved with a little effort. Delhi has a women's police force, which they suggest, can be given a short course of training and employed for detecting traffickers and stopping further increase in the number of brothels. At the same time, members of the Women's police can rescue some of the exploited women from the existing houses after which they could be placed in a separate home and given training in handicrafts.

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One practical step was taken recently when a committee was formed with Mrs. Rameshwari Nehru as its President, to devise means of checking these "unhealthy trends in society". The committee has divided Delhi and New Delhi into two zones for the organization of its work. Its main aim is to establish a rescue home and make it possible for the authorities to enforce the 'Supervision of Immorality Act'. The committee is at present raising funds and looking for a suitable building. 92 Rameshwari Nehru felt the need to take some strong measures to combat this social evil. She was in favour of enforcement of Immoral Traffic Act, which was a part of Indian Penal Code. She said, "This Act may be applied with vigour and arrangements may be made for the custody, maintenance, and training of women who are thus rescued." 93

Rehabilitation of women and children could not be achieved in a day. Children had to be looked after till they grew up and the young women had to be trained in suitable occupations. The responsibility of the old and the infirm was to continue for life. It was difficult for the Government alone, with its present set up, to undertake such long-term responsibilities and therefore the Govt. invited the private agencies of established repute to help the Government in undertaking the Rehabilitation work on the basis of planned Government aid.