

After Muzaffarpur, Deoria, Centre calls for audit of 9,000 shelters nationwide

SHALINI NAIR

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IN THE wake of allegations that minors were sexually abused in shelter homes at Muzaffarpur in Bihar and Deoria in Uttar Pradesh, the Centre has ordered a social audit of all 9,000 institutions in the country for children who are abandoned, orphaned or rescued. The audit reports are to be submitted within the next two months.

Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Union Minister for Woman and Child Development (WCD) Maneka Gandhi Tuesday said "I have asked the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) to ensure that the social audit is completed for all child care institutions within the next sixty days. I have designed the proforma for it."

She said that the new proforma for the audit will go beyond the usual checklist of just the number of children, beds, and other facilities available and will also include questions for a complete background check of those running the homes as well as the condition of the children.

The 19-page model social
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Audit of shelters

audit proforma submitted by the Centre to the Supreme Court in October 2015, at a hearing of a case concerning the exploitation of children in a Tamil Nadu orphanage, has a section on 'Prevention and Protection from Abuse (including emotional, sexual and physical).

The five questions under the section, however, focuses mainly on the institutional mechanisms and fails to capture instances of sexual abuse experienced by the children. In its May 2017 judgment, the SC had said that social audits need to be conducted every year "not only for purposes of introspection but also transparency and accountability in the effective implementation of the JJ (Juvenile Justice) Act..."

Such homes are provided funding by the central WCD ministry and are run by the state either on its own or through NGOs. Pointing to the case of a shelter home in Bihar, which continued to function despite the licence being cancelled owing to irregularities last year, Maneka said that the need of the hour is centralisation of the shelter home system to ensure that it is run and monitored effectively.

A 2017 study by the WCD ministry showed that half of the 9,000 child-care institutions (CCI) across the country were unregistered. "We have identified 9,000 CCIs, there may be so many others running unnoticed. We need to centralise the system. Every state should open shelter homes for women and children say in a single ten-acre complex. That's the

only way we can keep them safe. I have proposed to the chief ministers that if they are willing to build one central home, we are willing to fund it like we did in case of the home for Vrindavan widows. We can allot money from the Nirbhaya fund for this purpose."

Maneka said that she has repeatedly sent letters to all MPs, with a district-wise list of women and children's home attached, asking them to visit the homes periodically to keep a check on "poor living conditions and malpractices" as such women and children are "extremely vulnerable and require higher level of safety and security". She said: "I have said this in Parliament and in my letters to all MPs. We will take action within 24 hours if they send us reports of the homes in their constituency."