



**TARSHI**

Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health

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t e c h n o l o g y

f l e x i b i l i t y

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v o l u n t e e r s

# SUSTAINABILITY OF HELPLINES

## models that work





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TARSHI

Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues

# About TARSHI

TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) is a not-for-profit organisation based in New Delhi, India, that works on issues of sexuality and reproductive health. Guided by the vision that *all people have the right to sexual wellbeing and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality*, TARSHI works towards expanding sexual and reproductive choices in people's lives in an effort to enable them to enjoy lives free from fear, infection, and reproductive and sexual health concerns. TARSHI works towards achieving this vision through the following:

**THE HELPLINE:** Provides information, counselling, and referrals on sexuality and reproductive health issues

**PUBLIC EDUCATION:** Through publications, public events, campaigns and sessions in schools and colleges, raises awareness of sexuality and rights issues

**TRAINING:** On helpline counselling skills and on sexuality, reproductive and sexual health and rights

**THE SEXUALITY AND RIGHTS INSTITUTE:** An annual two-week long conceptual course focusing on the interface between sexuality and rights, conducted in collaboration with CREA ([www.creaworld.org](http://www.creaworld.org))

**THE RESOURCE CENTRE ON SEXUALITY:** Increases knowledge and conceptual resources on issues of sexuality and sexual well-being in the South and South East Asia region

## THE TARSHI HELPLINE

The TARSHI helpline has been providing a safe and non-judgmental space for people to obtain counselling, accurate information, and appropriate referrals on sexual and reproductive health, and sexuality related issues, since 1996.

The telephone helpline service is free, confidential, guarantees anonymity, and is meant especially for women and young people. The service is provided in Hindi and English. A team of trained counsellors operates the helpline three days a week, and a qualified clinical psychologist directs the helpline's operations. To date (December 2008), the TARSHI helpline has responded to over 60,000 calls. The helpline has reached out to people of all ages, genders and sexual preferences from diverse backgrounds. The helpline addresses wide-ranging concerns related to sexual health, behaviour and relationships. All calls are documented to maintain a high quality service. Analysis of data from the helpline serves to deepen TARSHI's understanding of sexuality issues within the Indian socio-cultural environment.

TARSHI is one of the first Asian members of the Telephone Helplines Association (THA) based in the UK. The THA is recognised as the main source of specialist information for the setting up and running of non-profit helplines in the UK.



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# Introduction



Running a Helpline is not as easy as it appears at first. The TARSHI Helpline has been operating since 1996, and as other helplines that have been running for a period of time, TARSHI is also faced with sustainability concerns such as difficulty in recruiting suitably trained counsellors, training new staff and retaining staff which is both time and resource intensive. Raising funds to keep the service running is another time consuming challenge. Given these challenges while at the same time maintaining the optimum quality of service, and sustaining skills and motivation levels of staff are sometimes more than an organisation can handle. How do other helplines manage? What challenges do they face? Are they similar or different? What strategies have they adopted to overcome these challenges and have they succeeded? Can we learn from those who have succeeded and from one another?

Keeping this in mind, TARSHI (Talking About Reproductive and Sexual Health Issues) convened a meeting of Helplines in New Delhi in September 2008, to address concerns related to sustainability. Over 30 representatives from 25 organisations that run Helplines in different parts of the country attended this meeting. The theme of the meeting was *Sustainability of Helplines: Models That Work*. Participants were representatives of

helplines that address a diverse range of issues such as sexuality, child rights, women in crisis situations, mental health, suicide prevention and disability, in addition to HIV/AIDS and de-addiction related issues. The meeting served as a platform to learn what works and how different strategies can be incorporated to keep helplines operational for the communities they serve while sustaining a high quality of Helpline services.

Through the *Sustainability of Helplines: Models That Work* meeting participants were able to identify the challenges faced by Helplines with respect to sustainability in terms of staffing, maintaining optimum quality of service, and funding. The interactive meeting brought out the successful strategies adopted by Helplines, provided information for those planning to set up new Helplines and offered ideas to those struggling with ongoing sustainability issues.

This publication draws on the discussions and experiences shared by the Helpline representatives who participated in the meeting. It is intended to act as a guide to inform Helplines about sustainability challenges as well as recommend options to overcome these challenges in order that others may learn from those who have walked this road before.

## SUSTAINABILITY THEMES

In the past decade, there has been a proliferation of Helplines across India, demonstrating both the need for and effectiveness of this form of intervention. Helplines are an effective means of disseminating information and providing people with the immediate help that they may need by way of reassurance or referral to other professional services. Helplines offer convenience and anonymity to those accessing information and can also

## SUSTAINABILITY OF HELPLINES: MODELS THAT WORK

offer confidential counselling on sensitive and intimate issues like sexuality, mental illness, suicide, HIV and so on. Helplines are cost effective and easy to access by all people, including women and people with mobility challenges. Helpline services are often sought as a first step to seeking information on a variety of issues ranging from health, emotional problems, disease prevention, and crisis intervention, to name a few.

In the development sector, the connotation of the word 'sustainability' is more likely to be one of empowering the communities who require a service to actively participate and contribute to the social intervention by a social development organisation/NGO. Such programmes work towards handing over ownership of benefits from services to the very community that participated in the intervention. This is done to enable the communities benefiting from the service to continue to benefit through their own sustained efforts. This however is not the case for communities benefiting from information and counselling through telephone Helplines, wherein the community using the service is continually changing and the need for the service is constant/ ongoing. Also, the impact of a telephone Helpline service is intangible and cannot be measured to assess the likely accrual of benefits to the communities that use the service. This is one important reason why sustaining a Helpline service is difficult and responsibility for sustaining the service falls mainly on the organisation.

It is often mistakenly assumed that running a Helpline service is simple and requires minimum investment of time and resources. Helplines that aim to provide quality service to callers over a long period of time require, among other things, adequate space, state-of-the-art equipment, adequately trained personnel, regular publicity for the service, funds to sustain the service and well documented

## INTRODUCTION

policies for staff development and growth, all of which eventually have a direct impact on the quality and credibility of the services being offered.

One of the key issues when setting up or even planning a Helpline is to evaluate how the organisation plans to sustain the programme. Helplines may experience some or all of the challenges that endanger the existence of helplines. The following challenges are discussed in this report: 1) Staffing; 2) Training; 3) Funding; 4) the Role of Technology and 5) Burnout in Counsellors. This report highlights both the challenges as well as the recommendations made by the organisations present at the meeting. The report also highlights some preliminary discussions on the issues that impact the existence of Helplines (funds, space, not enough calls, not enough trained staff, quality of service, intended audience is not being reached, etc).

**Most issues of Sustainability of a Helpline are so inextricably linked with one another that it may not always be possible to separate them. Staffing and Retention for instance is as much a Funding related concern, as it is one of Staffing alone.**



ONE

## Staffing and Sustainability

One challenge that organisations generally experience is of identifying and recruiting the right staff or volunteers to manage the Helpline. Some concerns include: Where does one advertise for staff? How much should be earmarked for salaries? How to reduce the margin of error in selecting the right counsellor who after the intensive selection and training process, will continue with the organisation for a length of time?

In India, Helpline organisations employ salaried staff or operate with volunteers. Operating a Helpline with salaried staff or volunteers has been shown to have both advantages and disadvantages, with both categories of staff being highly valued.

The advantage of being in a full-time salaried position in an organisation is that counsellors are not restricted to fulfilling only the one function of counselling. Working full-time in an organisation offers the opportunity to take on other functions. This enables the staff to gain more experience through undertaking a wider variety of activities which helps further their career/professional goals. At the same time it is important to note that while some organisations, especially volunteer-based ones, may have the flexibility to involve counsellors in other

activities, others may not be able to do so. This is because they may be bound by funding constraints/funder policies to employ staff for specific tasks like the Helpline only and not be able to use them for other activities. This often puts a strain on the already stretched resources of the organisation as well as leads to counsellor burnout because of the monotony of being only on the Helpline.

It is important for an organisation to have clear job descriptions for staff with their roles and responsibilities listed so that it leaves no room for ambiguity for the counsellors being recruited. This applies to volunteers as well as paid staff. In addition, this helps to make the expectations of both the organisation and the counsellors clear from the outset. Having said this, it is important to acknowledge that ground realities may be different; while counsellors may be 'prepared' to be wholly devoted to a service at the time of joining the organisation, they may feel the need to take on other activities to keep informed and updated on issues or to feel active/energetic and involved with other activities and projects of the organisation. A 'bored' or dissatisfied counsellor is certainly not effectual. This not only affects the service adversely but also leads to counsellor burnout while affecting the morale of other team members.

Interestingly, it has been found that a full time counsellor's optimum time on a Helpline is approximately two years, after which efficiency and interest in the job begin to wane. This is apparent in many small ways, and is discussed in the section addressing Burnout. On the other hand, several volunteers and part-time counsellors are able to sustain their interest and commitment for longer, sometimes even for decades! Many heartening stories of how Volunteers have devoted years of service, were shared in the course of the meeting.

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Groups who work for or within communities, such as groups of positive people, and lesbian groups face certain unique difficulties. On the one hand there is a commitment to build skills and use the community to serve others like them. On the other hand is the dilemma of the counsellors themselves belonging to the group/s they are serving which could be to the detriment of the service. For example, communities of gay men or positive people are fairly small and close-knit in most cities. In such a situation, if a counsellor for a confidential gay men's Helpline recognises a caller from his personal/social circle, it would be difficult for the counsellor to be objective and not let his personal impression of the caller/his life influence the counselling situation. This could have a detrimental impact on the quality of service being provided and therefore on the credibility of the service.

## RECOMMENDATIONS - STAFFING

Helpline work demands specific skills, over and above an understanding of the issues the Helpline works on. For example, whether the Helpline works with children, young people or adults, or on sensitive issues such as sexuality, violence, abuse etc., it is necessary for counsellors to have the requisite skills and know-how to be able to work with the specific issues and groups the Helpline addresses. While a number of skills are learnt and can be developed through training, the counsellors selected must have certain prerequisites before they can be trained.

It is useful to clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of Helpline workers (job description) and list the qualities, skills, and experience required of potential Helpline staff. All Helpline staff, whether paid or volunteer needs to meet the same selection criteria. Criteria could include:

## STAFFING AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Level or type of educational qualification and/or experience
- Personal traits and attitudes valued by the helpline, such as listening skills, sensitivity, openness to new ideas, ability to receive feedback, and so on.

In addition, requesting written references as per the policy of the organisation and conducting several rounds of interviews with applicants have been beneficial to several Helplines in the selection of the most suitable candidates for a particular post. Interviews provide an opportunity to check attitudes and viewpoints of potential volunteers or staff. Planning a trial or probationary period will further enable both the organisation and the individual to assess the suitability of the fit. A lengthy recruitment and training process is time and resource intensive; yet, it can help to weed out unsuitable candidates before they are actually assigned their Helpline duties.

One of the reasons attributed to the success of the Volunteer system may be to do with the fact that volunteer counsellors spend less time on the Helpline per week; in fact, in some cases a counsellor may come to work for a few hours once a week or once fortnightly. This helps them to maintain perspective and stay committed and motivated longer than full-time counsellors who are expected to put in several hours a day/week on the Helpline which could lead to burnout.

Offering counsellors (salaried staff or volunteers) options like flexi-hours, involvement in other activities of the organisation, networking with other service providers and Helplines serves to build and enhance their skills and at the same time breaks or reduces the monotony of counselling. This in turn motivates counsellors, keeping burnout at bay.



TWO

## Training and Sustainability

Training Helpline staff to be good counsellors is crucial to, and directly affects, the quality of the Helpline service. Training needs to be provided on the issues that a Helpline works with, besides telephone and conversation skills required to be effective on a Helpline. In addition to this, training on self-awareness is crucial to the quality of service being provided. Therefore, training remains one of the key activities that Helpline organisations have to attend to on an ongoing basis.

Different organisations have different training requirements, and tend to incorporate their training needs as part of the Helpline's operational plans. While a long term, structured and detailed training programme may be essential for one Helpline, the same may not be required for another. Most internal training modules have been conceived based on the mandate of the Helpline service; understanding the needs of potential clients as well as identifying specific training requirements of counsellors is important in this. Some organisations focus on listening and counselling skills training for their staff, while others focus mainly on the information that needs to be provided through the Helpline service.

Some helplines may find it more cost-effective to link up

with other organisations in their efforts to obtain suitable training.

Counselling entails working with callers to explore personal situations, problems or crises in one-off or ongoing longer-term professional relationships. Counselling enables callers to discuss their concerns in a space that is confidential, supportive, and non-judgmental - and helps them to make their own decisions. Counsellor training would therefore entail imparting information and skills to be able to provide a safe environment to callers in which to effectively assist callers in making their own decisions. Essential to counsellor training is addressing the principles, values and ethical issues of individual counsellors in relation to the issues that they are counselling on. The counsellor requires to be trained to be highly self aware, so that no biases and personal prejudices/values creep into the delivery of the service.

This is critical for several reasons:

- For counsellors to gain clarity about their personal values and attitudes so that they do not interfere in the counselling process. Ethical practice demands that counsellors guard against superimposing their values and decisions on to callers.
- To enhance the organisation's ability to retain the staff member for a substantial period of time. This is because, if counsellors feel competent and able to handle calls effectively, it will contribute to high motivation and morale, which will in turn, keep burnout at bay.
- To maintain the quality of the service. Competent, well-trained counsellors will ensure that there is a high standard of service being provided.

As mentioned above, the duration of training depends on the issues and services that the telephone Helpline provides. Some services such as Helplines working with issues of suicide prevention (or crisis intervention) would perhaps focus more on training counsellors on listening and counselling/befriending skills and practice; others providing updated information and no counselling may require a shorter/longer duration of training depending on the depth of information required by counsellors.

Another key challenge and one closely linked to Staffing is determining who is best suited to provide training to fresh inductees. Helplines that depend largely on their own staff to deliver training for extended periods of time, can find it burdensome if the existing staff has to conduct on-going/periodic in-house training in addition to their day-to-day Helpline work. This additional responsibility is likely to decrease productivity and adversely affect Helpline services in the long run.

Because issues that helplines work with are so diverse (and often highly specialised), there is currently no one recognised Helpline training institute/organisation in India. Basic telephone Helpline skills may be the common factor for all helplines and certain established Helplines are often approached to provide counsellor training, if their work intersects with issues that another Helpline is addressing. Training, however, whether internal or conducted by another organisation is important both for induction of new counsellors as well as throughout the tenure of the counsellors work with the organisation. On-going training can be in the form of refresher courses, book reviews, regular presentations, web-research to keep abreast of developments in the field etc.

Most organisations feel the impact and pressure of limited resources of time and money required to train

new counsellors for the Helpline. The time gap between induction into the organisation and having the counsellor independently operational on the telephone is a crucial consideration for most organisations. Because of this ill-affordable expense, training may be truncated and piece-meal. This not only affects the quality of service being provided but also affects the morale of the staff especially if they feel inadequate to deal with the concerns of callers.

Therefore, training on the following three aspects is essential:

**INFORMATION** on the issues the helpline addresses; this may be organised in-house, or may involve the participation of relevant external resource persons (e.g. gynaecological experts in the context of a reproductive and sexual health helpline).

**PERSPECTIVE BUILDING** on the issues the helpline addresses is important i.e. to train counsellors to clarify their values and opinions, which, derived mostly from personal experiences and/or socialisation, may interfere with the counselling process unless recognized and addressed.

**SKILLS** go hand in hand with being informed about and understanding the issues the helpline addresses. These skills include basic helpline skills and special skills pertaining to the service/s (befriending, counselling, providing tailor-made information, referrals to callers etc.) the helpline offers.

An intrinsic part of Training is **Supervision**. Ideally supervision and training cannot be segregated. Both volunteer-based and non-volunteer based Helplines that have well established supervision systems in place find

that supervision ensures quality of the service and also is very effective in preventing burnout in counsellors. Supervision is a formal process between supervisor and supervisee to discuss ongoing needs, plan training, give and receive feedback, and, focuses on the quality of the service. When supervision systems are in place, a healthy environment is created within the organisation, allowing for needs identification, recognition of strengths, weaknesses and achievements, and analysis of the work, thus leading to awareness of growing skills and knowledge.

### RECOMMENDATIONS - TRAINING

- Organisational commitment to training and supervision is very important in order to be able to sustain the quality of the service.
- Induction training as well as on-going training is essential to maintain the quality of the service as well as to prevent burnout of counsellors.
- Basic telephone skills are a common requirement for all Helpline counsellors and induction training would therefore obviously focus on this. Skills in applying the perspective that the Helpline operates from demands attention throughout the duration of the training period.
- In addition to focusing on the information that the service provides, the training also needs to focus on building the self-awareness of counsellors. Being aware of one's strengths, weaknesses and limitations contributes to counsellor competence. Working within the scope of the service is ethical and helps build the credibility of the service. A strong commitment to ethical practice lends to a

## TRAINING AND SUSTAINABILITY

more reliable and sustainable service, which in turn gives credibility to the pool of Helplines across the country.

- Having a strong system of Mentoring and Supervision translates into enriching the learning and experience of counsellors and helps prevent burnout and maintain the quality of the service over time.
- Supervision of counsellors is also a learned skill and needs be practiced over time as well as improved upon as with any other skill.





THREE

## Funding and Sustainability

Funding and sustainability are two sides of the same coin. Erratic/ sporadic and insufficient funds are very often the reason why Helplines are unable to run for long periods of time or expand their services to reach larger audiences.

Those Helplines in India that receive government funding may be more sustainable. On the other hand, for services like those addressing issues of sexuality and/or sexual identity it is a challenge to receive funding especially from the government, as the philosophy of the organisation and the nature of work may at times clash with current government policies and priorities. This could also be the case with private donors. Different donors have different mandates and priority areas to fund. Sometimes, even within the same funding organisation, change in leadership leads to a change in funding priorities which can cause grantees to lose favour with a funding organisation that has been supporting them for several years.

This leads to another interesting issue as to whether some Helplines have a higher chance of receiving funding than others. What kind of service gets more attention or more acceptability and does that actually benefit Helpline organisations? Clearly, organisations cannot change their mandate/s to what is more suitable and acceptable

to a funding agency. There are many funding related challenges faced by helplines which have a direct impact on their sustainability, some of which are listed here:

- Because benefits from Helpline services to a community are not easy measure nor quantify, and it is not easy to show the impact that the service is making in people's lives, Helplines are not seen as legitimate or useful by some funding organisations that therefore prefer not to support them.
- Helplines like many other services are considered 'bottomless pits' by funding agencies that believe that no amount of resources seem adequate to provide some services required by the community. For example, there may never be an end to the need for counselling on domestic violence. In other words, funding agencies prefer to fund awareness and advocacy efforts that may in the long term reduce the burden on services rather than fund services that seem to have limited reach and impact. So, in this example, funding agencies might prefer to put their money behind policy change and laws to prevent domestic violence, rather than into shelter homes and counselling services.

With respect to measuring impact of the service, the number of calls that the Helpline receives may not be a suitable yardstick. Helplines that are attached to interventions like child-rescue helplines and those for women in crisis situations may be able to follow-up on calls that translated into redressal of callers' concerns. However, for those Helpline services that promise anonymity and confidentiality, providing 'measurable data' may be violating the promises made to the community; besides being unethical, this may adversely affect the credibility of the service in the long run.

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Individual donors are often keen to fund helplines, but do not know how to contribute to a service where direct benefits cannot be measured and seen immediately. Similarly while some Helplines have had success in getting corporate sponsorship, others have not considered the option for a variety of reasons. For example, corporates such as liquor manufacturers, pharmaceuticals, beauty and slimming centres have a view of women's bodies, women's health and sexuality which may be in direct contrast to the values of women's rights organisations. Or similarly, organisations that work on issues of domestic violence, for instance, may not want to approach liquor manufacturers for funds because of the link between alcohol and violence in certain communities.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS - FUNDING

- Find sources of funding other than what one has traditionally been tapping. For example, build on local sponsorship, donations and individual funding, make sustained efforts at organizing fundraising events and involve volunteers in fundraising efforts.
- While Helplines do not need to be completely reliant on donor agencies, they would undoubtedly need to examine options to be able to raise resources and funds for Helpline services. Networking with other Helplines to share resources and collectively raise funds are areas that are yet to be explored.
- One large fundraising event a year is more resource intensive than planning small campaigns and collecting smaller sums of money from a larger base of people. For example, installing donation boxes in strategic places or tying up with banks to solicit small donations from patrons every time they conduct a transaction could generate more

## FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY

funds than a single annual event. working to install donation boxes in strategic places, tying up with banks to solicit small donations from patrons every time they conduct a transaction etc. could generate more funds than a one-off event every few years.

- Non-traditional sources of funding could include negotiating with telecom service providers to share call revenues with Helplines in a bid to make the service self-sustaining. Helplines would benefit from learning more about government policies. For example, in a bid to reach out to larger audiences, helplines may consider a toll-free number. However this should not be mistaken for an un-metered number. Toll-free numbers mean that the caller does not pay for the call while the Helpline has to do so. This can have enormous implications when the service is already strapped for funds. An un-metered call on the other hand, is a call which is exempt from any charges either to the caller or the receiver. This facility has to be processed through the DoT (Department of Telecommunications) and the process may be time-consuming though worthwhile.
- Funding also drives staffing and training. Helplines that function with volunteers and donations may be able to sustain themselves for longer than those that have huge overheads due to payment of salaries. However, working with volunteers need not make the structure of the organisation any less formal and defined. For any Helpline to work systematically and over a period of time, it is essential that systems be in place and responsibilities allocated to individual members of the team. While working with volunteers does cut down on costs, some running costs are always unavoidable.



FOUR

## Technology and Sustainability

Technology is ever-changing and evolving and Helplines need to be aware of the need to adapt to newer technologies if they do not want to become outdated or obsolete. Some of the newer technologies that Helplines have to contend with include:

- Mobile telephony
- Call centre technology
- Information Technology for documentation and data analysis
- The Internet

Mobile telephony has grown by leaps and bounds in the past decade in India and it continues to grow exponentially by the day. In terms of implications to Helpline service providers, there are several:

- 1 More and more people can access the Helpline as they have access to telephones literally at their fingertips. Gone are the days when each household had one telephone at best, and consequently no privacy to use the phone. Now, with more than one phone in almost every household, the potential client base of each Helpline service has increased manifold.

- 2 Telecommunication providers can and do earn significantly through Helplines; the more the number of calls and duration of calls to a service, the more the revenue earned by the telecom provider.
- 3 As more people use mobile phones, text-based and chat based services will become more popular as is being seen in many countries already. This means that Helplines will have to consider whether they want to provide information and advice through text. They will have to anticipate challenges, training needs and systems that they will need to put in place in order to keep up with evolving modes of communication.

Call Centre Technology has several advantages over the traditional telephone helpline, which had a single instrument being managed by a single counsellor. Those Helplines that are thinking of scaling up their services may consider tying up with call centres (either as a purely commercial venture or as part of the corporate social responsibility programme of a large call centre organisation) in order to increase their reach and volume. If this is planned well then the professionalism and systems of hiring, training, supervision and monitoring based on call centres can be dovetailed with the commitment, skills and expertise of Helpline counsellors for maximum benefit for all concerned. Things to watch out for would include not getting drawn into numerical targets and volumes that many call centres work on so that the quality of the service does not get adversely affected.

Information Technology (IT) can be highly beneficial in recording the details of calls and analyzing trends of the kinds of calls, age/gender/other profile of callers, and the kinds of queries that people call with, which may otherwise

take long hours of manual data entry and analysis. This is beneficial to map the impact of the service as well as to keep check on whether the Helpline is addressing the audience it is intended for. For example, if the Helpline for HIV awareness is addressing more questions about sexuality or contraception, the documentation may help them realize that they need to equip their counsellors with the necessary information, or strengthen their referrals to sexuality and contraception helplines and service providers, or may have to change their advertising strategies to attract more calls on HIV.

The all-pervasive nature of the Internet means that it is touching the lives of people in all corners of the country. This has direct implications on Helpline services in the following ways:

- 1 The Internet reaches far-flung areas and disperses information about a particular Helpline service much beyond the geographical boundaries that one may have envisaged. This means that more callers from different parts of the city, district, state and even country have access to a particular Helpline.
- 2 Information is available in abundance on the Internet. This means that callers may have already sourced the information on the Net and are calling a Helpline to check the validity of the information. Counsellors therefore have to be well versed with the latest developments in their field not only in the country but abroad as well.

### RECOMMENDATIONS - TECHNOLOGY

- Helplines could consider coming together to advocate/negotiate with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) so that the revenues

## TECHNOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY

earned by the telecom service providers through calls made to a particular Helpline are shared with them as well.

- Some Helplines have been making use of newer technologies for some time now while others are yet to tread in that direction. Regular meetings and interactions of Helplines within a city, state or even nationally can help the information and knowledge to be shared between Helplines. Successful networks and collaborations may also emerge through such regular interactions, such as collective advocacy with telecom providers and other such ideas.
- Helplines need to find newer and more cost effective ways of running their services while not compromising on the quality of the service. For example, the advent of mobile telephony opens up the option of running a Helpline service from counsellors' homes, which can reduce rental costs and/or keep the service running for longer durations. However, care needs to be taken that the service runs on the same standards as it would if it was running from a dedicated office space. Care will also have to be taken that the caller identity facility does not go against what the service advertises itself as (an anonymous service for example).
- Internet and text-based counselling services have to be extra careful of the information and services they provide because of the risks of their written suggestions being misinterpreted or falling into the wrong hands (for example, a friend reading a message on the caller's phone).



FIVE

## Burnout and Sustainability

Burnout is an occupational stress syndrome frequently seen among people working in ‘helping professions’. Though Burnout affects all professional groups, people in helping professions are especially vulnerable because for them to do their work effectively, they are privy to others’ lives and concerns. This adds to a feeling of responsibility for others’ safety and well being, which in addition to the usual stresses of working in resource-poor conditions (over-stretched resources, lack of support at work, inadequate compensation or lack of recognition etc) contribute to their vulnerability to burnout.

Under these circumstances, burnout rates are high and damaging to the care provider as well as the work in which there is constant need for qualified and dedicated professionals. Burnout costs both in terms of morale and management. The costs in terms of time and monetary resources spent in looking for, recruiting and training new professionals are also high especially when working on limited funds.

### RECOMMENDATIONS - BURNOUT

- Burnout is not a sign of weakness and can affect even the most motivated and dedicated staff person.

Recognising that it is a fact of life for counsellors is the essential first step to tackling it.

- Managements that recognise burnout are better equipped to prevent it in their staff. This is because they can integrate mechanisms within their training and supervision programmes and their organisational policies to help all members of the staff be aware of and take steps to prevent burnout.
- Common symptoms of burnout include: physical depletion including fatigue, sleeplessness, lack of appetite, headaches and other pains. Other symptoms include feeling helpless and hopeless that leads to disillusionment and cynicism about the world and about one's role as a 'helper', guilt when one does not live up to one's own often unrealistic standards, detachment or indifference as a way of coping with feelings of anger or disappointment and negative attitudes, towards colleagues, work and even life
- Planning proper interventions help prevent burnout. This is the responsibility of both the organisation and of individual counsellors. Organisations can consider the following for burnout prevention: create a supportive environment, provide adequate training, have systems to help fight monotony, include social interactions so that Helpline staff does not feel under-valued or isolated in their work.
- Counsellors can consider the following for burnout prevention: recognise their own emotional responses to calls, take breaks, engage in other organisational activities, maintain boundaries with callers and even colleagues if required, and consider leaving helpline work if they feel unable to continue.

# Conclusion



There is no one model that works! However the following components contribute to sustainability of Helplines over a longer period of time as shared by those who participated in the National Meeting of Helplines, in addition to those who TARSHI has interacted with over the years:

- Careful recruitment procedures to induct counsellors that would fit in with requirements of the job: those Helplines that do not mind spending weeks on recruitment and those who have stringent systems in place to select and recruit staff are likely to retain staff for longer which impacts the sustainability of the service in a positive way.
- Having well-developed, standardized training and supervision policies ensures competent counsellors who can function optimally for longer periods of time without falling prey to burnout.
- Maximizing the use of limited resources like combining paid staff with volunteers, whether for the helpline or other support functions like administration, networking, publicity, fundraising etc helps stretch limited funds over a longer period of time.
- Harnessing new and emerging technologies in order to reach out to larger audiences with the limited resources available.

- Networking with corporates, Government departments, NGOs, CBOs and other Helplines to optimize the reach and effectiveness of services.
- Educating donors about the need for and importance of the service is essential. Being effective in reaching out to willing donors who would be happy to fund the cause and the service requires research and sustained effort but pays rich dividends.
- Understanding the links between appropriate staff selection, adequate training and supervision and the credibility and usefulness of a service, will help in securing funding for longer sustainability.

## THE WAY AHEAD:

There are several Helplines in India that are struggling to survive, several that have closed down and several more that are growing from strength to strength. On-going, regular sharing of experiences between Helplines would help them learn from one another rather than having to reinvent the wheel each time. Helplines that have been meeting regularly under the auspices of the National Helplines Network have felt the need to formalize the Network so that more collaborative work could go into improving the quality and sustainability prospects of Helplines which in turn would mean benefit to larger and larger groups of people.

There are many challenges with running and managing Helplines. Yet counsellors, supervisors and managers continue their work whole heartedly and with commitment. Helplines are a credible and professional form of intervention that contribute to improving the quality of life for large numbers of people. This needs to be appreciated and encouraged.

# Readings and Resources



## USEFUL READINGS

Khanna, R. 2008.

*Assessing the Conditions and Quality of Counselling  
Related to Sexuality and Sexual Health*

(For WHO and KIT).

New Delhi: TARSHI

Nagaraja, P. 2005.

*Burnout Prevention of Healthcare Professionals.*

Paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Women and  
Health Meeting.

New Delhi, September 2005

TARSHI. 2003.

*Guidelines For Good Helpline Practice.*

New Delhi: TARSHI

## WEB RESOURCES

Befrienders Worldwide

<http://www.befrienders.org/>

Fried Social Worker

<http://www.friedsocialworker.com/>

Helpguide

<http://www.helpguide.org/>

Helplines Australia

<http://www.helplines.org.au/>

Kids Helpline

[http://www.kidshelp.com.au/home\\_KHL.aspx?s=6](http://www.kidshelp.com.au/home_KHL.aspx?s=6)

Mental Health Information Center

<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/hotlines/>

The Foundation Centre

<http://foundationcenter.org/>

The Telephone Helplines Association

<http://www.helplines.org.uk/>

# Participant List



The Fourth National Meeting of Helpline Organisations  
Sustainability of Helplines: Models That Work  
18 – 20 September 2008, New Delhi

## Contact Details of Participants

### ABIR NEOGY

SAPPHO FOR EQUALITY

11 A Jogendra Gardens (South), Ground Floor, Kolkata-  
700078, West Bengal

Tel: 09830135383 Email: sappho1999@rediffmail.com

Web: [www.sapphokolkata.org](http://www.sapphokolkata.org)

### ANIL KADAM

HUMSAFAR TRUST

3rd and 4th Floor, Municipal Market Building, Nehru Road,  
Vakola, Mumbai-400055

Tel: 022-26650547 Email: [humsafar@vsnl.com](mailto:humsafar@vsnl.com)

Web: [www.humsafar.org](http://www.humsafar.org)

### ATASHI GUPTA

CHILD IN NEED INSTITUTE

23/ 44 Gariahat Road, Golpark, Kolkata-700029

Tel: 033-24611463, 033-25601395

Email: [ciniarc@gmail.com](mailto:ciniarc@gmail.com) [ciniarc@vsnl.net](mailto:ciniarc@vsnl.net)

Web: [www.cini-india.org](http://www.cini-india.org)

## BETU SINGH

PO BOX 7532, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi-110070

Tel: 09810671603 Email: [info@sanginii.org](mailto:info@sanginii.org)

Web: [www.sanginii.org](http://www.sanginii.org)

## HARSHAD RAMESH PATHARE

POPULATION SERVICES INTERNATIONAL

18 Kumjai Co-operative Housing Society, V P Road, Khotachiwadi

Girgaon, Mumbai-400004

Tel: 022-23870883, 022-23894375

Email: [helpline@psi.org.in](mailto:helpline@psi.org.in) Web: [www.psi.org.in](http://www.psi.org.in)

## JOHNSON THOMAS

AASRA

104 Sunrise Arcade, Plot 100 Sector 16 , Koparkhairane

Navi Mumbai-400709

Tel: 022-27546667 Email: [aasrahelpline@yahoo.com](mailto:aasrahelpline@yahoo.com)

Web: [www.aasra.info](http://www.aasra.info)

## JOJOMON THOMAS

3/655 B Kuppam Road, Kaveri Nagar

Kottiyakkam, Chennai-600041

Tel: 044-24511187, 044-2411188 Email: [desh@vsnl.com](mailto:desh@vsnl.com)

Web: [www.deshhealth.org](http://www.deshhealth.org)

## MADHU

JAGORI

B-114 Shivalik, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi-110017

Tel: 011-26691219, 011-26691220

Email: [helpline@jagori.org](mailto:helpline@jagori.org) Web: [www.jagori.org](http://www.jagori.org)

## MADHU OSWAL

MUKTAA HIV/AIDS

7 Rahul Chamber Karve Road, Erandwan, Opp. Kasat Sadi

Centre, Deccan Gymkhana, Pune-411004

Tel: 020-25466060 Email: [doctor.madhu@rediffmail.com](mailto:doctor.madhu@rediffmail.com)

Web: [www.mukttahivhelpline.org](http://www.mukttahivhelpline.org)

### MALINI SRIDHAR

PARIVARTHAN Counselling, Training & Research Centre  
3310 8th Cross, 13th Main, HAL 2nd Stage, Indira Nagar  
Bangalore-560008

Tel: 080-25273462 080-25298686

Email: parivarthanblr@gmail.com Web: www.parivarthan.org

### MEENA GUPTA

CANSUPPORT

Kanak Durga Basti Vikas Kendra, Sec 12 .R.K.Puram, Near CGHS  
Dispensary, New Delhi-110022

Tel: 011-26102851, 011-26102869

Email: cansup\_india@hotmail.com Web: www.cansupport.org

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### MEERA

SANJIVINI SOCIETY FOR MENTAL HEALTH

A-6 Qutub Institutional Area, Satsang Vihar Marg  
New Delhi-110067

Tel: 011-24311918, 011-24318883

Email: sanjivinisociety@rediffmail.com Web: www.sanjivinisociety.org

### NISHIT KUMAR

CHILDLINE INDIA FOUNDATION

Nana Chowk Municipal School, 2nd Floor, Frere Bridge-Low  
Level, Nana Chowk, Near Grant Road Station, Mumbai-400007

Tel: 022-23881098 Email: nishit@childlineindia.org.in

Web: www.childlineindia.org.in

### P.V. SANKARANARAYANAN

BEFRIENDERS INDIA

11 Park View Road, R.A.Puram, Chennai-600 028

Tel: 09840499835 Email: shankar0050@yahoo.com

Web: www.befriendersindia.org

## PARTICIPANT LIST

### PARAG BHINGE

MUKTAA HIV/AIDS

7 Rahul Chamber Karve Road, Erandwana

Opp. Kasat Sadi Centre, Deccan Gymkhana, Pune-411004

Tel: 020-25466060 Email: muktaahelpline@rediffmail.com

Web: www.mukttahivhelpline.org

### RADHIKA ALKAZI

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE HANDICAPPED

Basti Vikas Kendra, Bal Mukund Khand, Giri Nagar, Kalkaji

New Delhi-110019

Tel: 011-26449029, 011-30985439

Email: aarth.helpline@gmail.com Web: www.asthaindia.in

### ABHISHEK

PRAYAS CHILDLINE

EE Block Jahangirpuri, Delhi-110033

Tel: 011-27633906, 011-27633907

Email: childlineprayas@rediffmail.com

Web: www.prayasonline.org

### RAMESH BABU

H. No. 9-1-103/A, Tatachari Compound, Secunderabad-500025

Tel: 040-27700113

Email: divyadisha@rediffmail.com & divyadisha@gmail.com

Web: www.divyadisha.org

### RATNA JOJORIA

CANSUPPORT

Kanak Durga Basti Vikas Kendra, Sec 12 .R.K.Puram

Near CGHS Dispensary, New Delhi-110022

Tel: 011-26102851, 011-26102869

Email: cansup\_india@hotmail.com Web: www.cansupport.org

### RUPA MUDOJ

AIDS PREVENTION AND CONTROL PROJECT

Voluntary Health Services

Rajiv Gandhi Road, T.T.I Post, Adyar, Chennai-600 113

Tel: 044-22541048, 044-22541965 Web: [www.apacvhs.org](http://www.apacvhs.org)

### S HARIHARA MURTHY

SNEHA

11 Park View Road, R.A.Puram, Chennai-600028

Tel: 09380615154 Email: [admin@snehaindia.org](mailto:admin@snehaindia.org)

Web: [www.snehaindia.org](http://www.snehaindia.org)

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### SUDESHNA SATPATHY

IDPR

34 Duplex, Sailashree Vihar, Bhubaneswar-751021

Tel: 0674-2742026 Email: [sudeshna.sparshha@gmail.com](mailto:sudeshna.sparshha@gmail.com)

### SUMIT BASU

NAZ FOUNDATION (INDIA) TRUST

A 86, East of Kailash, New Delhi - 110065

Tel: 011-41724636, 011-26910499

Email: [naz@nazindia.org](mailto:naz@nazindia.org) Web: [www.nazindia.org](http://www.nazindia.org)

### SUMITA GHOSH ROY

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES FOR THE HANDICAPPED

Basti Vikas Kendra, Bal Mukund Khand, Giri Nagar

Kalkaji, New Delhi 110019

Tel: 011-26449029, 011-30985439

Email: [aarth.helpline@gmail.com](mailto:aarth.helpline@gmail.com) Web: [www.asthaindia.in](http://www.asthaindia.in)

### SUNIL

SANGAMA

No.9 Ababil, Patel Cheluvappa Street, M.R.Palya

J.C.Nagar, Bangalore-560 006

Tel: 080-23438840

Email: [lesbit.lbwp@gmail.com](mailto:lesbit.lbwp@gmail.com), [sangama@sangama.org](mailto:sangama@sangama.org)

Web: [www.sangama.org](http://www.sangama.org)

## PARTICIPANT LIST

### USHA KALA

CAN SUPPORT

Kanak Durga Basti Vikas Kendra, Sec 12 .R.K.Puram

Near CGHS Dispensary, New Delhi-110022

Tel: 011-26102851, 011-26102869

Email: cansup\_india@hotmail.com Web: www.cansupport.org

### V.CHANDRA SEKHAR

HOPE TRUST

176-A M.L.A Colony, Road No:12 Banjara Hills

Hyderabad-500034

Tel: 040-2339 6339 Email: info@hopetrustindia.com

Web: www.hopetrustindia.com

### Resource Persons

### SHAILAJA CHANDRA

Executive Director, JANSANKHYA STHIRATA KOSH

283 August Kranti Bhawan, Annie Besant Gate

Bhikaji Cama Place, New Delhi-110066

Tel: 011-26181634, 011-26197380

Email: jsk.npst@nic.in Web: www.jsk.gov.in

### RADHIKA CHANDIRAMANI

Executive Director, TARSHI

11 Mathura Road, 1st Floor Jangpura B, New Delhi 110014

Tel: 011-24379070, 011-24379071

Email: tarshi@vsnl.com Web: www.tarshi.net , www.asiasrc.org

Others from TARSHI

### GUNJAN SHARMA

gunjan@tarshi.net

### PRABHA NAGARAJA

prabha@tarshi.net

### PAULINE GOMES

pauline@tarshi.net

### SAMEERA AHMED

sameera@tarshi.net

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TARSHI

Administrative office: 11, Mathura Road, 1st Floor,  
Jangpura B, New Delhi 110 014, India

Phone and fax: +91-11- 2437 9070, +91- 11- 2437 9071

Email: tarshi@vsnl.com, Website: www.tarshi.net

TARSHI HELPLINE: +91-11-2437 2229

